**The Threefold Nature of Beauty**

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*The Sacred Beauty Project*

***Ecce tu pulcher es dilecte mi et decorus.***

Song of Songs 1, 15

***The Son of God is the splendor of his glory and the image of his substance.***

Hebrews 1, 3

We lift our gaze to the Cross, and on it, this *youth of noble blood, innocent and holy, dying though the strength of his torments*,[[1]](#footnote-1) at once ***the fair­est of the sons of men***,at once broken in disfigurement beyond human appearance, at once the incarnation of Uncreated Beauty.[[2]](#footnote-2) He is the ultimate revolutionary, ***come to divide the world, to make the sightless see and the seeing blind***, in whom aesthetics is overcome.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Every law of a lesser beauty is confounded by the suprasensual plenitude of *a love that goes to the end*, whereby every accident is crushed, broken and annihilated, toward the keeping of a *feast* [which] *takes place in the substance of the soul where… the center of the senses … cannot reach.[[4]](#footnote-4)* Thus, the harmonies and sequences of Wisdom comprise asilent music.[[5]](#footnote-5)

And yet, even in this light, Scholasticism has handed on that the beautiful is *id quod visum placet*, “what is pleasing to see.”[[6]](#footnote-6) A philosopher of a rare eminence of wisdom, such as is Josef Pieper, comments, “[Beauty] is the most visible of all things… That is an unequivocal statement – neither a fragrance nor a taste nor an auditory impression can be beautiful in the strict sense.”[[7]](#footnote-7)

But how does a delight of the senses rise to the nobility of the human spirit, infinite in desire? How can an ethic of *divertissement*, no matter how exalted its sensibility, offer a gravitas sufficient to speak to the full and dread scope of the tragic? Does the darkened sun at the ninth hour not eclipse what had been, once, pleasing to behold? Have not modern advertising, the special effects technologies of cinema, the pageantry of dictatorships, mastered this art of captivation? Wherein lies the power of such a beauty, if not in seduction?

The great teacher of Thomism, Fr. Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange, O.P., enlightens us: “[W]e are unintentionally prone to interpret the loftiest doctrines materialistically.”[[8]](#footnote-8) Perhaps we are prone to a particular failure, when it comes to Aquinas, of interpretive vision. Lagrange names the reduction of the higher to the lower as the move fundamental to all materialism. With respect to the work of the Angelic Doctor, [[9]](#footnote-9)

we shall be considering only from below the supernatural principle of this masterpiece of the mind; seeing it only by its reflection on the lower realities it regulates, instead of judging these matters from above… by theological wisdom, not to speak of the gift of wisdom… Thus the reading of St. Thomas’ *Summa* and commenting on it may be only slightly supernatural and even anti-mystical.

However true the obvious epistemological claims of the *visum placet* formulation may be, the animating spirit of the system is to be found elsewhere; the truth of the *visum placet*, which I can hardly dispute, I hold to be an *analogical* one, obtaining with ever greater magnitudes of reality as one not only ascends the hierarchy of being, but also comes to understand the human person, the world, the cosmos itself, after modes which are increasingly more elevated.

So taken, “seeing” is, of course, an analogate of intellectual apprehension. But there is more. The doctors and mystics in common maintain the faculty in man of the spiritual senses, and our evaluation of reality must be deepened accordingly. By way of illustration, I offer an example from St. John of the Cross, a commentary on a single line from the book of Job: [[10]](#footnote-10)

***Auditu******auris******audivi******te****,* ***nunc******autem******oculus******meus******videt******te*** **(With the hearing of the ear I heard you and now my eye sees you.)** This passage points out clearly that to hear him with the hearing of the soul, is to see him with the eye of the passive intellect. Consequently, he does not say I heard you with the hearing of my ears, but of my ear; or now my eyes see you, but my eye, which is the intellect. This hearing of the soul, therefore, is the vision of the intellect.

Suddenly, the contradictions implicit in a literalistically confined interpretive template are brought to the fore. Owing to a certain personal investment, perhaps, I hold that the selfsame statement, which according to an earthbound mindset would seem to cast music as a subordinate mode of the fine arts, exalts it inestimably when read in the light of the mystic-poetic, “truer” for its being of the spirit most properly – not less so, as modernity might imagine, for being thereby less subject to the investigations of the scientific method, however tremendous their validity in their own sphere, in their own right.

Contemplative understanding ascends above the operations of the agent intellect, touching immediately the passive intellect of one so disposed to the reception of a non-discursive knowledge. An existential-spiritual language above sensory experience leaves stultified *the entire ability and harmonious composite of the interior and exterior senses*,[[11]](#footnote-11) pierces through the world of perception to find its expression in a new, transluminous realm, wherein is a native conceptual fluidity which vastly expands and redirects previously familiar ideas and usages.

The same Aquinas who authored the *visum placet* has provided history with his stunning *Commentary on the Divine Names*, in which we encounter the good and the beautiful wed in imperishable alliance. Dionysius, whom the doctors take as a very wellspring of mystical science, says outright: “The beautiful and the good are the same.”[[12]](#footnote-12) This assertion is one which Thomas accepts and verifies, although we must return to a qualification he places. This same idea appears again in the *Summa Theologica*, early on, in the treatment of the good. Beauty, with the good, is predicable of God supereminently, and, with the good, predicable of all creation, analogically and by participation, to the degree that each existent is possessed of its being. Umberto Eco, a medievalist whose fine scholarship is not without merit, understands the implications at stake with a transcendental beauty (although he likes them little and is at issue with the whole question): “Beauty, for its part, acquires concreteness and necessity, an objectivity and dignity.”[[13]](#footnote-13)

Let us look, for a moment, at the virtual distinctions, according to Thomas, between the beautiful and the good: *Although the beautiful and the good are the same in subject… they are conceptually different. For beauty adds something to the good, namely an order which enables cognition to know that a thing is of such a kind.*[[14]](#footnote-14) Even more pertinently, in the *Summa*:[[15]](#footnote-15)

…I reply that the beautiful and the good are the same in any subject. For they are grounded in the same thing, namely form, and this is why the good is esteemed as beautiful. They are different notions nonetheless. For the good, which is what all things desire, properly has to do with appetite… Beauty, however, has to do with knowledge, for we call those things beautiful which please us when they are seen.

We have already examined the “seeing” of the *visum placet*, now we must visit the “pleasing.” The pleasure in question must be of a character and quality to meet the demands of the vision which is its subject, and – always – revise our thinking heavenward. “The beautiful is that in which the appetite comes to rest through contemplation,”[[16]](#footnote-16) which is a *loving* knowledge.

At this point, we return to our example of music. Fr. Lagrange, in his incomparable theological mastery, presents a difficulty of Thomism. The highest fulfillment of man is to be had in the beatific *vision*, and Thomas incontestably holds the supremacy of the intellect, and yet is Christian perfection comprised exclusively by love. Of Thomas Fr. Lagrange writes:[[17]](#footnote-17)

He himself has given us a profound answer to this question… He tells us in substance that although one faculty may be by its very nature superior to another, as sight is to hearing, it is possible that an act of the second may be superior to an act of the first, as the hearing of a sublime and very rare symphony is of a higher order than the sight of an ordinary color… [I]n this life our knowledge of God is inferior to the love of God, since, as the Angelic Doctor says, in order to know God we, in a way, draw Him to us, and in order to represent Him to ourselves we impose on Him the bounds of our limited ideas. On the other hand, when we love Him, we raise ourselves toward Him, such as He is in Himself.

In its conjoint cognitive reference and lure of the will, beauty, I propose, is an interstice of the two superior modes of sanctity, one of earth and one of heaven, in the midst of our own “not yet.”[[18]](#footnote-18) Mystical contemplation, as we have seen, rests upon unmediated knowledge, a foretaste of the life of grace forever confirmed in the souls of the blessed. “St. Thomas defines contemplation as a simple intellectual view of the truth, superior to reasoning and accompanied by admiration.”[[19]](#footnote-19) Finally, we have arrived at the summit from which to appraise the world; natural contemplation, such as to be had by artists and philosophers,[[20]](#footnote-20) indeed, in the appreciation and esteem of beauty, is also connoted by the one definition. The beautiful, I hold, properly relates to the higher spiritual faculties, of which, in turn, the suprasensual comes into its specific milieu – holding analogously for the order of nature as well as for the order of grace. Beauty, definitionally, lifts the soul to a contemplative atmosphere, more rarified than that afforded by reason, which remains locked into its own inherent limitation.

All being, as such, possesses its own intelligibility, exhibiting a primal state of manifestation, such as to be taken up by the intellect. In perceiving the beautiful, the agent “intercepts” being at a metaphysical level of interface, of intersubjective exchange ordered to relationality. On what basis do I say this? Because contemplation is loving knowledge. The terminus of knowledge is in the agent, while love compels the will outside of itself. Beauty, of its nature, roots the agent in deeper interiority and draws her out into ecstasis, simultaneously. The authentic experience of the beautiful, allowing for a simpler, more purified apprehension, tempers the interest of mere conquest, and engenders a noble and tender affectivity.

Beauty, of its nature, unites. *[W]hatever creatures may have in the way of communion and coming together, they have it due to the power of beauty.*[[21]](#footnote-21) Following Dionysius, Aquinas cites the causative powers of the beautiful, demonstrating that the *concordiae* among persons originate in a unitive capacity which has beauty as its source. I offer that, as the inner mystery of being is disclosed according to a mode of admiration, beauty overcomes the temptation to objectification and dominance known to humanity since the sin of our first parents. Interpersonal communion is impossible, divorced from beauty.

St. Thomas says of God that, *since he possesses his own beauty, he wishes it to be multiplied as much as possible.*[[22]](#footnote-22) Whereas the good is *self*-diffusive, the beautiful seeks to reduplicate the superadded value of a new unity, achieved through relationship which it itself has both enabled and caused. And how is this? The good had with the beautiful is not solely assimilated to the agent via appetitive fulfillment, but exists outside of herself, as it were, while neither does it elude a real and personal ownership. A centripetal-centrifugal gravity conditions a cosmos created of, and moving ever toward, love, a salutary tension which opens the soul to ever greater possibility and expansion, upwards toward the Infinite.

Meditation on this threefold efficacy, an efficacy unto the revelatory, the unitive, and the generative, presents to us an inner nature of Beauty which is fundamentally nuptial. It has presented itself to my meditation that the inherence of the transcendentals in being takes its Primal Archetype in the intra-Trinitarian mutual inherence of the Persons.

Beauty is a divine name. If I have come to realize anything in my extended work with the Sacred Beauty Project, it is that Sacred Beauty is a *Person*. The marks of the beautiful – integrity, harmony, radiance – are born of Aquinas’ contemplative identification of Beauty with the Second Person of the Trinity.[[23]](#footnote-23)

Eco gives us an adroit formulation: “[T]ranscendentals differ from one another conceptually or logically, according as it were to the *particular point of view that one adopts to being*.”[[24]](#footnote-24) Engagement with the beauty of being is a committed choice, a vantage point of perspective which it remains to our freedom to adopt. The chosen radical affirmation of being, specifically as beautiful, is, I believe at heart, a Christological stance. To say yes to the inherence of transcendental beauty coextensive with the entire created cosmos has eternal and beatific exultation in the Beloved for the blessed, and ever more in the Eternal Contemplation[[25]](#footnote-25) of the Godhead, as its supreme analogate.[[26]](#footnote-26) Are not the Wounds of Christ – the source and plenitude of light, fire, wisdom and beauty; the *five rivers of paradise[[27]](#footnote-27)* which **gladden the City of God**, perduring in a state of sacrifice glorified beyond all pain – an Omega Point of victory,[[28]](#footnote-28) in which all creation is glorified, spiritualized and recapitulated? The bond of relationship among persons, the adherence of the soul to God in sanctifying grace and the nexus of blessed relationship which is the communion of saints, must ultimately be Christ, the Second Person of the Trinity under the aspect of the surpassingly elegant nuptial and spiritual beauty of the Bridegroom.

Jacques Maritain muses, “[Beauty] is in fact the splendor of all the transcendentals taken together,”[[29]](#footnote-29) a conclusion come to as well by Hans Urs von Balthasar, set in a poetry to rival Maritain’s: “Beauty… forms a halo, an untouchable crown around the double constellation of the true and the good in their inseparable relation to one another.”[[30]](#footnote-30) How rightly, beauty is the splendor of truth, the refulgence of the Father, **the splendor of his glory and the radiance of his substance.**

All honor be to Him forever.

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1. St. Alphonsus Liguori, *Meditations on the Passion*. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. A formulation which I first encountered in the diaries of St. Teresa of the Andes, O.C.D. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Condensed and paraphrased from Josef Cardinal Ratzinger, “Thee Feeling of Things, the Contemplation of Beauty,” address delivered to *Communione e Liberazione* gathering at Rimini, 2002. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. St. John of the Cross, *The Living Flame of Love*, ¶9 of commentary; found in the ICS Kavanaugh/Rodriguez English translation, p. 644. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. St. John of the Cross, *Spiritual Canticle*, stanza 14. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. This rendering of St. Thomas is drawn from Etienne Gilson, *The Arts of the Beautiful*. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Josef Pieper, *Enthusiasm and Divine Madness,* p. 84. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange, *Contemplation and Christian Perfection*, p. 49. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange, *Contemplation and Christian Perfection*, p. 49. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. St. John of the Cross, *Spiritual Canticle*, ¶14 of commentary; ICS Kavanaugh/Rodriguez p. 532. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. St. John of the Cross, *The Dark Night*, Bk. II, Ch. 17, ICS Kavanaugh/Rodriguez p. 477. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, *The Divine Names*, Ch. 4. All citations from the *Divine Names* or from St. Thomas’s commentary (with the exception of that cited as footnote 21, which is taken directly from Ananda Coomaraswamy’s 1936 partial translation) are as they appear in Umberto Eco, *The Aesthetics of Thomas Aquinas.*  [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Eco, p. 22. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Aquinas, *Commentary on the Divine Names*, IV, 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Aqunas, *Summa Theologica*, I-I, 5, 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. *Summa,* I-II, 27, 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Garrigou-Lagrange, p. 141. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Ratzinger, *A New Song Unto the Lord*, p. 129. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Garrigou-Lagrange, p. 45. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. For further development, see Garrigou-Lagrange, p. 45. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Aquinas, *Commentary on the Divine Names*, IV, 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Aquinas, *Commentary on the Divine Names*, IV, 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. See Jacques Maritain, *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry*, p. 125, for a treatment of this. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Eco, p. 21, emphasis mine. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Concept drawn from the writings of St. Peter Julian Eymard. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Language originating from Maritain. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Paul Claudel, *The Precious Blood*, as cited by Fr. Rainero Cantalamessa, O.F.M. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Expression of Pope Benedict XVI, drawing on the thought of Fr. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Jacques Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism*, as cited by Eco. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord,* p. 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)