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Beauty and Truth

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One of the greatest Nobel Prize acceptance speeches ever given was made by Alexander Solzhenitsyn in 1972. In that speech, Solzhenitsyn reflected on a comment made by Fyodor Dostoevsky.

Dostoevsky once let drop an enigmatic remark: ‘Beauty will save the world.’ What is this? For a long time it seemed to me simply a phrase. How could this be possible? When in the bloodthirsty process of history did beauty ever save anyone, and from what? Granted, it ennobled, it elevated—but whom did it ever save?

There is, however, a particular feature in the very essence of beauty—a characteristic trait of art itself: the *persuasiveness* of a true work of art is completely irrefutable; it prevails even over a resisting heart. A political speech, an aggressive piece of journalism, a program for the organization of society, a philosophical system, can all be constructed—with apparent smoothness and harmony—on an error or a lie... A true work of art carries its verification within itself: artificial and forced concepts do not survive their trial by images, ... [rather] works which have drawn on the truth and which have presented it to us in concentrated and vibrant form seize us, attract us to themselves powerfully, and no one ever—even centuries later—will step forth to deny them.

I’d like to take up this claim inherent in both Solzhenitsyn’s and Dostoevsky’s words—that “beauty can save the world.” In doing so, I want to set aside any worries that I might be arguing for the Romantic view of beauty that lands perhaps too completely in the ideal realm. Instead, I must take up the challenge of the “truth” problem or “alethic” argument (always so compelling to academics!)—that is, art “as a way of knowing.” Surely that is a question or problem that must be taken up more thoroughly in a talk entitled “Beauty and Truth.” And while I agree that we’ve got some very well-worn grooves here in the philosophical and epistemological frameworks we’ve erected around discussions of beauty and knowing—surely we aren’t simply locked into rehearsing the same old eighteenth and nineteenth century arguments, either.

Rather, as a narrative theorist in literature—a philosopher of story and interpretation, if you will—I’d like to take up Solzhenitsyn’s two statements that “the *persuasiveness* of a true work of art is completely irrefutable; it prevails even over a resisting heart”—and— “A true work of art carries its verification within itself.” In each of these claims, Solzhenitsyn takes as given the

fact that art contains within itself the constituent elements of its own **dialogue**—indeed its own **argument** (by the language of both “persuasiveness” and “verification”).

This is not a position unique to Solzhenitsyn but it does seem to be particularly compelling to Russian thinkers and believers—an idea I will investigate further in just a moment. For now, though, it is important to note that in this definition, beauty is not self-enclosed but always in relationship. Therefore, I want to offer my central claim that “beauty” is the term best used to characterize what it is that brings about “persuasiveness” and “verification” — indeed, that very notion of “truth-telling in a work of art. “Beauty,” in this formulation, is the term for **the discursiveness outside of words** that exists in any beautiful thing.

It wasn't only Jacques Derrida—although he famously gets the credit—who noticed that the entire foundation of western epistemology has been erected on the slippery foundation of human language, back in the old twentieth century. As far back as Edmund Saussure in the nineteenth, of course, the dangerous territory of linguistic instability has set off alarms. And nothing seems to be more problematic than trying to talk about truth in beauty with so wobbly a tool—words being so alarmingly multivalent. But we humans rely so heavily on language—indeed it is our species' distinctive gift. And God himself spoke to us in “the Word made flesh,” of course. How then do we find our way out of these thickets?

LET ME MAKE AN ATTEMPT by first telling you about something beautiful I saw one day. The first time I visited London was in 1994 when I was a graduate student, in England to give a paper at a conference. Of course, who could resist the lure of the British Museum and all that problematic imperialism and compulsive collectivity on display—especially for a scholar of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries?

As I walked around the very large room that reproduces this Parthenon Frieze (or “Elgin Marbles,” in the Victorian terminology) at a height suitable for viewing, I was particularly struck by both the incredible beauty of the sculpted marble and the powerfully life-like figures that proceeded around the hall—but also by the compelling narrative that starts to emerge as you walk with all the people and animals in each marble section. A viewer has the mesmerizing sense of being part of the parade as the figures seem to move alongside you as you walk the hall.



Suddenly, one jarringly different scenario stopped me in my tracks—this hilarious scene of a recalcitrant bull and the two guys desperately trying to keep him in line. You can practically hear the animal bellowing. I paused in my walk along the procession and read that little

white explanatory note below the figures. It says:

Figure 117 quickens his step and turns sharply. A youth leading the animal also turns while the beast itself raises its head to bellow. This slab is thought to have inspired Keats to write of “that heifer lowing at the skies in his *Ode on a Grecian Urn*.”

You could have just knocked me over with a feather at that moment.

Of course, every English major worth his or her salt knows that famous poem backwards and forwards. No, what hit me then was that I was dumbfounded to realize that I was standing literally on the exact same piece of flooring that had stopped Keats, too. The beauty—and humanity—of this ancient sculpture not only has “intrinsic worth,” as it were, that has lasted through the ages—surely it does. What interested me, though, was that it was **still speaking**. The incredible—and even clichéd—fame of both these marbles and that Romantic poem did nothing to silence the conversation that we two were able to have that morning in September 1994. And I hasten to add that this claim does not foreground the Marbles’ “instrumental” worth in making me “experience” its beauty (or recall the poem), either. Rather, it was an encounter rooted only—and temporarily—in the short instance of space and time when that object and myself met and “mutually completed each other,” to quote another Russian philosopher.

But look again at that famous last stanza of Keats’s poem.

O Attic shape! fair attitude! with brede

Of marble men and maidens overwrought,

With forest branches and the trodden weed;

Thou, silent form! dost tease us out of thought

As doth eternity: Cold Pastoral!

When old age shall this generation waste,

Thou shalt remain, in midst of other woe

Than ours, a friend to man, to whom thou say’st,

“Beauty is truth, truth beauty,—that is all

Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.”

“Beauty is truth, truth beauty”—in disputed quotation marks, no less (since scholars aren’t totally sure if Keats or his first printer put them in)—implying that someone is actually speaking these lines, correct? But whom? The urn? The poem’s speaker? And *is* that “all ye know on

earth” and, even further, “all ye need to know”? And who exactly is this “ye”? We who stand and see? The reader of the poem? Anyone who comes close and listens? The longer you look the less clear that statement seems. The editors of the *Norton Anthology of English Literature* go so far as to say in a footnote that the famous phrase is either “a profound metaphysical proposition, an overstatement representing the limited point of view of the urn, or simply nonsensical” (8th ed. 906).

In fact, I believe that this powerful yet ultimately mystifying moment in poetry-reading makes one thing very clear—while beauty makes us notice our own attempts to understand it, it also evades the rational certainty, the “finalizing” of any kind of fixed reference in language. As we see, the poet’s words here finally fail to capture the ultimate “meaning” of truth and beauty in a rational or epistemological way; they collapse into their own jumbled system of reference. Indeed, Keats, like me, was stopped right in his tracks, jolted by the marble’s beauty into a moment both inside and outside of time and stunned with a sense of our shared humanity across the ages by the “discursiveness without words” of a humorous moment with a boy and a bull. But it is, in fact, the poetic lines before these that seem to me to be the actual point here. The comforting incarnate presence—and even love—of the beautiful thing itself will continue to be always in **relationship** outside of itself: “Thou shalt remain, in midst of other woe/Than ours, a friend to man,…”

So I want to turn back to my central claim that “beauty” is the term best used to describe that artistic “persuasiveness” and “verification” —indeed, that “truth-telling—of **the discursiveness outside of words** that exists in any beautiful thing. As with the Hebrew notion of the God who is not named, the “not-said” of the holy word “YAHWEH” carries within it all the divine meaning of the One True God. It is not silence or absence—it is the “not-said” that is all-encompassing and divine PRESENCE.

What is central to my argument here, then, is a re-framing of “truth” into a much broader conception of “telling.” Mikhail Bakhtin has written that the representative beauty of the arts is a shorthand term for “a specific aesthetic attitude to reality... untranslatable into logical language... a specific means of artistic perception and cognition,” one that “restores the ambivalent wholeness” of life (*The Dialogic Imagination* 201). What Bakhtin notices here, long before Jacques Derrida, is that a reliance on language alone gives a deceptively rational and linear view of things—and that’s the whole trouble. Rather what we need is a better way to restore this ambivalent wholeness of life.

One way to restore wholeness is to see beauty as what Bakhtin calls a “transgredient”—an incarnate aspect of the relational interplay of being and knowing that reaches across the seemingly impossible separation between concrete things (such as marble sculptures and American graduate students) and enters into the very heart of our ability to know anything at all, least of all ourselves. As he writes in the 1919 fragmented text we know as *Art and Answerability*:

The more the moment of trust and the tones of faith and hope gain immediate actuality, the more certain **aesthetic** moments begin to **penetrate into self-accounting**. When the organizing role [in our narrating inner voice] passes from repentance to trust, an aesthetic

form, *a concord*, becomes possible.... in anticipation of beauty in God, tranquility, concord, and measure become possible... values that are shared in common by life and by art.... are an *aesthetic of lived life* (3, his emphasis).

This is “bio-graphical” architectonics—literally “life” in “writing”—as he calls it. As such, it is a relational philosophical system founded on the ever-shifting and never-finalized time/space interplay between the inner and outer discourses of each individual person in conversation with the narrating “others” both within and without our lives—including, of course, works of art. It is in precisely this way that beauty functions as that space/time “transgredient” that encodes its role as the boundary-bridging element of epistemological truth-telling outside of words.

A PARTICULAR EXAMPLE OF THIS IDEA at work can be found in a short scene from the Academy-Award-winning 1999 film *American Beauty*, directed by Sam Mendes and written by Alan Ball. In this scene, the troubled teenaged boy next door shares his video image of “the most beautiful thing in the world”—a floating plastic bag on a windy day. “Beauty,” as the character tell us, is to him an emblem of all that lies unseen and unsaid and, in this case, taken for granted: “[I]t was then that I knew there was this incredibly benevolent force that told me not to be afraid.” In fact, this amazing scene of the slowly floating and dancing bag makes his “heart feel like bursting from so much beauty.” It also shows its audience the transcendent truth that the simplest beautiful thing is also capable of teaching a troubled soul that “an incredibly benevolent force” both existed and did not want him to be afraid.

I was first alerted to the hidden power of this scene—and its transcendent and even spiritual imagery—in a keynote address by Robert K. Johnston of Fuller Seminary at a recent conference held at Azusa Pacific University. Johnston has written several books about the power of contemporary art forms (such as film) for people of faith who may have only a limited understanding of the way unsettling truths can, should, and are used by God. This film’s overall argument is that beauty is what helps jolt us alive and what helps transform our sadness and brokenness into “so much gratitude for every single day of my stupid little life,” as the main character Lester Burnham (Kevin Spacey) says at the very end of the film. As such, then, we know we are in the presence of a kind of beautiful truth-telling that “embraces the ambivalent wholeness of life” when encountering a film such as this one.

As in Bakhtin’s formulation, the beauty here is also truth-telling because of the “responding and answering soul” there present in the same space/time moment—both the troubled teenaged boy and the young girl who comes to love and understand him through the eloquent silence of this powerful filmic moment. Once again, these images are examples of the way that art can communicate “silence that is not absence” as a “transgredient” that bridges the gaps in our ability to know some of the deepest, truest things. And the “not-said” here certainly seems to be grace and redemption—and possibly even the presence of God. Certainly “the incredibly benevolent force that told me not to be afraid” is both divine and mysterious for both characters and viewers. Even, in fact, marked and incarnated in each of the young character’s lives by both hand holding and a kiss—another emblem of the visible presence of unspoken things.

The language of truth-telling in long narrative forms such as film and the novel, then, “makes possible new things,” according to Bakhtin, through its capacity to grasp the many-sidedness and

potential of both the fleeting moment and of the most commonplace individuals and events. Such a vision is able to capture phenomena in the process of change and transition, what he calls “their continuous, creative, renewing, changeability.” Life is both too full and too important to “permit seriousness alone to atrophy and break away from the unfinished wholeness of everyday existence.” Art works to restore this ambivalent wholeness—with all its unfinalizable, changing, living breath—by operating as discursiveness outside of words. What more truth could we ask for?

Even the apostle Paul has given us to understand that the deepest frameworks of knowing truth lie in human mind that discern not with human rationality but with the mysterious and beautiful truth-telling of the Holy Spirit:

The Spirit searches all things, even the deep things of God. For who among men knows the thoughts of a man except the man’s spirit within him? In the same way no one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. We have not received the spirit of the world but the Spirit who is from God, that we may understand what God has freely given us. This is what we speak, not in words taught to us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, expressing spiritual truths in spiritual words. . . . The spiritual man makes judgments about all things, but he himself is not subject to any man’s judgment: ‘For who has known the mind of the Lord that he may instruct him?’ But we have the mind of Christ. (I Cor. 2:10–16)

MY THIRD AND FINAL EXAMPLE OF TRUTH and beauty is a film entitled *The New World*, written and directed by the renowned and reclusive Terence Malick, and brought to my attention by Jeffrey Overstreet, Seattle Pacific University’s own resident film expert and *Christianity Today* writer. This story is the historically accurate re-telling of the first encounters between native peoples and Europeans in America in the early seventeenth century and of the life of the native woman sometimes called “Pocahontas” (although that name is never spoken in this film). More specifically, it is a brilliant attempt to represent in the multidisciplinary art form of film the actual process of the spirit animating a “new world” being born—both in the historical implications of that term for Americans and Europeans and in the literally “Edenic” newness of creation itself. The film uses to powerful effect another masterpiece telling of the birth of a new world—Richard Wagner’s opening music to the first opera of the epic “Ring” cycle, arguably one of the greatest total art works (*gesamptkunstwerken*) ever created. This musical leitmotif, heard in the opening of both the film and the opera, is the metaphor and musical representation of creation itself, as you may notice from the way the filmmaker interleaves the notes of Wagner’s overture along with natural sounds of the forest and river in this scene—literally allowing the sound of God’s creation to “finish” Wagner’s score. It is almost like witnessing the very act of creation itself.

The multi-valence of many different modes of beauty in film allow Malick to enact and embody a new world being born. Spirit is called forth, almost literally “hovering over the waters.” And a scene of baptismal immersion and celebration of water, as well, recalls both Genesis and Wagner’s Rhinemaidens who open the Ring cycle in a joyous celebration of the “concord” and peace at the waterside dawn of creation—so soon, of course, in both cases to “fall.” Here Malick actually invites our “future remembrance,” as Bakhtin says, of this sin and brokenness, as the

deadly clashes between native peoples and European conquerors are shown through maps and lithographs at exactly the moment Wagner's overture begins. Malick also foregrounds in several filmic images how both sides are so baffled in their ability to "see" something so completely "other" (that is, each other) that all they have in common, quite literally, is the very life-giving waters both cultures are so utterly reliant upon.

SO, CAN "BEAUTY SAVE THE WORLD"? Certainly its way of knowing and truth-telling need to enter (or re-enter) the conversation, carrying as it does within itself both persuasiveness and its own verification. We began and now are ending, too, with history. We are inheritors of an immense tradition of truth and beauty in art—and yet we must also embrace our historical chance to re-frame the dialogue for a new time, a new historical framework that is even now emerging in the postmodern period. It appears to me, so far, to be an age seeking models of epistemology and ontology that are relational without being relativistic, and ethical without being dogmatic. Its best model may be "dialogue" and "community," if we follow what Bakhtin has told us about the way we need each other to complete ourselves, embracing a horizon of vision that recognizes its human limitations while not fearing but trusting what lies beyond. It seems to also be a model that embraces beauty in order to expand the avenues of access to truth—to embrace the ambivalent wholeness of life.

And so, as the scripture in Psalm 90 says: "Let the beauty of the Lord our God be upon us."

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