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AESTHETICS

BEAUTY AVENGED, APOLOGETICS ENRICHED

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I. *Sleeping Beauty*

Despite what would seem their obvious integral place in human experience over the centuries, beauty and the beautiful have been sent into hibernation in academic circles. Scholars and critics have been so shy to use the term beauty that we hear of accounts of an unspoken gag rule on aesthetics. Ironically, this is most often felt in the humanities, particularly in literature or the arts. Recently a student at Southern Utah University complained (on the Internet) about the taboo on beauty. "If I were to say, in any of my upper-division literature courses, that I found a particular poem beautiful or emotionally moving, I would be met with rolling eyes and unchecked laughter. Those things we don't say in academe."¹

Why would this be? One of the reasons is a concern for justice. In the prevailing schools of the 1980s and 1990s—post-structuralism, deconstruction, semiotics, and cultural studies—declarations about the beauty of an object were deemed insensitive to social concerns. This could happen in two ways. First, talk of the beautiful is a distraction from injustice, and therefore undermines our commitments to bringing about equity and well-being in the world. It holds to a wrong agenda. Second, when we look at something beautiful, be it a person, a natural object, or a work of art, we judge it. We thus feel superior to it, and reduce it to an object. Gianni Vattimo rails against regarding poetry and art as timeless expressions of genius. At best, they are reminders of mortality and decay.² In the "new historicist" school, works of art are examined as symbols of attitudes toward power. For Roger Greenblatt, as an example, the plays and literature of the Renaissance are a commentary on the transition from the

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¹ Craig Lambert, "The Stirring of *Sleeping Beauty*," *The Harvard Magazine* 101, no. 6 (Sept/Oct 1999), 46.

² Gianni Vattimo, *The End of Modernity: Nihilism and Hermeneutics in Post-modern Culture* (London: Polity, 1988), 27.

rule of the church to the rule of modernity. To call Shakespeare's writings beautiful is to miss the point of their true language.³ Louis Montrose adds that literary texts are symbolic formations which ultimately differ in no respect from other symbolic formations, including historical events and trends. Typically, the literary texts are "complex," not because of any aesthetic essentialism, as New Criticism might have it, but simply because the history they produce and the history they reflect are incapable of coherence and stability. Struggle, not beauty, is the issue in the *Faerie Queene* or *Hamlet*.⁴

There is some truth to this way of looking at things. It had become necessary to redress an imbalance. The nineteenth-century French movement known as *l'art pour l'art* was no doubt guilty of divorcing the aesthetic from any social connotation. Aestheticism, to name its fundamental intention, was a complex movement of ideas.⁵ At its most radical, it did indeed keep its distance from ordinary people and their problems. Oscar Wilde was perhaps the most colorful advocate of art for art's sake. He often argued in quips. For example, he reckoned America was the only nation to have "traveled from barbarism to decadence without traversing the usual phase of civilization in between." Walter Pater was England's most notable aesthete. His project attempted to subsume all aspects of human life, including ethics, to the criterion of beauty and beauty alone. He liked to compare the fine arts (Style, as he preferred to call it) to a religious retreat. Style, he once said, provides "a sort of cloistral refuge from a certain vulgarity in the actual world."⁶ Reactions against this trend, itself something of a reaction, have been understandably strong and widespread.

In their own way, evangelical Christians have joined the opposition to aesthetics. The most common form is a pragmatism, which argues that evangelism is prior to cultural pursuits. There are many variants on this. Fundamentalists, for example, present a fascinating paradox. Some identify artistic pursuit with worldliness, and thus center the discussion on boundaries: May we go to the movies? May we play folk music in church? Can a Christian be a professional actor? Others would allow pursuing artistic endeavors, indeed they would celebrate them, on condition that they be "excellent." Here, the discussion is centered on questions of artistic merit: is not classical music the only legitimate kind? Should not our museums feature only the great masters? Ironically, though, both sides of the fundamentalist approach neglect deeper aesthetic concerns. The first eschews them, the second contains them in a small "high-brow" box.

³ See Roger Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 2; also, his *Marvelous Possessions: The Wonder of the New World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 14, 24.

⁴ Louis A. Montrose, "Professing the Renaissance: The Poetics and Politics of Culture," in *The New Historicism* (ed. H. Aram Veser; New York: Routledge, 1989), 22.

⁵ See Gene H. Belle-Villada, *Art for Art's Sake and Literary Life* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996).

⁶ Walter Pater, "Style," in *Selected Writings of Walter Pater* (ed. Harold Bloom; New York: New American Library, 1974), 110.

II. *Beauty Re-emerges*

Today, all this is changing. Within academics beauty is being revived. At Harvard, for example, Cabot professor of aesthetics and the general theory of value, Elaine Scarry, teaches a graduate seminar simply labeled, "On Beauty." It is extremely popular. Recently she published a book with the title *On Beauty and Being Just* which has become something of a best-seller.⁷ Scarry takes issue with the opponents of beauty who claim it leads to the abuse of power. She argues that the very opposite is the case. She says, for example, that the word *fair* can mean both beautiful and just. This points to a convergence of two sensitivities, the one for aesthetics and the other for ethics. If we contemplate beautiful things we eventually develop a greater awareness of the world and its problems. Drawing partly on John Rawls, she notes that beauty involves symmetry, and this is close to the social ideal of equality, a sort of symmetry in human affairs.⁸ Drawing on the ancients, particularly Plato and Dante, she makes the point that a person gazing at a beautiful object is vulnerable, even weak. Think of Dante as he moves higher and higher toward the *Paradisio*. Think of his account of contemplating Beatrice. He is awed and humbled. The beautiful, according to Scarry, makes the viewer more modest, ready to revise his location, looking higher up. This is not patronizing at all. Calling on more recent advocates, she notes that Iris Murdoch and Simone Weil make the same point. The beautiful bursts the bubble of our own autonomy, makes us attuned to the needs of the world around us.

There are insufficiencies in Scarry's theory, to which we can allude below. But the point here is simply that a resuscitation is going on, and the ancient wisdom which connects the beautiful to the good and the true is being revived by a most articulate advocate.

We are not saying there is a mass retreat from the social or political angle on the arts, nor a new commitment to purely aesthetic qualities. Nevertheless the winds of critical theory are definitely changing. In a recent conference, followed by an anthology called *Revenge of the Aesthetic*, no lesser lights than Stanley Fish, Hillis Miller, Stephen Nichols, Jacques Derrida, with others, argued against a purely deconstructive opposition to the integrity of a text.⁹ In other words, they plead for the importance of aesthetic values and the formal characteristics of a text, without neglecting the historical roots and power struggles the text may also represent. Many of the essays posture themselves in relation to Murray Krieger's ultimate suspicion of historicism and his defense of poetry.

The revival of beauty can be observed from other disciplines as well. In the natural sciences the notion of beauty has never quite been dead, yet even here it enjoys a renaissance. Some scientists are doing highly technical work on issues such as design theory. A typical example is the work of Joe Rosen from the University of Tel Aviv. After explicating extraordinarily complex examples of *broken*

⁷ Elaine Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).

⁸ *Ibid.*, 110.

⁹ *Revenge of the Aesthetic* (ed. Michael P. Clark; Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

charge symmetry and the like, he asks, "What makes a theory beautiful?" The answer is something of a tautology: "Most scientists are prejudiced in favor of (what they consider to be) beautiful theories and feel (albeit irrationally) that nature should be described by beautiful theories."¹⁰ Far more popular essays by those proclaiming the parallels between theology, science, and cosmology can be cited. For example, there is the work of Jeffrey Sobosan, who argues that the very uselessness of the stars in heaven means they have an aesthetic purpose. We are free to contemplate their beauty, and to be jolted by that into recognizing the true goodness of the cosmos, and, behind that, of its Maker.¹¹ The enigmatic Stephen Wolfram is currently working on a theory of order in complexity that may speak even more eloquently of intelligence behind the design of things.¹²

Thomas Applequist, Higgins professor of physics at Yale, holds that the beauty of a scientific theory is often predictive of its truth. His primary understanding of beauty in this case is simplicity, and something he calls elegance.¹³ Thomas Kuhn, of course, has worked with a similar notion since the mid twentieth century, noting that the paradigm shifts leading to scientific revolutions were often experienced because of aesthetics, not measurement. To be precise, it was in large part out of a sense of "admirable symmetry," that is, the "clear bond of harmony in the motion and magnitude of the spheres," that drove Copernicus to question the older, earth-centered astronomy and to suggest a sun-centered system. As Kuhn puts it, "Copernicus' arguments are not pragmatic. They appeal, if at all, not to the utilitarian sense of the practicing astronomer but to his *aesthetic* sense and to that alone."¹⁴ Dudley Herschbach, Baird professor of science at Harvard, and Nobel Prize laureate, is known for his comparisons between molecules and symphonies. He likens science to architecture. He unashamedly elevates the mystery of things out there.¹⁵

A considerable reawakening toward the beautiful can also be traced in evangelical circles. We have all become familiar with the "worship wars" and with the debates about the beauty of the liturgy in the last few years. Marva Dawn's *Reaching Out Without Dumbing Down* is a call to respect aesthetic standards in worship while making the liturgy accessible. Coming from a neo-conservative viewpoint, she pleads for high standards and generally sympathizes with one of

¹⁰ Joe Rosen, *Symmetry Discovered: Concepts and Applications in Nature and Science* (New York: Dover Publications, 1997), 121. See also his *Symmetry and Science: An Introduction to the General Theory* (New York: Springer Verlag, 1995).

¹¹ Jeffrey G. Sobosan, *Romancing the Universe: Theology, Cosmology, and Science* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 24.

¹² Stephan Wolfram's manuscript for *A New Kind of Science*, which already has 1,200 pages, has enough preorders to make it a best-seller when it finally comes out.

¹³ See Thomas Applequist, Alan Chodos, Peter G. O. Freund, eds., "Modern Kaluza-Klein Theories," *Frontiers in Physics* 65 (n.d.).

¹⁴ Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Copernican Revolution* (New York: Random House, 1959), 181 (italics mine).

¹⁵ Dudley R. Herschbach, *Molecular Symmetry, Structure and Spectra* (River Edge, NJ: World Scientific Publishing Co., 2000).

C. S. Lewis's most important criteria for great art, that is, its durability.¹⁶ To be sure, the appeal to artistic criteria in worship has been voiced for a good while. For example, one of the most notable advocates of quality and excellence in church music is Erik Routley. He makes the interesting observation that composers and other artists cannot achieve beauty by striving for it directly. Instead, they must look for a balance between "right making" and function. The effect will follow. Beauty is the desired effect, but is only achieved when one is not looking for it.¹⁷ Many other advocates of high creative standards can be cited. From C. S. Lewis to Leland Ryken, Calvin Seerveld, Frank Burch Brown, and others, voices have not been lacking. The book *It Was Good: Making Art to the Glory of God* is only the most recent example in the steady stream of writings by Christians on the relation of faith to the arts.¹⁸ Jeremy Begbie's unusually creative apologetics through the arts in the Veritas Forum is also noteworthy.¹⁹

A variety of factors have stimulated churches to rethink the issues of beauty. One of them is the relatively modest delivery of seeker-friendly worship. It is significant to note that many churches which had become "post-traditional" in an attempt to adapt to contemporary tastes in order to reach outsiders are now reconsidering. They found they missed the mysterious, the prophetic, and the beautiful, especially the rich musical heritage of the church of the ages. Even advocates of "blended" worship and other attempts to reach out to different social groups find themselves defending the importance of aesthetics and making disclaimers about selling-out.²⁰ The exodus from Protestant Evangelicalism to the other major communions, Roman Catholic and Orthodox, is due in part to aesthetics. Among the top reasons given for former evangelicals who take the "Canterbury trail" is the perceived dearth of artistic sensibility in the typical low-church culture.

Another factor that contributes to a new concern with aesthetics is in a particular historical dynamic. Many evangelicals are now ready to move beyond the older discussions about *whether* Christians can engage in the arts and to begin to discover *how* they can engage in the arts. They are often concerned with connecting the vocation of the artist to a local community. This is clearly the theme in a recent issue of *Regeneration Quarterly* with the cover story, "Artists, Come Home!" It is an eclectic set of articles and reviews, but one of the unifying themes is authenticity, nurtured by healthy community. This is in keeping with its announced editorial policy: "to equip the emerging generation to transform their

¹⁶ Marva J. Dawn, *Reaching Out Without Dumbing Down: A Theology of Worship for the Turn-of-the-Century Culture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 186, 197.

¹⁷ Erik Routley, *Church Music and the Christian Faith* (Carol Stream: Agape, 1978), 33.

¹⁸ Ned Bustard, ed., *It Was God Making Art to the Glory of God* (Baltimore: Square Halo Press, 2000).

¹⁹ Musician, theologian, Director of Studies and Tutor in Doctrine at Ridley Hall, Cambridge, Begbie presents the gospel to students by explaining the parallels between music and human aspirations. He takes audiences through the history of Western music and visual art, showing how in recent times there is a decline toward meaninglessness, and heralding the hope of the gospel.

²⁰ Jackson W. Carroll, *Mainline to the Future: Congregations for the 21st Century* (Nashville: Westminster/John Knox, 2000).

[sic] world by providing commentary, critique, and celebration of communities and contemporary culture. Our core conviction is that communities of Christians, in many forms, are the paramount resource of transformation in their neighborhoods.”²¹

III. *Renewing Apologetics*

“Beauty will save the world,” said Prince Myshkin, the modern Christ figure of Dostoevsky’s *Idiot*. Orthodox Christians believe that all essential doctrines were resolved by the first seven Ecumenical Councils of the church. The remaining task is to beautify rather than analyze faith. This has become, as it were, the major apologetic philosophy of much of the Eastern branch of Christianity. Indeed, it appears the Eastern Slavs were converted to the faith when they beheld the beauty of Byzantine Christian worship.²² What are we to make of this? Can we dismiss it as so much aesthetic seduction? There is a way to be cautious here, without throwing the baby out with the bathwater. What is at stake here for evangelicals? How does all this relate to Christian apologetics? Let me suggest a few ways in which these recent developments can be seen as positive, or at least provocative. As we go along I will spell out a couple of dangers.

Beauty avenged is a strong reminder that culture, and particularly the aesthetic aspect of culture, is a critical component of the Christian worldview, one worthy of defense. As such it will have an impact on apologetics and persuasion. Too often Christian apologetics has centered around mostly philosophical debates. In the past, it might have been about the theistic proofs. Today, it might be about the relative merits of the three prevailing schools, classical, evidentialist, and presuppositional. No doubt the issues are significant. I myself believe much is at stake in these options, and I have cast my lot with the presuppositionalists. But to ignore the cultural dimension of human life is to ignore what makes us live and move and have our being, under the life-giving presence of God. What, then, is culture? It is one of the richest, most problem-laden words in our language. One way to cut to the chase is to respect the basic etymology. Culture comes from *cultivation*. There is something significant about tilling the soil and sowing seeds that will become plants. Accompanied by proper watering and enough sunshine, cultivation is the perfect illustration for any human activity that invests in the things of this world, under God’s direction. For our first parents culture was in fact gardening, as they were told to “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it . . .” (Gen 1:28). By the time of Cain and his descendants, culture was defined further to include city-building, tent-dwelling, animal husbandry, music-making, and metallurgy (Gen 4:17-22). From the beginning, then, culture meant both developing the world with technology and craft, and also the more ideal and axiological dimension of life.

Aspects of this fundamental definition have been recognized by modern students of culture. Commenting on the enterprise of culture studies, Robert

²¹ *Regeneration Quarterly* 5, no. 4 (Winter 1999/2000): 2.

²² James H. Billington, *The Face of Russia* (New York: TV Books, 1999), 49.

Wuthnow discusses the allusive nature of culture. It leads to the two basic aspects we have noted: "In these terms cultural analysis becomes the examination of the symbolic-expressive aspect of behavior, whether that behavior is oriented primarily toward the discussion of values or the rational-purposive manipulation of the material world."²³

Today the study of culture has become a major discipline, not to say an invasive one. Among the most thorough, all-inclusive approaches, one must pay homage to that of Raymond Williams, who rightly affirms the diversity of culture's meanings, without sacrificing the term to the amorphous. They include, according to him, 1) a general process of intellectual, spiritual, and aesthetic development, 2) a particular way of life, whether of a people, a period, or a group, and 3) works and practices of intellectual and especially artistic activity.²⁴ Within the general field of culture studies, special areas have come under scrutiny. Popular culture, for example, is the subject of much analysis and much controversy. Definitions depend to a significant degree on presuppositions. For example, the Frankfurt School saw popular culture as an imposed mass-cultural manipulation. The "civilization" tradition, along with neo-conservatism, saw it as a sign of decline. Culturalism, or "essentialism," views it as an authentic people's movement of spontaneity from the grass roots. Neo-Marxist "hegemony theory" regards popular culture as "a shifting balance of forces between resistance and incorporation."²⁵ Think of the short-lived rebellious phase of the punk rock movement before it gave way to chic stylistics.

At the very least the methods developed in tracking culture are useful tools we can use to understand our times, and have a better grasp of our audience. Of course, a great deal depends on the particular bias one represents. Here, Christians must be wary not to accept all that a particular school proclaims in order to marshal it into the service of evangelism. Still, many social analysts have much to teach us, whether or not they make explicit Christian commitments.

The point for our purposes is more than just recognizing the cultural dimension of life as essential if we are going to understand how human beings function. This is true in itself, and is something not only that we are not yet doing, but that we should be doing. Years ago, for example, Owen Chadwick pointed out that the basic reason people in the nineteenth century embraced Marxism and Darwinism had more to do with the cultural ambiance of Victorian England than with the ideas themselves, which were often opaque, difficult to grasp.²⁶ More recently, Os Guinness has shown that the development during the Second World War of the French radical thinking of Sartre, Buñuel, Picasso, De Beauvoir, and

²³ Robert Wuthnow, *Cultural Analysis* (Boston: Routledge & Keegan Paul, 1984), 255.

²⁴ Raymond Williams, *The Long Revolution* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965), 57.

²⁵ John Storey, *An Introduction to Cultural Theory and Popular Culture* (2d ed.; Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1998), 122.

²⁶ Owen Chadwick, *The Secularization of the European Mind in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 48-49; 161-62.

others was more greatly fostered by the “plausibility structures” of Paris’s Left Bank bookstores and cafés, than by the arguments themselves.²⁷

But a deeper point is that the *aesthetic* dimension of culture is as crucial a component of culture as any other, one which ultimately cannot be separated from one’s beliefs. People care deeply about aesthetics. Contrary to received wisdom, beauty is not only a luxury, something we cultivate after other cares, such as survival, are covered. Many of us remember the powerful account of Ernest Gordon’s *Through the Valley of the Kivai*, in which men were deprived in the work camp, reduced, almost, to animals. And yet, in the midst of their destitution, they held a feast, sang songs, created an art gallery, and concocted a make-shift orchestra, using bones and skins from the surrounding debris.²⁸

We are *homo aestheticus*, and to ignore this dimension is to impoverish our apologetic impact. I have often had discussions with friends, not believers, who though they disagree with a large body of Christian truth, care deeply about beauty’s allure, and are willing to admit the frequent connection between a biblical consciousness and great art. Indeed, in certain traditional apologetics, one of the arguments for the Faith has been to move from the reality of beauty to the truth of the gospel. The argument may be a strong, logical demonstration, or less direct, something like a “signal of transcendence,” to use Peter L. Berger’s terminology. Even at the level of ordinary, naïve experience, most of us can report seeing a great painting or hearing a great piece of music and making the connection between the experience and the divine presence. At a more complex level, beauty has been identified as one of the fundamental features of an entire philosophical outlook. For example, Hans Urs von Balthasar made aesthetics the centerpiece of his theological system.²⁹

Here, though, we come to a special difficulty. It is one thing to be aware of the aesthetic dimension in life and even to celebrate its compatibility with the truth of God’s revelation. It is quite another to prove God through beauty. There are several reasons we cannot simply use the fact of beauty to certify the fact of God. The first, obviously, is that there is much ugliness alongside of what we deem beautiful. To go in a straight line from this fact to God would lead to the conclusion God is ugly, or worse. The second is that to say beauty proves God risks containing God in a human, or creaturely, reality. God thus becomes either the most beautiful, which puts him at the top of a chain of being, or he is deemed the source of beauty, which begs the question of what beauty might be to begin with.

At the same time, to deny the correlation between the beautiful world and God seems to ignore the obvious. The Scriptures have no hesitation in making a connection between loveliness, or glory, with God’s presence: “How lovely [יְדִירוֹת] is your dwelling place, O Lord Almighty!” (Ps 84:1 [Heb v. 2]). “The

²⁷ Os Guinness, *The Gravedigger File* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1983), 32-36.

²⁸ Ernest Gordon, *Through the Valley of the Kivai* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 158-59.

²⁹ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord I: Seeing the Form* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1982).

heavens declare the glory [כבוד] of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands" (Ps 19:1 [Heb v. 2]).³⁰ How can we maintain this bridge, while avoiding the pitfall of natural theology? If we are going to accomplish this, we of course will have to begin with God, rather than with an autonomous, rational assessment of the world. Thus, whatever idea of proof we may have, it cannot assume the absence of God, in order to find him by a supposedly neutral methodology. God's existence, his rationality, must be presupposed if we are to arrive at meaning in the world, including the world's beauty. God is the only way to account for the creation. A God who gives meaning and coherence, a God who is the master craftsman, the supreme artist, is the only transcendentally sufficient origin for the beautiful. When we can presuppose this wholly sufficient precondition for meaning and value, we then can interpret revelation confidently, and find its clear communication of the divine attributes. Beauty in the creation will articulate something about its origin.

In this way, everything proves God, including the beautiful. Yet we do not climb up an ontological ladder between the earthly beauty perceived and the heavenly imperceptible God. Furthermore, general revelation requires special revelation for the right interpretation of the data before us. Without the Scriptures we would not know what to make of the beauty of the world, nor how to assess its ugliness. There is a perfect harmony between general and special revelation. But because of sin, nature is not simply "regular," as Cornelius Van Til puts it, but cursed, highlighting the need for grace. In addition to the type of special revelation of God before the fall, we now need post-lapsarian special, corrective revelation to explain the world, its glory and its dishonor, and to proclaim judgment and the gospel.³¹ If one puts the notion of beauty into the mix we could say: the world in its beauty reveals the goodness of God. The world in its grotesqueness reveals evil and the severity of God's judgment against it.

Again, all things reveal God. Beauty certainly does; not in a mathematical demonstration, but in the setting of a meaningful universe. This helps with the difficulty of reckoning with the ugly. With the proper interpretive frame we can distinguish between the function of the beautiful and the ugly, unlike Hegel's scheme, and yet agree that both point us to God. Strangely perhaps, then, ugliness is no less an indication of the truth of the gospel than beauty. To be sure, we are using the concept of proof in a non-mathematical way. As Gerald Bray puts it, "These things [aesthetic principles at work] can and must be given their due, but none of them proves conclusively that God exists. Alongside beauty, Christians also believe that there is a place for ugliness at the heart of their faith, not the least in the torn body of the one who died for them (*cf.* Is. 53:2)."³² Still, properly understood, beauty is a manifestation of the reality of another scheme of things, the author of being and of salvation. Beauty discloses the divine nature.

³⁰ The fact that these Hebrew terms do not strictly correspond with our word "beauty" is the subject of considerations just below.

³¹ Cornelius Van Til, *Christian Apologetics* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1976), 30-32.

³² Gerald Bray, *The Doctrine of God* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 75-76.

In order to interact positively with the resurgence of beauty, then, Christian apologetics will have to integrate the issues into this presuppositional complex. In its argumentation, it will thus be able to take note of the aesthetic dimension of life. It will make sense only if the sole ground for its meaning is in the God of all glory.

IV. *Beauty Defined*

We have come some distance in setting forth the need for a renewed apologetics, strengthened by the awakening of the aesthetic dimension. But so far we have not made any attempt at clearly defining this perplexing value, beauty. What is it? Surely, defining beauty is one of the most difficult of all philosophical problems. We certainly will not arrive at definitive solutions here. But a few considerations are worthy of mention.

Perhaps the best way to approach the matter is to raise the quite basic, if somewhat disturbing, question: is beauty an appropriate concept for Christians to use at all? At least one extremely thoughtful scholar's answer is strongly negative. Calvin Seerveld is a fertile thinker who for years occupied the position of Senior Member in Aesthetics at the Institute for Christian Studies in Toronto. In his writings he asks us to consider throwing out the term "beauty" altogether. His basic argument is that the history of the idea of beauty has been driven mostly by unbiblical philosophy.³³ Plato bequeathed us the judgment that the essence of beauty was harmony. This mathematical aesthetic was a sort of semi-divine quality which should be gradually discovered and imitated for salvation. Plotinus developed this notion of beauty further, placing it near the top of a great chain of being. Salutary human endeavor is to climb up the rungs in a ladder until we attain the higher spheres. The body may be beautiful, but the soul is even more so. Soon the church fathers Christianized this whole scheme. Augustine led the way and the medieval church folded beauty-as-harmony into its theological universe. God was deemed beautiful, and the arts were lower-level reflections of God's glory.

Seerveld challenges the propriety of using beauty in this way, because it confuses the biblical teaching on God's glory with Greek metaphysics. They are not the same, even quite opposite, he protests. Furthermore, this view actually degrades art! This is because artists work with physical materials, like stone for sculpture, sounds for music, and oils for painting. Art depicts earthly, creaturely things. So in order to achieve true beauty in the Platonic sense, art must leave the properly artistic realm. Ironically, art is lowered, and becomes only a sensuous imitation of higher things.

Continuing with Seerveld's fascinating historiography, the next stage in the story of beauty is at the Enlightenment. Following the general philosophical mood, aesthetics became secularized. Those Platonic, quasi-divine attributes

³³ Calvin Seerveld, *A Christian Critique of Art and Literature* (Sioux Center: Dordt College Press, 1995), 28-31. The same argument is developed in his *Rainbows for the Fallen World* (Toronto: Tuppence Press, 1980), 116-25.

were no longer needed for aesthetics. Formerly, beauty had carried some objective qualities. But now, in keeping with the widespread skepticism about absolute authority, beauty became a special kind of human sense perception. Building on this new paradigm, a new, fashionable ideal, that of the “sublime,” replaced the former notion. Harmony was gone, and “beauty-sensitivity” was in.³⁴ This human perception of beauty was rich, a special feeling. It included what we typically think beauty might mean, inspiration, enraptured spiritual state, but it also could include distortion, tension, obscurity. It could carry the sense of awe, almost a terror at the overpowering grandeur of an object.

Seerveld makes the interesting point that though the ideal of the sublime would lead to the problematic romantic cult of the genius and of originality, yet it accomplished something quite positive as well. The move was a sort of transcendental critique against a very limited classical view of beauty, one which had narrowed aesthetic ideals to Plato’s harmony. With this new “beauty-sensitivity” one could question the propriety of reducing beauty to harmony. In fact, there had been a confusion of spheres, because harmony is closer to mathematics than to aesthetics, in Seerveld’s judgment. One senses his lineage back to Kuyper, via Dooyeweerd. In any case, the benefit of this Enlightenment turn was to widen and deepen the possibilities of aesthetic perception to include more human and created realities. This, as we will see, is close to Seerveld’s heart.

But the full story is nevertheless negative. Next in Seerveld’s historiography, Hegel emerges and he does something paradoxical. He marginalizes beauty and taste by relegating everything aesthetic to *art*, that is, to the “fine arts” (architecture, painting, music, poetry). He rationalizes aesthetics by subsuming everything aesthetic under the *science* of art. For Hegel, the human, rational generation of art becomes its own transcendent norm. Beauty is absorbed into artistic production rather than remaining an abstract, albeit subjective, criterion. The result is that anything that is artistic is beautiful, even the ugly. Actually, according to Hegel, the ugly is a fundamental quality of art. With a debt to Romanticism, he proves this by referring to medieval altarpieces representing the crucifixion, Michelangelo’s sculptures, Shakespeare’s dramas. In each of these violence and bloodshed accompany greatness and redemption.³⁵

Once again, there is a sort of transcendental critique here. This time, there is a proper broadening of aesthetic experience to something far wider than the unique kind of experience espoused by the Enlightenment ideal of “beauty-sensitivity” or the “sublime.” It recognizes a humanness and a culturally contextual property of the aesthetic, by tying it into the generation of art. Unfortunately, though, the end product is negative, since in Hegel’s scheme

³⁴ *Rainbows*, 119.

³⁵ Seerveld faults his mentor Abraham Kuyper for succumbing to the same kind of Romanticism robed in Christian garb. See *Rainbows*, 121-22, and also his *A Christian Critique of Art and Literature*, 34-35.

artistic production becomes self-justifying, and thus ultimately everything declines into relativism. The result right up to our own times is what Seerveld calls “utter relativity,” reducing the term beauty to become an “embarrassing catchall.”³⁶

How should we evaluate Seerveld’s fascinating critique of the notion of beauty? Has he not gone overboard? It should be noted he does not intend to debunk every usage of the term beauty. If one sees a rainbow and calls it beautiful, there is no harm done as long as one does not load the adjective with a Platonic sense of harmony, and thus pass judgment on art that does not achieve this kind of “rainbow beauty.”³⁷ Rather, Seerveld’s concern is to make aesthetics into something human, yet covenantal at the same time. Art for him has a *qualifying* function. The key is *style*. His favorite term for what art does is that it is *allusive*. His definition of art, accordingly, is “The symbolical objectification of certain meaning aspects of a thing, subject to the law of allusivity.”³⁸ Beauty is not a manageable concept, but allusiveness is. It allows us to discuss good and bad art without the complication of calling it beautiful or ugly. It goes beyond schools of art, particular styles, and rests on what they all have in common. It draws attention to the human need for interpreting life, and demystifies the idea of artistic inspiration. There is an objective quality too, for two reasons. First, the “laws of allusivity,” as he puts it, are presumably grounded in the structures of the created world, and not up for grabs. One type of “symbolic objectification” is delight, or, as Seerveld puts it, what “makes God smile.” But art does not have to be Christian to be good. An artist like Jean Tinguely makes self-destroying machines as a blasphemous statement. But the problem is not whether it’s good art, but whether it’s Christian. And second, because once we know that allusiveness is the way an art product signifies, we are free to test the signified and to judge the worldview that governs the artist. The point is the same: the religious foundation of one’s heart commitment may be towards the truth or towards an idol. But artistic endeavor is only good or bad according to the skill of the artist’s allusive prowess.

In this view Seerveld actually parts company with some of his Neo-Calvinist forebears. Kuyper, Dooyeweerd, and Rookmaaker, and, behind them, theologians like Bavinck, though sharing a Reformed world and life view, fall prey to the classical idea of beauty as harmony, or unity-in-diversity, which Seerveld rejects. In replacing harmony with allusiveness, he liberates aesthetics from an overly formalist temptation. Jeremy Begbie, mentioned above, has leveled an extremely thoughtful critique at the Neo-Calvinist tendency to connect beauty to law structures in the creation rather than to grace and incarnation.³⁹ Though he is in sympathy with them at many points, he wonders whether the God of

³⁶ *Rainbows*, 121.

³⁷ *A Christian Critique of Art and Literature*, 36.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 36. *Rainbows*, 125-31.

³⁹ Jeremy S. Begbie, *Voicing Creation’s Praise* (London: T. & T. Clark, 1991), 142-60.

these Reformed thinkers is not stronger in justice and holiness than he is in love. He recognizes that Seerveld parts company with Dooyeweerd and Rookmaaker. He calls him a “nonconformist” who rightly substitutes style for beauty. Begbie himself advances the concept of metaphor as being the basic key to the arts. But then he gently faults Seerveld for not doing very much with his idea of allusiveness, calling it “vague and undefined.”⁴⁰ Fascinatingly, Begbie suggests there is a problem with the Reformed view, one that perhaps even Seerveld has not overcome. It is the tendency to detach the covenant of creation (the covenant of works) from love. Grace, when it appears, is only a response to the failure to meet the demands of God’s law. The idea of the “cultural mandate” in Gen 1 is limited in these authors to obedience, without the requisite “blessing,” signaled in the text (Gen 1:28). Common grace is an inadequate compensation for this lack.⁴¹

I have considerable sympathies with what Begbie is saying. There indeed can be an imbalance in favor of the law, and a neglect of the wonder of grace in certain Neo-Calvinists. Yet Begbie’s critique is not altogether fair. It misses the corrective emphasis in a number of Reformed theologians. John Murray, to name but one, without minimizing the need for obedience, stresses the goodness of God in giving us the creation. He will readily use the term “grace” in regard to the administration with Adam, preferring the expression “covenant of life” to “covenant of works” for that early arrangement with our first father.⁴² Actually, as Murray painstakingly demonstrates, a similar emphasis is present in the best of the classical Reformed theologians, a point which Begbie has not appreciated fully. In fact, the tenor of his critique reminds me of that of the Neo-Orthodox theologian James Torrence, who in my judgment has subtly eroded the contrast between creation, fall, and redemption by making the incarnation his theological hub.⁴³ The result is that, rightly wanting to put the relationship with God, the God of love, at the center of life and of art, any Neo-Orthodox approach risks neglecting both the possibility of objective aesthetic norms and the reality of evil as a contradiction to the goodness of creation in life and in art.

This brings us back to beauty. If Begbie is short of the mark, does that make Seerveld’s fundamental point right? Is beauty to be rejected because of its dubious history? Is his only problem the vagueness of his notion of allusiveness? I believe there is more. If art can be Christian, should it not be able to reflect the

⁴⁰ Ibid., 158.

⁴¹ Ibid., 144-47; 150-54; 159.

⁴² John Murray, “Covenant Theology,” in *Collected Writings of John Murray* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust), 4:222. Murray studies the genealogy of the more legal theory, attributing its clearest early formulation to Robert Rollock, in the late sixteenth century. Murray clearly favors more continuity between the covenants, in order to stress the purely “gratuitous” character of God’s relations to mankind.

⁴³ See, for example, James B. Torrence, “The Incarnation and Limited Atonement,” *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* 2 (1984): 32-40.

truths of God's world, and even the quality of the divine attributes? To be sure, it will do that only in an artistic way, not as infallible revelation. Allusiveness (metaphor, to go with Begbie) may be a part of how it does this. Art tells a story. If the story is true, then the allusion is right. If not, the allusion may be well-crafted, but fundamentally out of synch with the real world. What if beauty were simply artistic faithfulness, that is, faithfulness to God's revelation? *Artistic*, because it first must be considered to belong to that unique sphere of aesthetics, where, as God's image-bearers, we make things, we craft a poem, compose a fugue, move to the music. *Faithfulness* because it matters how one does this. Is it well done by the terms of art? Then it is beautiful. But what does that mean? At bottom, it means being conformed to all that is involved in a living, grace-filled, covenant relation to God the creator and redeemer.

This would mean the very best art is faithful as a skill *and* as a true story. Art that is aesthetically weaker could simply be poorly crafted: the wrong word, a less convincing melody, a shoddily made furniture joint. Or, the work may show a certain felicitous craft, but it gets the narrative wrong. For example, Salvador Dali's *St. John of the Cross*, in the Glasgow Museum, is beautifully executed. The colors, the lines, the draftsmanship are superb. But it is a gnostic view of the cross, with no blood, with no real suffering Christ. It lacks the beauty of truth, and hence the aesthetic quality is diminished overall. There is no depth, no humanity, no aesthetic faithfulness.

If this is right, beauty embodies objective standards both for the skill and the narrative aspects of the artistic product. These are not abstract. They are ultimately based on revelation, both general and special. Thus, both the skill and the narrative, in turn, are informed by cultural variants, understood against the teaching of revelation. Economics play a role, and so do audience participation, religious views, performance, occasion, in short, all of the wonderfully diverse cultural ingredients that inform the artistic process. Begbie is on the right track, I believe, when he marshals Gadamer and Polanyi into the service of a more flesh-and-bones approach to beauty. Though he mistakenly feels that most Neo-Calvinists isolate creation from redemption, his instinct is right when he says, "I am contending here that the most fruitful model of beauty for the artist will be found not by attempting to distil some formal principle from the contingent processes of the created world, but by directing our attention first of all to the redeeming economy of God which culminates in Jesus Christ. This, I submit, would equip us with a concept of beauty much more distinctively Christian than the somewhat pale Platonic notions which are so often offered in theological discussion of art."⁴⁴

⁴⁴ *Voicing Creation's Praise*, 225.

V. Navigating Aesthetic Waters

Where does this leave us? For Christian apologetics a number of stirring tasks emerge from our considerations. First, a thoughtful interaction with the many players in the cast of beauty's revenge is requisite. Elaine Scarry should be praised for her courage in reviving the criterion of aesthetic judgment and in showing how essential it has been, and is, to human endeavor. She courageously defends beauty against its politically-minded detractors by calling attention to the close tie between aesthetics and justice. She also recognizes the way beauty is a pointer to the "sacred," and how it awakens our sense of wonder and gratitude. At the same time, she appears to be limited to a Kantian framework, where beauty is an absolute without a convincing bridge to a transcendental origin. There is so much to work with, but there are serious difficulties. Similarly, the brilliant art critic Arthur Danto has dared to invoke the notion of beauty in his thoughtful works on contemporary art. To explain a painting by Rothko, he pleads for the legitimacy of connecting even his most non-objective work with the natural world.⁴⁵ Danto claims he "saw" a Rothko painting in a sunset in Iceland, once. How can the connection be legitimate? Because it's all connected in our single world. He appeals to the Hudson River School's philosophy of beauty, based on the metaphysics of an inseparable connection between the natural world and the world beyond. But then, disappointingly, he adds, almost as a matter of course, that the real difference between the Rothko and the sky in Iceland is that the former has meaning, whereas "sunset skies have no meaning at all, or at least no supernatural meanings."⁴⁶

Second, we will want to go to the Scriptures, and carefully ask questions about the role of beauty. When we do that we will discover that sometimes our modern aesthetic issues will seem to have little to do with the ancient text's language and concepts. Seerveld rightly warns us against building a simple bridge from the large problematic of beauty to the terms translated into our vernacular as beauty, glory, etc. Yet, what are we to make of the replete references to beauty in the Scriptures? There are "fair to look upon women" (Gen 24:16; cf. 2 Sam 11:2; Esth 2:7), "goodly hill country" (Deut 3:25), "beautiful gold" (2 Chr 3:5, 8; cf. Gen 2:12), "pleasantly situated cities" (2 Kgs 2:19), "wonderful buildings" (Mark 13:1), and so forth. Are these simply naïve, purely phenomenologically induced reactions, with no connection to the divine? This cannot be possible. There must be a deeper connection, in a world ordained and ordered by God. Many of the terms translated "beauty" are related to broader notions, such as goodness, glory, worthiness, etc. Surely Seerveld has given away too much.

Furthermore, the Scriptures often praise the craft of an artist, for example, David's skill on the lyre. The Bible is unashamed to compare God's wisdom to

⁴⁵ Arthur C. Danto, *The Madonna of the Future* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2000), 335-42.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 338.

a craftsman who forms the world (Prov 8:30). The master artist declares the newly made world to be “good,” and “very good” (Gen 1:12, 18, 21, 25, 31). Part of that approval must be aesthetic. Part of the heavens’ praise for the wonders of God must be aesthetic (Ps 89:5). The glory of the Lord revealed in redemption is also partly aesthetic, attracting the nations (Isa 60:1-3). Indeed, much of the Bible’s literature is beautifully crafted, as literature.

Finally, with all these biblical resources, confronting a world that is rediscovering aesthetics, we find ourselves with a marvelous opportunity for enriching the actual apologetic argument for the gospel. There is a reality to beauty because there is a transcendental ground which gives everything, including the aesthetic, meaning. The creator, redeemer God, the covenant Lord who makes and remakes a world of meaning, is the all-sufficient warrant for truth. The artistic endeavor is one of many proofs for the wisdom of God. What could be more appropriate to persuade a lost generation about the love and justice of God than the wise appropriation of artistic examples and gifts that articulate the true story of the gospel in a way that speaks to the soul? What could be more apt to denounce idols, which always distort beauty by either degrading it or deifying it, than an apologetic enriched by a biblically-based aesthetic? What more important approach to the transformation of culture could there be than articulating a Christian worldview in which aesthetics occupies its rightful place?