

Notes on Beauty

Peter Schjeldahl

In my experience, an onset of beauty combines extremes of stimulation and relaxation. My mind is hyperalert. My body is at ease. Often I am aware of my shoulders coming down as unconscious muscular tension lets go. My mood soars. I have a conviction of goodness in all things. I feel that everything is going to be all right. Later I am pleasantly a little tired all over, as after swimming.

Mind and body become indivisible in beauty. Beauty teaches me that my brain is a physical organ and that "intelligence" is not limited to thought, but entails feeling and sensation, the whole organism in concert. Centrally involved is a subtle activity of hormonal excitation in or about the heart—the muscular organ, not a metaphor.

Beauty is a willing loss of mental control, surrendered to organic process that is momentarily under the direction of an exterior object. The object is not thought and felt about, exactly. It seems to use my capacities to think and feel itself.

Beauty is never pure for me. It is always mixed up with something else, some other quality or value—or story, even, in rudimentary forms of allegory, "moral," or "sentiment." Nothing in itself, beauty may be a mental solvent that dissolves something else, melting it into radiance.

Beauty invariably surprises me even when I am looking at what I assume

to be beautiful—a sunset, say, or a painting by Giovanni Bellini. There is always a touch of strangeness and novelty about it, an element that I did not expect. The element is usually very simple and overwhelming. In the sunset, I may identify something I never realized before about color; in the Bellini, something about mercy.

Sometimes the object of beauty is not just unexpected, but bizarre, with an aspect I initially consider odd or even ugly. Such experiences are revolutions of taste, insights into new or alien aesthetic categories. When I first "got" an Indian temple sculpture, it was as if my molecules were violently rearranged. Something similar happened when I first "got" a painting by Jackson Pollock, say, or Andy

Warhol-any strongly innovative artist. As a rule, what had seemed most odd or ugly became the exact trigger of my exaltation.

An experience of beauty may be intense, leaving a permanent impression, or quite mild and soon all but forgotten. But it always resembles a conversion experience, the mind's joyful capitulation to a recovered or new belief. The merely attractive (pretty, glamorous) and merely pleasing (lovely, delectable) are not beauty, because they lack the element of belief and the feeling of awe that announces it.

The attractive or pleasing enhances the flow of my feelings. The beautiful halts the flow, which recommences in a changed direction.

Beauty entails a sense of the sacred. It surrounds something with an aura of inviolability, a taboo on violation. I am mightily attracted to the object while, by a countervailing and equal force of reverence, held back from it. I am stopped in my tracks, rooted to the spot. Beauty is a standoff.

Beauty has an equivocal relation with taste, which at best guides me to things I will like and at worst steers me away from things I might like if I gave them a chance. Taste may sharpen beauty by putting up an initial resistance to its object, making keener the moment when my intellect lays down its arms in surrender. Taste that is not regularly overridden forms a carapace, within which occurs spiritual asphyxiation. But to have no taste at all is to have retained nothing from aesthetic experience. Taste is residue of beauty.

In line with recent breakthroughs in neurological brain research, I fancy that one day the mental event that is an experience of beauty will be X-ray photographed. I predict that the photograph will show the brain lit up like a Christmas tree, with simultaneous firings of neurons in many parts of the brain,

though not very brightly. It will show a suddenly swelling diffused glow that wanes gradually.

There is something crazy about a culture in which the value of beauty becomes controversial. It is crazy not to celebrate whatever reconciles us to life. The craziness suggests either stubborn grievance-an unhappiness with life that turns people against notions of reconciliation to it-or benumbed insensibility. The two terms may be one.

"Beauty" versus beauty. Platitude versus phenomenon. Term of sentimental cant versus dictionary word in everyday use. I want to rescue for educated talk the vernacular sense of beauty from the historically freighted, abstract piety of "Beauty"

A dictionary says beauty is "the quality present in a thing or person that gives intense pleasure or deep satisfaction to the mind." Now, the idea of a "quality present in" external reality could use qualifying in this case. Overly confident identifying of experience with its object can foster rigid projections, such as

"Beauty," that repulse the playful, exploratory, even skeptical vitality of aesthetic perception. Speech should distinguish beauty as a quality more volatile than, say the color blue. The sky's reputation of being blue has never yet, that I know of, incited a rebellious conviction that it is orange. But anything's reputation of being beautiful is guaranteed to recommend itself to some as a theory, if not of the ugly, of the boring. To argue that beauty is real is unnecessary. To argue that it is interest-lg requires making room for the position that it is "all in the mind."

Meanwhile, can there be any possible problem with "intense pleasure or deep satisfaction to the mind"? I know those experiences, and I like them. I believe that others know and like them, too. For people without the comfort of religion, and even for many who are religious, the experiences may provide a large part of what makes life worth living. Any society that does not respect the reality of "intense pleasure and deep satisfaction to the mind" is a mean society. Respect for something begins with having a respectful name for it.

Forty or so years ago, J. L. Austin wrote that it was time for aesthetics to quit fretting about the single narrow quality of the beautiful. He recommended for study the dainty and the dumpy. Though without intending to be, he was prophetic. Since pop art, minimalism, arte povera, and conceptualism, artists have devoted themselves to all manner of aesthetic sensations exclusive of beauty-to the point where it seems vital to think about beauty again, though hardly to reduce the focus of the aesthetic back to beauty alone.

Loss of necessary connection between beauty and art seems another of the baleful effects of modern technology, which can simulate, so readily and in such abundance, experiences that once were hard to come by. Visual beauty has been escaping from visual art into movies, magazines, and other media, much as the poetic has escaped from contemporary poetry into popular songs and advertising.

Beauty's value as a profound comfort, a reconciliation with life, inevitably wanes when ordinary life is replete with comforts, notably including less frequent exposure to the ugly. The beautiful meant more before indoor plumbing.

Another reason for the progressive divorce of beauty from art is the institutional order that governs most activities involving art. Servants of this order, like minions of an established church, naturally try to rationalize

their functions. They are temperamentally averse to irrational and, especially, indescribable phenomena. If I had what I believed was a mystical experience, probably the last person I would report it to would be a priest or pastor. Similarly, I do not discuss beauty with curators. It would only discomfit them and embarrass me.