



The Truth of Beauty: Educating the Moral Imagination

By Benjamin G. Lockerd, Jr.

*Beauty is truth, truth beauty,—that is all
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.*

—Keats, “Ode on a Grecian Urn”

These famous lines of Keats have charmed and delighted readers for nearly two centuries, but skeptics have scoffed at his claim, especially as beauty is said to be wholly subjective, a value found only in the eye of the beholder. Even those of us who are inclined to agree with the poet’s bold statement have been known to wonder whether this is really *all* we need to know. Surely we must add at least two other categories to the formula, for philosophers have long considered three subjects of contemplation to be paramount: the True, the Good, and the Beautiful. These topics give rise to the three prime branches of philosophy: metaphysics, ethics, and aesthetics. All three of these are considered by many people today purely relativistic concepts, and one of the goals of the Catholic educator must be to contradict the prevailing relativism, which is practically taken for granted even by many Catholic students, since, as T. S. Eliot says, secularism today “holds all the most valuable advertising space.”

Aesthetics is as old as philosophy itself. Plato argued that there were eternal forms in the ideal realm that were the source of all beauty in the physical world and then in art. He emphasized the universality of geometrical figures, the circle, the triangle, and the square. Here are shapes that are indeed everywhere regarded as beautiful and that are found at the basis of more complex forms (such as Renaissance paintings in

which the main figures in a composition form a triangular shape). However, there are a couple of problems with Plato’s approach. First, as a thoroughgoing idealist, he regards the forms of the physical world as pale and imperfect copies of the eternal forms, and at times he seems to regard artistic representations as even further removed from true beauty. In the *Republic*, Socrates famously states that poetic mimesis is thrice removed from ideal reality, concluding that poets

Beautiful works have a complexity of parts resolved in an integral wholeness. They exhibit multiplicity in unity.

must therefore be banned from the state. Many Plato scholars regard the entire utopian scheme of this dialogue as ironic, for it begins with Socrates’s interlocutor insisting on luxuries in the ideal state and the master acquiescing and agreeing to think of an ideal government for a “feverish” society. Nevertheless, the question had been raised as to whether the arts could present truth or were only good for pleasure (a pleasure which might, according to Socrates, merely encourage irrational passions). The other problem with Plato’s aesthetic theory is that his ideal forms are indeed universal, but of a limited range. It is not clear that geometry can really account for all the beauty of the

world and of the arts.

Aristotle took a more balanced view of the physical and spiritual worlds, asserting that matter cooperates with form rather than obscuring it. For him, the physical world is not an illusory and deceitful copy of the ideal world but is real and meaningful. Here Aristotle seems to intuit something approaching the Christian view of created matter, and it is largely for this reason that he became the favorite of Catholic theologians. In his *Poetics*, Aristotle states that poetry has the capacity to present the universal realities of “human action and life”. He goes on to say that “Poetry, therefore, is more philosophical and more significant than history, for poetry is more concerned with the universal and history more with the individual.” Here for the first time is the claim that beauty is truth: a good work of art captures universal truths about humanity.

St. Augustine was sometimes nervous about the power of art. For instance, he became concerned if he found himself too caught up in the music of the liturgy. At the same time, he gave one of the enduring definitions of beauty, namely that it is a harmonizing of parts in an ordered whole. This definition of beauty seems to me to be the best and most comprehensive. Beautiful works have a complexity of parts resolved in an integral wholeness. They exhibit multiplicity in unity. Augustine also asserted that judgments of beauty could be objectively valid.

St. Thomas Aquinas similarly argued that beautiful things have *integrity*, an integration of separate parts, as well as propor-

tion and harmony (which seems to me to be another word for integrity or wholeness, since harmony is a resolution of different elements). Aquinas also points out that the true experience of beauty is not only sensory but intellectual—that it is a kind of *knowing*. Perhaps he was the first to make this distinction between beauty, which has this cognitive element interfused with sensory experience, and simple physical pleasure, which is exclusively sensory. This is another way of saying that beauty has to do with truth, not just with entertainment. St. Thomas wisely admits, however, that the term “beauty” is difficult to define and has different senses when applied to different things.

What Christianity added to the ideas of the ancient philosophers on this topic was the assurance that God had created the universe in such a way that it was inherently meaningful. According to the Christian view, everything in the world is a creature of God and a reflection of one part of His infinite goodness. The universe itself is the ultimate work of art, exhibiting to an astonishing degree that integration of parts within the whole. Thus the beautiful orderliness of the world is itself a reflection of God and a proof of His existence. Our sacramental theology insists that the most profound spiritual moments are experienced in and through the physical world. Baptism requires water; Communion, bread and wine; other sacraments, oil. The sacraments are perfect works of art, for their physical elements not only symbolize but really embody or enact spiritual realities. A sacrament is, by definition “a symbol that effects what it signifies.” The water of baptism signifies spiritual cleansing and *effects* spiritual cleansing. The bread of communion signifies the body of Christ and *is* the body of Christ.

The greatest poet of the Middle Ages was inspired by these beliefs. Dante saw the *Divine Comedy* as allegorical, that is, as having meaning at several levels—but with all those levels springing from the literal level of the poem. This most spiritual poem is at the same time intensely physical and piercingly beautiful. Many find the *Inferno* the

best part, but the *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso* are powerful as well. In fact, the whole work may be read as a meditation on the interaction of the physical and spiritual. *Inferno* is filled with physical, bodily images, while *Paradiso* uses ethereal and even Platonic geometrical forms to hint at the mysteries of the Godhead. *Purgatorio* is in between, and it is here that the reader encounters that in-between phenomenon, art. Everywhere there is singing and poetry, and in one striking example there are carvings in marble of the Annunciation, sculpture so good that the poet feels as if he hears the angel saying *Ave*. The *Purgatorio* is also full of rituals, for both art and ritual unite immediate physical experience with transcendent spiritual meaning. Though the *Paradiso* must necessarily be more abstract, it is full of beautiful images of light, turning wheels, and the cos-

Aquinas points out that the true experience of beauty is not only sensory but intellectual—that it is a kind of knowing.

mic dance. Since we believe in the resurrection of the body, Dante envisions a physical reality even in heaven. The final canto begins with a reminder of the incarnation, with the poet addressing Mary as *figlia del tuo figlio*, daughter of your son. Though she transcends time in this paradoxical relationship, it is through her that the Lord enters the temporal world. The canto ends with a vision of the blessed Trinity as three circles of light reflecting each other, and then with a sudden glimpse of “our human effigy” in the second circle. The highest vision is not of a completely immaterial deity but of the incarnate Lord. It is that perfect union of spirit and matter that makes objective beauty possible and inevitable.

One of the most famous treatises on poetry in the Renaissance was Sir Philip

Sidney’s *Apology for Poetry*, written in response to Puritan attacks claiming that all poetry was essentially immoral. Sidney engages the relation between aesthetics and ethics, between the beautiful and the good. Following Aristotle, he argues that poetry reveals universals and is therefore deeply philosophical, deeply true. But he goes further, asserting that poetry is a better ethical teacher than philosophy, for poetry touches our emotions and moves us to moral action, while philosophy can teach us what is right but not move our hearts to act on that knowledge.

Now, Sidney’s dispute with the Puritans brings us to the Protestant Reformation, which did damage to the union of matter and spirit that is at the heart of beauty. In proclaiming the doctrine of *sola Scriptura*, the revolutionary notion that the Bible was the only way we had of knowing God’s will, the Protestants denied the continuing action of the Holy Spirit in guiding the Church. In rejecting the sacraments, they ripped apart the beautiful incarnational conjunction of the physical and spiritual worlds. In denying Church authority and asserting the authority of the individual Christian, they inaugurated the movement toward modern individualism and subjectivism that has resulted in denials of objective truth, goodness, and beauty. The Reformation took hold at about the same time that Descartes introduced in philosophy a radical split between matter and mind, and the coincidence of these two trends in theology and philosophy is significant.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, subject and object tended to separate entirely, with an apparently unbridgeable chasm between. A new sort of objectivity appeared as some thinkers took a radically materialist approach. Two objectivist notions swept the intellectual world: Marxist “realism” treats all inner experience as an illusory *Überbau* (superstructure) entirely reducible to material causes; Freud similarly considered all mental or spiritual or artistic phenomena as sublimations of physical, erotic impulses. On the other

hand, there arose radically subjective notions, which effectively treated the world of objects as insignificant, assigning ultimate authenticity to the inner world of the mind, which gave meaning to its surroundings according to its arbitrary whim. Thus we have existentialism, which denies that there are any objective essences and claims that reality is composed inwardly, in the existential moment: there are no *essentia*, only *esse*. The secularist thinkers of the twentieth century found themselves called upon to take sides, to choose either a radical objectivism or an equally radical subjectivism. The center, as Yeats put it, could not hold.

Another strong influence on the loss of meaning came from the new science of linguistics. One of the founders of modern lin-

The universe itself is the ultimate work of art, exhibiting to an astonishing degree that integration of parts within the whole.

guistics, Ferdinand de Saussure, distinguished between the “signifier” (the sound image, or word) and the “signified” (the concept indicated by the word), and he asserted that “The bond between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary.” Saussure is speaking primarily of linguistic signs, of words, and anyone who considers the fact that there are different languages will admit that particular words are not integrally connected to the objects to which they point. However, Saussure sweeps non-linguistic symbols under the linguistic rug, and the structuralists and post-structuralists who followed him have blithely proclaimed that all meaning is linguistic and hence wholly arbitrary, a cultural construct. Pope John Paul II used the linguists’ terms (but contradicted their dogma of arbitrariness) when he spoke of “the sign of the Eucharist, in which the indis-

soluble unity between the signifier and signified makes it possible to grasp the depths of the mystery” (*Fides et ratio*).

As an answer to the meaningless worldview of the materialists, existentialists, and structuralists, we might go back to Samuel Taylor Coleridge in the Romantic period, who writes that a symbol “always partakes of the Reality which it renders intelligible.” Symbols are not chosen randomly but point to an abstract meaning naturally because of what they are physically. Water symbolizes cleansing because it cleanses. The rose symbolizes beauty because it is beautiful. T. S. Eliot makes the same point when he says that “It is essential to the doctrine which I have sketched that the symbol or sign be not arbitrarily amputated from the object which it symbolizes. . . . No symbol, I maintain, is ever a mere symbol, but is continuous with that which it symbolizes.” One more recent theorist who acknowledges the reality of symbols is Paul Ricoeur, who begins with what he calls the “non-linguistic dimension of the Sacred” found in religious ritual. Perennial natural symbols such as the four seasons, the four elements, trees, and sky and mountains and sea and stars—these symbols are, as Ricoeur says, “bound to the cosmos.”

Since symbolic meaning is derived from the cosmos, it has the possibility of being objective and of conveying objective truth. These truths, as Sidney says, have the advantage over truth abstractly expressed in that they move our hearts to right action. This idea was given a name by Edmund Burke when he spoke of the “moral imagination.” The phrase might never have gained much currency had it not been for Russell Kirk, who (in his book *Eliot and His Age*) defined and elaborated Burke’s concept. By the “moral imagination,” Kirk says, “Burke meant that power of ethical perception which strides beyond the barriers of private experience and events of the moment.” This definition is a challenge to the notions of relativism and “cultural constructionism” that rule much of the academy today, which assert that our thoughts can never go beyond “the barriers of private experience

and events of the moment.”

Kirk’s theory of imagination has much in common with the one C. S. Lewis proposes in *The Abolition of Man*. In this book, perhaps his greatest, Lewis argues that good imaginative literature trains the heart to respond with ordinate emotions appropriate to the object presented. Lewis begins the book rather innocuously, as a book review of an English textbook. He calls the book *The Green Book* and its authors, Gaius and Titius. Gaius and Titius set Lewis off by debunking a statement once made by Coleridge. Having overheard two tourists talking about a waterfall, Coleridge disapproves of the one who calls it “pretty” and approves of the one who calls it “sublime”. Gaius and Titius correct Coleridge, pointing out matter-of-factly that neither word

The sacraments are perfect works of art, for their physical elements not only symbolize but really embody or enact spiritual realities.

really has anything to do with the waterfall: the man who called it sublime “was not making a remark about the waterfall but about his own feelings.” This is one of those dangerous half-truths (or quarter-truths) which, when pushed far enough, become monstrous falsehoods. Lewis argues that there are objective emotions, rightly ordered emotions, that respond properly to true values. Such emotions must be normative (must be enconced in education and law and custom) if a culture is to remain healthy. Lewis foresaw the debates of today, when we are being told that our personal religious views should not determine the law of the land—even if they are the views of the vast majority of people in a democratic country.

Having begun with the particular case of this poor textbook, Lewis points out that it

is merely an obvious example of a much wider trend in modern thought toward subjectivism of one type or another. He outlines the fundamental difference between traditional and modern thought thus:

Until quite modern times all teachers and even all men believed the universe to be such that certain emotional reactions on our part could be either congruous or incongruous to it—believed, in fact, that objects did not merely receive, but could *merit*, our approval or disapproval, our reverence, or our contempt. The reason why Coleridge agreed with the tourist who called the cataract sublime and disagreed with the one who called it pretty was of course that he believed inanimate nature to be such that certain responses could be more “just” or “ordinate” or “appropriate” to it than others.

Lewis goes back to St. Augustine, who spoke of the *ordo amoris*, “the ordinate condition of the affections in which every object is accorded that kind and degree of love which is appropriate to it,” and to Aristotle, who asserts that “the aim of education is to make the pupil like and dislike what he ought.” Here is another way of describing moral imagination, a response to beauty that is true to our nature and the nature of the created world.

The natural law is determined by right reason, but it must be felt emotionally if we are to live in accord with it, for it is the emotions that move us to action. (Notice that we are right back to Philip Sidney’s claim for poetry.) As Lewis goes on to say, “because our approvals and disapprovals are thus recognitions of objective value or responses to an objective order, therefore, emotional states can be in harmony with reason (when we feel liking for what ought to be approved) or out of harmony with reason. . . . The heart never takes the place of the head: but it can, and should, obey it” (31–32). Children who are educated in the way of *The Green Book* are in danger of becoming “Men without Chests”, whose

emotions have not been taught to value what is objectively and rationally valuable. They have been taught to disregard the truth of beauty.

What can we conclude after this dizzyingly rapid review of the history of aesthetics?

First, the relativists are right to some extent. Certainly there is no accounting for taste and one must partially accept the old saying, *chaque’un à son goût*, to each his own. Taste clearly changes from one generation to the next and from one place to another.

Second, it is a grave error, nevertheless, to totalize that relativistic declaration and propose that there are no universally recog-

Samuel Taylor Coleridge writes that a symbol “always partakes of the Reality which it renders intelligible.” Water symbolizes cleansing because it cleanses. The rose symbolizes beauty because it is beautiful.

nized beauties. Plato’s circles and triangles, intervals such as the octave and fifth in music, natural objects such as mountains, streams, flowers, birds, sun, moon, and stars—these are all transcultural, giving pleasure to all people in all times and places. Moreover, there are general principles of aesthetics that seem to be universal. Beauty always involves a sense of multiplicity in unity, a conjunction of opposites, an integral wholeness of parts. A beautiful garden is not merely a long stretch of grass but a combination of several different plants of various shapes, heights, textures, and colors (and perhaps rocks and sculptures and benches as well) that somehow works, somehow looks all of a piece.

Third, beauty matters. Radical Protestantism, such as was found in Calvinism generally and particularly among the Puritans, distrusted beauty and removed it

from churches and from worship services. A similar attack on beauty has unfortunately arisen in the Catholic Church as a result of a common misreading of Vatican II. We must again strive to offer praise to God with the most beautiful churches and art and clothing and liturgical music we can manage. The modern notion that only the inward matters and that outward forms are impediments to worship is false.

Fourth, we find that we must object strenuously to those who maintain that all signs are arbitrary and that all meaning is either existentially or culturally constructed. There are in fact many natural symbols that mean more or less the same thing to all people because all have the same experiences of the physical world. Christian doctrine teaches us that the world around us is meaningful because the Father created it with order and completeness. He created us in such a way that our minds are capable of grasping the significance of the objective world. The world itself is sacramental.

Finally, we maintain that our human imagination is capable of grasping truth and goodness in ways that move us passionately to live in those objective realities. The answers to the errors of modern times need to be given in philosophy and theology, but it is essential that our students also experience the truth imaginatively. Moral imagination may even be found in works by writers who did not fully accept the very truths they described. For instance, Aldous Huxley was not a believer, but his novel *Brave New World* remains one of the most powerful indictments of the modern movement to deny Original Sin and enforce happiness on all. The moral imagination is our best defense against what C. S. Lewis called “the abolition of man”.

Ben Lockerd is Professor of English at Grand Valley State University in Grand Rapids, Michigan, where he has received the Alumni Association’s Outstanding Educator Award. He has written books on Edmund Spenser and T. S. Eliot. Dr. Lockerd is past-president of the T. S. Eliot Society and wrote the introduction to a new edition of Russell Kirk’s book Eliot and His Age.