***Angeli et archangeli***

***September 29 - October 15, 2014***

***Spiritus Domini replevit orbem terrarum, et hoc quod continent omnia,***

***scientiam habet vocis.***

***-*** *Wis. 1:7*

For Julian

Here I am, at the start of the harvest, the resplendence of the fall begun in earnest, these days to honor angels, archangels, and saints wounded by seraphs. I am at the same field where, last year, snow collected on my windshield in the gray of winter, and I was given to understand many things. Never before have I been happy; I did not know that this was here. But it does leave a problem: How does one write? There is the inner press to produce literature, and a deadline from academia. For me has vexation alone elicited art. How can overflowing fullness be tamed? Suffering brings focus; joy is expansive.

***Many a time have they afflicted me from my youth***; the need to bring some kind of transformation to bear, over and against the strife, has invariably driven *poiesis*. I know of someone who does spiritual writing, who by her own testimony was made to live all of the counsel for times of tragedy which she proclaimed; frightful tragedy indeed was she made to endure. Through unending years of suffering, I’ve written of glory, of beauty. Am I now to be made to live these words, numb and dazed, broken according to a sheer vehemence of wonder? For months now, everything seems remarkable, as though angelically guided. I would not have known: joy is not without its force. Nor is this joy unrelated to all that has come before, which has been a remote preparation without which I would have been ill-equipped for present felicity. Inexperience fails to excuse from the demand to rise to the invitation. Being must be made to be; love must be loved; all love is risk. And so is beauty.

***Daughters of Jerusalem, come forth***

***and look upon King Solomon***

***In the crown with which his mother has crowned him,***

***on the day of his marriage,***

***on the day of the joy of his heart.***

-Song of Songs, 3,11

This is our life, our *raison d’etre* and final destiny; this, the nuptial mysticism of the divine bridegroom: crowned with thorns, embracing abandonment, pouring forth salvific joy upon his beloved in streams of blood and water from his pierced heart. This is his wedding day, the day of his coronation: o Jerusalem, behold your King.

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

Every law of a lesser beauty is confounded by the suprasensual plenitude of *a love that goes to the end*,[[3]](#endnote-3) 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]](#endnote-4)* Thus, the harmonies and sequences of Wisdom comprise asilent music.[[5]](#endnote-5)

And in the same move, so too is ethics overcome, though not in the sense that law has been abolished; love triumphs over law, where law is assimilated to the heart as love. In the presence of sublime love, *faith, worship and* ethos *are interwoven as a single reality*;[[6]](#endnote-6) freedom and spontaneity of heart stand together, as necessarily linked concepts.[[7]](#endnote-7)

In his envy the prince of this world falsifies an ethics, indeed a spirituality, a particular and malignant counterfeit, which presents itself as *righteousness*. This malformation, utterly coextensive with sin itself, prevails as endemic to human agency under the curse of the Fall, worn into every relationship, engraved into every social, moral, ethical, religious dynamic under the heavens, as if furrowed into the earth itself. This foundational blindness is rooted in a miscasting of the natures of good and evil. How rightly did Nietzsche, endowed by the irrevocable call of the Lord with a mystic soul, call for a transvaluation of values – an inversion of the true order is manifest in a Christianity which does not *go all the way to the end*, however much despair and rebellion furnish poor answers.

There is a righteousness which renders love ineffectual, if not impossible, and affectivity embarrassing and shameful; it contrives an ideal of virtue measured by a goodness divested of all that is actually good. These haters and stonethrowers are of a single category, be they law-obsessed Javerts or the libertine Sophists of Plato’s *Phaedrus*.

Consider what happens when you strip goodness of all that makes it good – beauty; attraction; the authority of its call to the personal core; suitability and harmony to the heart’s true nature; confidence and health in conscience; the peace of right order; the foretastes of heaven which call the soul to heroism, to high virtue, to mysticism, to martyrdom – and leave nothing behind but the chains of conformity and the poison of a perfunctory approval, the fulfillment of petty expectation.

Nothing exerts moral suasion quite like hyperprudence, an irrational domestication, a backhanded insult of a distinction wholly at the disposal of the one whose it is to give or to withhold. What ensues is a cult of dominance on the one hand, and of self-interest on the other, an ethos divorced from the natural heart, abandoned in stultification to grasp for its needs through thick mists of shame – a morality which bids the Messiah come down from the Cross, so as to demonstrate a divinity prefabricated in its own self-image.

This “good,” which derives not from a spontaneous law of love etched into the nature of humanity itself, but from a contrived ethics, is perhaps captured by the German word *brav* – the well-behaved, the duty-bound, the domesticated. *Brav*’s sole value is the external approval it garners; thus, it shuns all risk. *Brav* is singularly antithetical to beauty, to art, to artists and to artistry – fearing the overlords by which it is hard driven, it counsels every talent lie buried in the ground.

A soul primarily motivated by reward and punishment cannot follow the Christ to the depths of his desolation – nor plumb her own. Nor can a soul confined by mere earthbound ethical and moral aspirations foretell the splendor of the heavenly city, nor is such a one sensitive to nobler beauties, nor of the class of the true artists, nor particularly prone to falling in love.

And this brings us to another duality overcome: Transcendent beauty heralds a realm where *eros* and *agape* are inseparably one. *Agape* understood as mere benevolence, like a merely harmonious beauty, is not enough. *Benevolentia*, a righteousness of willing, may well be the beginning of friendship.[[8]](#endnote-8) But apart from the impassioned desire for *union of affection*,[[9]](#endnote-9) every good it wills must needs be, somehow, exterior. *The perfect cause acts for the love of what it has*. [[10]](#endnote-10) God is not beauty, rather *superbeauty*, a term signifying a causative preeminence, apart from the limits of any genus. God moves *by love of his own beauty*, in which *all being participates*. [[11]](#endnote-11) And such a love is fire – the love at the heart of all being, the fire which rages yet does not consume, is jealous, and beautiful, and impassioned. God’s passionate love is *so great, that it… turns God against himself.[[12]](#endnote-12)*

And for the creature, brought forth out of the chaos of nothingness by the efficient causality of superabundant beauty? Must such a one, in her God-given beauty, not too be turned against herself?—crying out with the greatest of prophets at the approach of the bridegroom, ***He must increase; I must decrease***? And so is the proclamation of the *Agnus Dei* focal to the cosmic liturgy, a canticle sung in intricate harmony, in canon, sung with the very breath of the spirit, sung together by the blessed, choirs of men and choirs of angels, ordered according to the designs of Wisdom, in the one and undivided Spirit.

What is it to be so moved by the call of such a vision, such a *mission*, as to cast forth the weak fire of unworthy petitions, prostrate, night after night, in darkened churches in blighted neighborhoods? I choose glory, but *this* is the glory I choose, because we are created of beauty, and so is our nature fire.[[13]](#endnote-13) *Abasement and exaltation are mysteriously intertwined*,[[14]](#endnote-14) and so do I, in an exaltation of madness, desire to burn, but as a tiny flame against the darkness, the ritually inextinguishable light of a presence lamp… easily overlooked, lost in the glare of the city.

*I will be light.[[15]](#endnote-15)* What is the sound, the supramaterial music, of a finite soul being dissolved into the Infinite, burning into pure light? What is the sonant expression of these inflamed adorations we make all through the night? Ours is music bearing so many groanings of spirit, seethings of Spirit,[[16]](#endnote-16) whose diapasons are elevations to the sung inner dialogues of the Godhead. The true Beloved of contemplatives and angels is, himself, silent music. *And thus all these voices form one voice of music, praising the grandeur, wisdom, and wonderful knowledge of God,* [[17]](#endnote-17)who is word, knowledge, song, primal and causative.

But the power of such beauty! The power of love! *The power and the tenacity of love is great, for love captures and binds God himself. Happy is the loving soul, since she possesses God for her prisoner, and he is surrendered to all her desires.[[18]](#endnote-18)*

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But is this not all too good to be true? Do not the morning light and the morning’s headlines disabuse of these strange intoxications? And what right have I, I personally, to happiness at all? Have not decades, ancient eons, of misery and disappointment, sufficed to establish precedent? Have not violent tragedies, disclosures of betrayal and corruption, lies and enmities – more than I care to tell – furnished a compellingly credible transcript of daylight realities? How has unrelenting pain failed to train my character and break my will? *Seek the answer in… darkness, not daylight; and look not to the light but rather the raging fire that carries the soul to God with intense fervor and glowing love.[[19]](#endnote-19)*

It occurred to me: All humanity is mystically implicated in the original sin of our first parents – but not as myth. Each human life is a prolonged engagement with the selfsame temptation; the serpent – the accumulated tangle of misery, pettiness, ugliness, decay, futility, nausea, inhumanity, malice – inflicts on each soul the ultimatum, to eat of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. What remains, most radically, to finite freedom is the choosing of one’s own disposition toward the good, the true, and the beautiful. A commitment of the heart, the adoption of a stance, indeed makes one like God. Do you know, dear reader, the spectacle that’s been played out before my eyes, the formation in iniquity in which I’ve been raised up? Nor can I imagine that you are without a story of your own. The greatest sin would be naïveté, credulity. So play the game, my friend; we can, the whole lot of us, jump off of parapets and then, aggrieved and justified, not to mention injured, preemptively blow up the whole world. We will not be taken.

But, **no**! *We live for love*.[[20]](#endnote-20) We embrace beauty. We are children of God, by faith. If the call is to wise up, then please realize that the accuser hates beauty; we are collateral targets in the stratagems of an infernal grandiosity.

Might it not be, rather, that the curse enunciated realities of the true order, of God and heaven and transcendence, as filtered through a sort of shadow existence? Are death and suffering not first and foremost realities of heaven?—and now I know that I am mad! As what is most divine and sublime is subject to the greatest debasement, so the hand of the eternal, for which man was not yet tempered or prepared by a matured love, fell all too heavily, all at once, before its time. Might death and suffering not be a necessary component of spiritual being itself – just not as we know them? If so, it is sin which is the alien and extraneous factor… sin as *privation*, as deficiently rendered being, pattern drift, music performed by the tone deaf. Behold the lamentable portrait of the human condition: The soul become haunted with hell, exactly where it should have been most suffused by grace.

Acedia hates the goods that attract us. Imagine oneself attracted to a genuine good in a disordered way – it should not strain the imagination much. Does acedia want this good on its own terms? By no means; rather, it seeks the agitation of unfulfilled desire, the tremors of dependency, the burn of excess and overindulgence, appetitive clamor, deprivation, emptiness and need, idleness and vacancy. Love wants being to be, and to be as beauty; acedia knows only calculation and interest, *amor* abandons itself in surrender.

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*I praise you God my beloved*

*I have made your Cross my bed*

*For a cushion I have poverty,*

*and pain and contempt to rest on.*

-St. Angela of Foligno

Thus the newly canonized St. Angela sees, disclosed in the triumph of the Cross, the innermost secrets of the life of the Trinity. She further claims that from all eternity, *even before man sinned*, the Father loved the Cross and its accoutrements poverty, suffering and contempt, with such a love as to predestine the passion and death of the Cross for His Son[[21]](#endnote-21) – not through the Fall and the bitterness it left, but from the original glory of a radical fullness.

*Death cannot be bitter to the soul that loves… and at the thought of it she rejoices as she would over the thought of her betrothal and marriage, and she longs for the day and hour of her death more than earthly kings long for kingdoms and principalities.[[22]](#endnote-22)* Is not such a death an analogate of the radical ecstatic abasement of self in complete gift, in the full absorption of personhood in the beloved? The simultaneous resting and fulfillment of all desire, which culminates in invincible and enduring adherence to beauty, is the ultimate liberation from interest and need. It is we the sinful who have forged the relation between death and destruction, smothered the flame of this desire with a bourgeois and lukewarm calculation, flooded the opening out of the self into the Unknowable with bile.

In heaven, in *ecstasis*, there is a being-smitten, a being-beside-oneself in love of the beloved. I submit to you the shattering, alive, unbearable quality that attends goods in rare moments. In heaven, in *ecstasis*, the cascading fullness of love and rejoicing impels the lover to an overflowing effusion of goodness, a radiating and communication of light – the *claritas* which is the quasi-indefinable and singular mark of the beautiful – downward through the hierarchies, reaching the world of all material creation via contemplatives, mystics and artists. And are not the Wounds of Christ – the source, summit and plenitude of these streams and rays of light, fire and beauty, the *five rivers of paradise[[23]](#endnote-23)* which ***gladden*** ***the City of God***, evoking the resounding music and praises of its own and unending liturgy, perduring in a state of sacrifice glorified beyond all pain – are not the Wounds of Christ an Omega Point of total victory, in which all creation is glorified, spiritualized and recapitulated?[[24]](#endnote-24)

All of this illustrates a great mystery of being: The selfsame love may be experienced as pain or as delectation, according to the disposition of the subject. It would be insult, heresy – no, blasphemy – even to suggest that the suffering found on this earth should be met with stoic indifference, or is of little consequence, or must not by the law of charity be compassionated and assuaged with all our power. Yet at a depth level of being, there is a transsignification which points to the life of glory – a transsuffusion of suffering and glory, already here on earth.

Sacrifice *is* the inner life of the Trinity. Love and sacrifice and beauty are a pure and unmixed identity of terms for Being which holds every attribute as a unity. Here, all Being *belongs to an other*, without prejudice to ineffable perfection of self-possession. There is no being that does not flow into a beloved. God is act, but what is this pure actualization?—it is love, love as Self-lavishing, love as Eternal Sacrifice, love as abasement, as exaltation, as ascending and descending streams of *eros* and *agape*, inextricably entwined. The mutual inherence of the Persons is the function of this sacrifice. There is gift so perfectly given, so perfectly received, as to effect union among eternal diversity unto consubstantiality. Which seraphic soul has not known from within the longing to rend herself, that vehement in-loveness be unfolded unto sacrifice?

And so does salutary beauty make us suffer; it wounds, it pierces like a dart.[[25]](#endnote-25) Of the pierced soul poets and doctors hardly dare speak: *There flow seas of loving fire within it, reaching to the heights and depths of the earthly and heavenly spheres, imbuing all with love. It seems to it that the entire universe is a sea of love in which it is engulfed, for conscious of the living point or center of love within itself, it is unable to catch sight of the boundaries...*[[26]](#endnote-26) The music of the spheres, the songs of angels, the spiritual seethings of the mystics, the *irritated melancholy[[27]](#endnote-27)* wrought by art, the primal energies of the ever-expanding universe – all are of the ineffable ecstatic resonance of a creation fallen in love, antiphonal outpourings of the eternal threefold Sanctus. What is it to sing thus, pouring out voice, soul and spirit alike? ***My heart and my flesh cry out with joy to the living God.***

Souls so wounded by the *fiery darts[[28]](#endnote-28)* and arrows of beauty, inspired with the *theomania* of an authentic and substantially supernatural *caritas* – such bear this crazy proneness to falling in love. Such souls fall in love recklessly – without caution, without reserve. *Since the delight arising from the sight of your being and beauty is unendurable, and since I must die in seeing you, may the vision of your beauty be my death.* [[29]](#endnote-29)Of the great doctor St. Augustine it is written, *he fell in love with beauty*.[[30]](#endnote-30) And the same Augustine has determined the condition on which he means to be understood: *Give me a man in love, and he’ll know what I’m talking about.*

If I have come to realize anything, enlightened by the giddy, perhaps unsustainable joy of this time, it is that Sacred Beauty is a person. The very threefold marks of the beautiful – *integritas, harmonia, claritas* – were born of Aquinas’s contemplative identification of beauty, most properly, with the Second Person of the Trinity. The inner logic of the Word of Beauty is poverty, obediential sacrifice, chaste ecstasy.

Beauty is the communion among beings. The bond of relationship among persons must ultimately be Christ – but specifically under the aspect of his surpassing spiritual beauty. Such is the explosively revolutionary paradigm – new not in the sense of novel, but in the sense of recovering something original, something from which we have been alienated. Anything less is mere aesthetics, a deficient and casuistic ethics, mere talent, not genius which proceeds according to its own necessity.

To be wounded by beauty, united in beauty, to author the arts of the beautiful,[[31]](#endnote-31) to heed the suasion of the beautiful,[[32]](#endnote-32) which is the voice of the Divine Shepherd, above every other, is to become an *oasis around which life sprouts up, and something of the lost paradise returns,*[[33]](#endnote-33) and to be thereby commissioned to establish *oases of creation*,[[34]](#endnote-34) foreshadowings of reconciliation, and of peace.

-V.J. Tarantino

1. St. Alphonsus Liguori. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Developed by Josef Cardinal Ratzinger. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Josef Cardinal Ratzinger. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. St. John of the Cross. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Developed by St. John of the Cross. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Benedict XVI. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Developed in the CCC. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Developed by Aristotle. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. St. Thomas Aquinas. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. St. Thomas Aquinas. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. St. Thomas Aquinas. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Benedict XVI. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Reference to the writings of St. Catherine of Siena. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Benedict XVI. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Matisyahu. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. St. Patrick. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. St. John of the Cross. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. St. John of the Cross. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. St. Bonaventure. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. St. Therese of Lisieux. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Paraphrased from Fr. Paul Lachance, OFM. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. St. John of the Cross. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. Paul Claudel. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. Developed by St. John Paul II. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. Developed by Benedict XVI. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. St. John of the Cross. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. Charles Baudelaire, as cited by Jacques Maritain. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. St. John of the Cross. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. St. John of the Cross. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. Josef Cardinal Ratzinger. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. A token of respect to Etienne Gilson. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. Roger Duncan. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. Benedict XVI. [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. Benedict XVI. [↑](#endnote-ref-34)