The Place of Beauty

ANTHONY SKILLEN

It was the Football World Cup in 1998. As the screen revealed David Beckham's backheel lash at the Argentinian captain, Simeones, my wife exclaimed, 'That does look ugly'. Watching the action replayed countlessly through the night, I asked whether Oscar Wilde might have been tempted to say: 'It may **be** ugly, but it **looks** beautiful; can we have it again?'. After all, Beckham's movement on the ground resembled nothing so much as that of a languorous young thing on a beach towel on a beautiful summer's day. The ugliness was a more spiritual, if in some ways more trivial, matter: petty would-be sly retaliation.

The layerings and multi-focality of such evaluative responses are easily forgotten or denied. With unawareness of subtlety and complexity goes a tendency to infer a pervasive epistemic fragility to the point of arbitrariness. From the way many people write on the subject, one would think that the concept of beauty was constricted, prissy even. I guess there are those who would say that my wife was speaking metaphorically; that only the objects of sight or hearing can be beautiful in the literal or perhaps the primary sense. These exiguous people would, at one end, chop off the spiritual, whether individual or social—for example the thought that the atmosphere in front of the Hotel de Ville in Paris at the time of the World Cup was 'beautiful—incredibly harmonious.' At the other, baser, end, you can get the very same people excising, even as they talk about 'taste', the tastes and smells, the feels and even the lovely sounds of nature from the sphere of Beauty Proper—as merely sensuous matters. I recently read a Piagetian article in a journal of developmental psychology which talked about a 'first stage' of aesthetic development at around 7 years: an age when, the article assured us, children cannot yet distinguish between what they like and what is good. Yet on a rare break in June's weather, I saw something as common as it is marvellous, the still-to-walk infant in the garden next door squatting in noisy but wordless rapture in front of a lovely cornflower. It is surely contemptuously dismissive to toss such experiences into the bin marked 'Sensory Gratification': the child was delighting in the flower. We find that infants, virtually from Day One show an awareness of, preference for and delight in things

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and forms and expressions that are harmonious, vibrant and, alas, 'conventionally beautiful'.[1]

Psychoanalysis is supposed to have combated our amnesia of the infantile. But in many ways it has reinforced the derogation of infant life. This is especially remarkable in respect of the 'aesthetic dimension': of the child's intuitively holistic grasp of harmonies and disharmonies, sensory, emotional and situational. Take Melanie Klein, whom many regard as having rescued psychoanalysis from its founder's reductiveness. It seems to me that although Klein populates the mind of the infant with a virtual library of sophisticated, especially moral, concepts, she engenders them on the received Freudian basis of the child as a helpless but tyrannical little nipple-guzzler. She fails to see the innate experiential holism of the child and its discriminating capacity to be switched on to the world; hence failing to see its 'splitting' as a response to intolerable if often inevitable unassimilabilities and breakdowns of trust in the world. Klein overstresses fantasy and, in a strange way, makes it harder to listen to children; specifically to the way the contrastive dimensions of beauty and ugliness penetrate their experience and understanding.

Reductive Benthamism about undisciplined pleasure-craving as that which it is 'education's' mission to conquer shows itself also in the institutional ideologies of schooling today. That our New Labour training-school masters are promoting this all-round anaesthetization programme in their obsession with the marketable motivates my sense that beauty has new enemies now that the smog of an earlier industrialism is less palpable. It is a horrible thought that people who imagined themselves to be subversive of oppressive social structures should, by including 'conventional notions of beauty' among the props of those structures, have aided the anaesthetization process, helping to remove aesthetic impediments to the march of the machine. Meanwhile, our unreconstucted need for beauty can be addressed in advertising and peripheral decoration.

Beauty is loved and treasured, it is something we are alive to. It is a matter of sensibility. One of the most remarkable things we are aware of today is the preoccupation with 'feelings': stress, feel-good and so on. But what is needed is an education in feelings, not a suppression, at war with sporadic pathologically interpreted outbreaks.

[1] See Langlois, in *Developmental Psychology* (1991), where a cross-cultural confirmation of the preference of children less than 6 months old for faces deemed attractive by adults is reported. *Developmental Psychology* (1987), Vol. 23, 363–69: 'Infant Preference for Attractive Faces'.

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Feelings, I suggest, are best thought of as our being affected by things as we experience, perceive and comprehend them: they are charged thoughts, not an alternative to thought. Trusting our feelings is not an alternative to trusting our judgment: your shame is in part your thought about what you've done and become. The thing about Jane Austen's Elinor Dashwood was more the right focus of her affections than her capacity to suppress them in the name of Reason. She grasped situations in their constraining and painful complexity and that is how she felt them: her 'heart' was a usually reliable barometer of the moral salience of the features of her situation. So if beauty is something that has to be thought of as a matter of 'Sensibility', that does not mean it is not a matter of 'Sense'—to be silly is after all to lack a sense of proportion.

One could approach the topic of popular culture with an idea that we need and seek beauty in our lives as passionate social beings struggling to get it together within and among ourselves. Beauty in things and beauty in expressive activities and performances seem to me to link with inner harmony and human fellowship and community; not as beauty linked to something else: psychological or social, but as beauty to answering and penetrating beauty. Minus his Forms, and minus, perhaps, the heavy ontological realism, I guess this is a Platonising position. Perhaps Joseph Addison was right in his Lockean point that the natures of otherwise rational and cognitively adequate beings could have been such 'that whatever seems loathsome to us might have shown itself agreeable'. Maybe he wasn't; the hypothesis sounds more plausible in the abstract than if you try to fill its details out with a delight in detritus, sores and rotting flesh, a preference for monotonous screeching and so on. At any rate, I would suggest we be wary of seeking to displace beauty and 'beauty' with a more subjectivized refocus on 'experience', 'appreciation' 'or the 'pleasures of the imagination', as if we can just take it that there isn't enough agreement in judgment or definition to constitute a more objective and universal, and pervasive, language-game of criticism and appreciation.

Love of beauty, once our sense of its naturalness is, during our reflections, lost, can seem as tough an achievement as conscientiousness itself. Anthony Savile, who is perhaps inclined to regard the experience of artistic beauty as itself a matter of fulfilling a task, writes in *The Test of Time,*

'A man who finds a way of viewing Nature in which he is bound to love it will through doing so find one way of overcoming that baneful divide between the subject and the world in which the

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subject lives. He will find in loving nature an encouragement to his own integration in the world'.[2]

The description evokes a recognizing response; it summons up perhaps the thought of poor Rousseau walking through the woods trying to shake off his obsessions with his dignity and to yield to the beauty and peace about him. But surely a love of lovely places is pretty basic and a sense of a place's beauty is much more primitive than a sense of the beauty of a landscape in a 'picturesque' sense. I guess Plato aspired, at grave risk to human freedom, to preempt baneful divides in the first place by ordering the spontaneities of love, through surrounding the child with beautiful forms in art, architecture and the rhythms of daily life (*Republic*, 401). Even in our post-modern awareness of imperfectibility: of an inevitable clash among values, we are not any more debarred from a recognition of kinds of beauty and ugliness around us, of 'solutions' whose beauty resides in their very grasp of difficulty and compromise. Indeed, unless post-modernism is no more than a travelling salesman's mantra, the condition is one whose reality presents itself through our sensibility of clash and fracture. We do not have to fall in with the Plato whom Aristotle in the *Politics* accused of conflating the demand for harmony with the demand for simplicity.

It is obviously hard to hold 'beauty' in place; or rather to hold on to it as it moves about. Wittgenstein tried to confine the term to quarters, as just one among many aesthetic concepts. Roger Scruton, in his awesome gallops across the field, seems officially to endorse Wittgenstein, though I would say that a love and grasp of beauty pervades his thinking. As I understand him, Scruton tends to say that our aesthetic delights are in experiences, typically constructs of the voluntary imagination. Yet he insists that these lovely experiences have a deep value as intimations of human yearnings. I want to say that yearnings such as these are, as Plato says, (*Timaeus*, 47) 'akin'; are themselves for beauty, where that is not best thought of as an 'aesthetic' concept, any more than happiness, though it has an aesthetic dimension as an aesthetic concept.

Let us take some modern treatments of Plato as examples of modern discomfort about where the concept of beauty belongs. I think it is important and, really, obvious that Plato's **kalos** is more or less our **beautiful**. But I see that in Christopher Janaway's struggles[3] through the thickets of Platonic exegesis, he follows Paul

[2] Anthony Savile, *The Test of Time*, p. 182 (UK, Oxford, 1982).

[3] Christopher Janaway, *Images of Excellence* (UK, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995).

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Woodruff's crew-cutting translation[4]: not 'beautiful' but 'fine'. Plato, we are told was not discussing what we would call beauty but something more general: fineness. Let us consider this briefly. First, let us note the obvious crowding imposed by this extrusion. How are we to distinguish **kalos** and **agathos**? 'fine and good'. Fine! Good! Very clarifying! Moreover,how are we to make sense in the *Hippias* of silly Hippias's starting off with beautiful maidens and gold as his attempt at a definition? How can we be so unhearing as to think that a concept whose primary paradigm is taken by this preening **homme moyen** to be a girl, the quintessence of the translator's culture's idolography, to be ill-rendered by the English word 'beautiful'? How are we to make sense of Socrates' at one point trying out a definition in terms of 'the pleasures of sight or hearing'? Imagine offering that as an equivalent of 'fine', especially where that English word is offered mainly because it is not confined to **aesthesis** and hence can move without alleged embarrassment up to lovely souls, institutions and ideas! How can we understand Socrates indicating to Hippias that the latter might not be happy with him speaking of practices, ways of life and laws as beautiful in the same sense as are things that please the sight (298b)? More generally, how are we to understand Plato's variously formulated but constant preoccupation with the beauty of sensuously delightful things as a path, albeit treacherous, leading beyond the sensuous? How are we to understand his picture at *Republic* 402 of the beauty of character expressing itself in beauty, not only of deed and gesture but of craftwork, song and dance? 'Fine!, Fine!'.

There is another thing prodding this conflationary translation. Plato instances a beautiful wooden ladle and a beautiful pot as a way of exposing Hippias's lack of grasp. Woodruff and Janaway, failing to note Hippias's own protest at such an egregious example, take it that, being a functional object, a pot cannot, as such, be a thing of beauty—fine though it may be for its job at the end of a hard and hungry day. Thus, whereas 'fine' happily and univocally jumps categories from the intrinsically to the instrumentally admired, 'beautiful', on our translators' view, does not. So, they reason, Socrates must have the broader concept in his sights. Here, I make one suggestion: there is a big difference between admiring something's apt functionality or loving someone's craft on one hand and, on the other, being 'interested' only in results. In terms of beauty, I suggest, the ladle and the pot are admired as matter-with-purpose, and that wonderful unity may itself be celebrated in decoration and

[4] Plato, *Hippias Major,* trans. Paul Woodruff (UK, Oxford, 1982).

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stylishness. This is different from a purely 'instrumental attitude'—the merely utilitarian attitude has no place for the love of tools and equipment. Not all results are achievements and not all celebrations of results are celebrations of achievements. In sport, this distinction is active throughout; among participants as well as supporters and admirers. A beautiful shot draws gasps for its effectiveness (even from the fieldsman left standing); an identical stroke straight to the fieldsman, though it be a cover drive out of the best book, leaves all but the narrowest aesthete unmoved: it lacks something, in timing and placement, in effective judgment and selection. You'll get comparable talk among decent plumbers, bricklayers engineers and mechanics. They have a sense of quality and its connecting powers; dysfunctionality, especially accompanied by flashiness, is repugnant, ugly, to them. We talk of a ruthlessly efficient utilitarianism which is thoughtless of beauty. I want to suggest that, where this is so, what is typically implicit is a complaint about ends unaddressed and unexpressed: as in a 'machine for living'. Here there is an impoverished sense of what needs to be provided architecturally to constitute the material of a home to live in, of what it is to enjoy the intimate and personally stamped beauties of home life.[5] We admire as beautiful solutions to the extent that they are appropriate to often complex and competing aims, not in the same breath questioned. That such things tend to look beautiful in themselves is a bonus, so pervasive as to induce theological impulses in many—'He made their tiny wings'. (I find it very strange, by the way, that Duchamp's admirers tend to assume that his urinal and bicycle wheel are not classically beautiful. Hence Duchamp has been recruited by Arthur Danto and others for smart-guy institutionalist anaesthesia rather than its opposite; the main point I take is that you don't have to be consecrated art to be beautiful.) So, I would argue, we should resist pressure to say of Plato, without regard for any issue of his Forms, that he stretches the conception of beauty and its area out of shape at both ends—in his spiritual or in his functional applications.

But if we translate him as discussing 'fineness' in the first place, we are left without the tension and depth of his vision.

Let me take another contemporary example of one who assumes a restricted conception of beauty's conceptual range. If you read Robert E. Norton's book, *The Beautiful Soul*[6], you will find beauty being put firmly in its sensori-aesthetic place. The book treats the

[5] For a discussion of architectural beauty see my critical notice: The Foundations of Roger Scruton's Aesthetics of Architecture, *British Journal of Aesthetics*, Vol. 20, 257–65, (1980).

[6] Robert E. Norton, *The Beautiful Soul* (Cornell, 1995).

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very idea of spiritual beauty as a neo-Platonist reinvention by Shaftesbury and as a fad which was effectively killed off by Hegel's ironic treatment of the Beautiful Soul in the *Phenomenology*. Like Terry Eagleton's *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*,[7] this book seeks debunkingly to historicize a universal concept and to see it as, in an important sense, an epidemic illusion. Norton treats the notion of beauty of soul as a seductive category-mistake, surviving on a consensual metaphor as a 'narcissistic projection' (page 242) among Enlightenment dreamers and navel-gazers.

Shaftesbury wrote:

> 'Is there then a natural beauty of figures? And is there not as natural one of actions? ... no sooner are actions, no sooner the human passions and affections discerned, than straight an inward eye distinguishes the fair and shapely, the amiable and the admirable, apart from the deformed, the foul, the odious and the despicable...[8].

It seems to me that Shaftesbury and those who followed him—and had preceded him—were on the right track here. What is remarkable about Norton's hatchet-job is that he chases after Shaftesbury's most derisory views and formulations (which are certainly there to be debunked), while completely ignoring the support for his more central theses in ordinary language and thought—represented and perhaps idealized in the hugely diverse character portraits of Addison, Steele, Goldsmith, Johnson, Fielding, Lamb and Hazlitt, not to mention the more nuanced and even tortured explorations of beauty and ugliness of character: of good and bad 'tempers', in Jane Austen.

Norton regards the treatment of oneself as an art-work as flowing as an entailment from the ideal of psychological beauty. This is a catwalk parody of the thing: cosmetics and calisthenics of the soul, a cultivating regime of workouts and massage as far as possible from the interruptions, disruptions, eruptions and corruptions intruding from forces external to the soul's chamber of mirrors. In other words, if we employ the concept of beauty (hence its opposite and contrary) in assessing each other and ourselves we are, on this view, buying into a cult of self-preening and admiration.

Plato, perhaps sucked in by his political analogy, said that the just man will look first after his own soul and to the impact of possible actions on its harmony. Shaftesbury, despite his magnificent refutation of Psychological Egoism, a refutation that opened the world up to the self's concerns, went in for an abstracted model of self-

[7] Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Blackwells, 1990).

[8] *Characteristics*, 2, 414–15.

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sculpting. The very image is Plotinus's, ripe for Norton's sickle; indeed, Norton takes as decisive Hegel's attack on the madness and dissolution consequent on the solipsistic mania for spiritual beauty. But this attack, on Goethe's ambiguously presented 'Beautiful Soul' and on Rousseau's pure Julie, no more refutes the appropriateness of the concept of personal beauty than an attack on some mad lusting after virtue, or terror of vice, would show the idea of virtue improper.

If the mind is not a thing, it is not right to look on its beauties as the beauties of a thing, to be appreciated in its isolation. If the beauties and deformities of our observable actions are to be understood and felt as expressive of the spirits and purposes they embody and express, any talk of beauties, deformities and insipidities in our souls cannot be of some skull-framed inner sculpture or theatre existing in more or less harmony within itself. To characterize our souls is to characterize our thoughts, passions, actions and reactions largely as they 'intend' their objects—which, in self-regard, include ourselves (think of the grotesqueries of vanity or self-abasement). So to talk 'kalistically' (I prefer this monster to the trapping sheen of 'aesthetically') about souls is to talk relationally, to locate an adequacy and appropriateness of spirit to occasion as well as to talk holistically: to be aware of balances, tensions and at least potential conflicts among our passions, perspectives and dispositions.

In respect of the inner harmony, it is tempting to think of 'harmony' as another word for 'integrity' and then to forget that harmony is note-hungry, in that it needs to be clear what it is that is in harmony. For example, Colin McGinn, who puts forward an 'Aesthetic Theory of Virtue' in his book *Ethics, Evil and Fiction*[9] falls into saying of the beautiful soul that it is 'a harmonious whole composed of discrete elements' so that 'nothing jagged or jarring must trouble the virtuous soul' (page 102). Pity, then, the beautiful soul whose child falls seriously ill just when the quartet's rehearsals are coming to fruition. McGinn's amiable thought cannot be right. Beautiful persons are not in permanently beautiful states! Any view of the beauty of persons which, ignoring what cares and concerns constitute it, leaves no places for conflict and its jarrings, for trouble, for bad news, for misery, has to be a bloodless one; ignoring the very things that make personal beauties strike us so forcefully. How wonderful when such situations are met with truly good grace. How terrible when contingencies cause a life to fall to pieces. (Beautiful souls and beautiful states of mind or experiences are different but

[9] Colin McGinn, 'Aesthetic Theory of Virtue' in *Ethics, Evil and Fiction* (Oxford, 1997).

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connected: isn't it interesting that the characterization of delight is often so like the characterization of beauty, its object; a sort of harmony in harmony?)

Having discussed beauty in the soul, let me now move to Beauty-in-the-large, to relationships, societies, institutions, practices, ways of life, traditions...

Schiller is interesting to the explorers of beauty not because he advances any novel analysis of the concept but because he follows Plato in a concern with the lovely and 'impressive' aspects of social life: with the ways in which social forms appear to participants as attractive or repulsive. He is, then, a thinker who keeps broad one's sense of the 'field'. Having said that, just because his concern is with the 'aesthetic', with the sensed, he does not to my mind go sufficiently into that of which the image is an image. Hence he leaves the door ajar for Terry Eagleton's heavy boot: for the terribly distorted charge that Schiller invents the aesthetic as a technology for getting the oppressed to fall in love with the structures of their oppression. On the contrary, I want to say that the situation of a person cheerfully embracing an oppressive situation is itself an ugly one: obviously one of incongruity between appearance and reality. While I would have loved to have found more by way of an 'aesthetic' critique of oppression in Schiller, it seems to me that he is almost presupposing that the duties he wants us to embrace joyfully are themselves just. In his *Kallias* letter to Korner in February 1793, Schiller wrote:

> 'I know of no fitter image of the ideal of beautiful behaviour than that of a well-danced English country dance composed of many complicated figures. A spectator in the gallery sees countless movements which intertwine in the most colourful way and change their direction in a lively and capricious way, but which never collide. Everything is so ordered that one dancer has made way by the time the other arrives; everything fits so deftly together, yet without artifice, that each lad seems to follow his own inclinations without ever getting in the way of his fellows. It is the aptest illustration of the assertion of a man's own freedom combined with the respect for that of others.'[10]

Schiller presents this performance, honed over generations and rehearsed to the last detail, as an 'image' of social beauty. But it is not presented by him as a paradigm of social beauty, for that would be to imply either that the society is itself characterized by rehearsal and only 'seeming' spontaneity or, on the contrary, that the dance is

[10] A. Savile, *Aesthetic Reconstructions*, p. 252 (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987).

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itself an instance of spontaneous harmony. Rather, the dance represents or signifies the value of harmonious pluralism. To Schiller at this momentous time, it expressed the idea of a spontaneous harmony among diverse and independent members, whose complexity and variety of action rendered the cohesion astonishing. (How are we to distinguish such an image from one that the authoritarian anti-pluralist Plato would have admired? And what distinguishes Schiller's performers from those that used to entertain visitors to Eastern Europe, with their pretence of representing vibrant 'national cultures'? Mainly we can discriminate through our capacity to know the truth. We are also aware of the place of improvization in non-performance dancing, where the dance event is itself 'paradigmatic' in the sense discussed, itself an instance of the human world of turbulent civility it represents.) Schiller's description of the liberal-democratic dance, then is suggestive of the idea of a beautiful dance representing a beautiful social form—right down, perhaps, to the strong role of the female participants.

Popper condemned the 'aestheticization' of politics, by which he meant the treating of social 'materials' as if they were those of an artist with a clean sheet, as inherently totalitarian, the quintessence of utopianism's allure. (Benjamin, I think, uses the word 'aestheticising' in terms not so much artful in respect of social formations as spectacularly impressive, offering a surface surrogate of true social harmony.) But does the idea of beauty in ways of life, in societies containing diverse ways of life need this conflict-free and volksy model of harmony (brilliantly and sympathetically satirized in Kundera's *The Joke*)? How about a muddier and more dynamic model, such as Glastonbury, with its hundred thousand trudging from Techno-beat to Tony Bennett?

Although a flower is beautiful itself, it might spoil an arrangement. It might clash. But sometimes that clash might be appropriate...

Suppose you turn up to a gathering in a nice shirt. But you are the only one in 'casual' dress—you stick out like a sore thumb.

Now suppose that this is a group of uptight, stuffy types—you are not going along with that.

But it's a memorial service for a member of the host's family—you are grossly, thoughtlessly and hurtfully out of order.

Still; you were the dead girl's best friend and the two of you shared attitudes to dress—you dressed with a sense of integrity and appropriateness to your dead friend's outlook.

But; the father had had a heart attack in the period since your friend's death....

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We have a rich and subtle sense, normally tacit or intuitive grasp of beauty and deformity, which cuts across the boundaries of art/life, things/actions. And that sense typically allows for a contestable balance in the sort of situation I've just sketched. That is why we can appreciate someone's sense of beauty even though we do not share it. And it is also why, when we recognize—and accept the appropriateness—of the frame within which a situation, action or object is being made or responded to, we can find that we too see its beauty or ugliness (beauties and uglinesses) too and the way that fits in to be part of the beaty or ugliness of the wider situation. People who think they are belittling beauty when they promote punk or otherwise transgressive inappropriatenesses are often just shifting the frame: appropriateness, harmony are formal notions, inviting the question: 'appropriate to or harmonious with what?' When Adorno says that you cannot have poetry after Auschwitz he is saying that the very juxtaposition of beautiful human expression with such monstrosity is an ugly and occlusive lie. At that level the issue is a discussable one; it has nothing to do with abandoning or altering the conception of beauty.

Schiller, Ruskin, Marx and Morris corroborate our natural tendency to look for beauty in interactive situations and systems, and to locate this at the heart of social criticism.

Ruskin, in *The Crown of Wild Olives*, addressed his audience in Bradford Town Hall thus:

> 'Your ideal of human life is this, I think, that it should be passed in a pleasant undulating world, with iron and coal everywhere underneath it. On each pleasant bank of this world is to be a beautiful mansion with two wings; and stables and coach-houses; a moderately sized park, a large garden and hot-houses: and pleasant carriage drives through the shrubberies. In this mansion are to live the favoured votaries of the Goddess (of Getting On); the English gentleman, with his gracious wife and his beautiful family... At the bottom of the bank is to be the mill; not less than a quarter of a mile long with one steam engine at each end and two in the middle; and a chimney three hundred feet high. In this mill are to be in constant employment from 800 to 1,000 workers, who never drink, never strike, always go to Church on a Sunday, and always express themselves in respectful language.
>
> Is not that broadly...the kind of thing you propose to yourselves? It is very pretty indeed, seen from above; not at all so pretty seen from below.'[11]

[11] John Ruskin, *The Crown of Wild Olives*, Lecture 2, paragraph 79.

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Ruskin uses a visual metaphor to expose the structural ugliness of what someone might call the contradictions of capitalism. Thus is the beauty of the mansion life constricted and besmirched by the conditions of its production. Ruskin shifts the frame, incidentally providing a critique of the tastelessness of an aestheticism that anaesthetizes itself to ugliness-in-the-large. Marx, of course spoke in terms of the 'contradiction' that under capitalism our greatest achievements are devastations. Drawing on the vocabulary of Schiller and Carlyle, he spoke of ruptures, fractures, disfigurements and crushes: developments in the mode of production

> '... mutilate the labourer into the fragment of a man, degrade him to the level of an appendage to a machine, destroy every remnant of charm in his work and turn it into a hated toil.'[12]

Marx peppered his writings with depictions of unsightliness and deformity, but I would argue that his sense of a deeper distortion of human potential, of alienation and forced failure to thrive is the meat of his perspective. It is a picture of a horribly systemic disharmony and ultimate chaos. Morris raged against the split between high art and mass-produced utilities and luxuries; he mocked the rich tourist's quest for beauty spots far from the places their wealth-generation had destroyed. In other words, his sense of social deformation and misconstruction ramified with his feeling for natural and artistic beauty, his dream of a society of artistic beauty-lovers: he shifted the frame of appreciation; in his ethical social criticism he retained the sense of quality and balance. Like the others I have mentioned, he does not, despite using metaphors, speak metaphorically in thinking of the beauties and uglinessses of social life. Mind you, it is hard to deny that Morris's vision was a bit prissy, like the ideal birthday party that cannot but be a dream. But, against Popper and others, I would maintain that Morris's problems were problems within his too exiguous conception of beauty, not in his taking that category to range over the field of human experience. And, I suggest, that is true of ripostes to these writers by their critics. After all, they are talking about order, fellowship, community, vitality. We are speaking, if you like of different sorts of unity in different sorts of variety, from mutual restraint to mutual celebration, where these beauties, though politically organized and more or less institutionally embodied, are not the product of a Platonic artist or Legislator, but are the ways of life of a group or community. And we are speaking of different sorts of deformity and atrophy, from the obscenities

[12] Karl Marx, *Capital*, Vol. I, Part VII, Ch.25, Section 4.

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of poverty amid plenty to those of the new market managerialism, where, in the name of the delivery of quality and excellence, spin and lying are part of the shortchanging discourse of everyday professional practice. No wonder a sort of post-political comedic cynicism, celebrating the hopelessness of all ideals, pervades the media. Aristotle reckoned the ludicrous to be a species of the ugly. But there is not supposed to be serious pain and suffering in the comical!

Having attempted to sketch out a field which, I claim, is traversed by at least one strong current in 'our' concept of beauty as it functions rather than as it is held to function, I will offer some even sketchier remarks on the 'logic' of 'beauty'. Duns Scotus, 'somewhere', as they say, says:

> 'Beauty is not some absolute quality in the beautiful object. It is rather an aggregate of all the properties of such objects—for example magnitude, shape and colour, and the sum of all the connections among themselves and the object.'

This seems to me to be along the right lines, as long as we are allowed to think that the distillations, contrasts and absences that can make a silence or a pure yellow beautiful are contributory properties that are part of the 'aggregate', ensemble or configuration. And as long as we do not think of aggregation in terms too literally arithmetical. Such a 'resultant' view collides, I think, with at least some formulations of the idea that aesthetic qualities, beauties, are something over-and-above their 'descriptive' properties, a view which leads to claims of such as Anne Sheppard in her *Aesthetics*[13] that there are no necessary and sufficient conditions for beauty or for artistic excellence, which seems like saying that there is no such thing as excellence (really). (Sheppard comes to embrace a 'persuasive' view of artistic criticism as a sort of attempt to get us to see things as this or that.) This claim strikes me as mistaking for an descriptive-evaluative leap, even a leap into subjectivity, what is better seen as a leap from generality—which may be all that a bundle of descriptive remarks can signify—to the individual configuration of characteristics in an individual object or work…in an individual situation. (Think of people listening to beautiful music while they do atrocious things.) That you can wreck an elegant statue's elegance by adding some feature to any given set of features—thus showing that its beauty does not follow from its having those features—does not establish a general 'descriptive'/'aesthetic' gulf.

[13] Anne Sheppard, *Aesthetics*, (Oxford University Press, 1987).

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Sheppard supports, using *Waiting for Godot* as her example, the contention that 'there are no necessary and sufficient conditions for a play being good'[14] with the thought that 'despite its lack of shape the play is a good one'[15]. But the very word 'despite' suggests the (defeasible) status of 'shape' as an aesthetic virtue, while there is much to question in the idea that a repetitive and non-climatic structure is an absence of structure in this play. The absence of a universal formula does not equate with the absence of necessary and sufficient conditions for something being good if it is good! Crudely, these are the indefinitely complex composite of things that make it, that particular individual, good. (You get analogous confusion about causality.) If these do not suffice, then goodness becomes something subjective: we are with the idea that however a play or object is, it is 'open to any one', without any lack or difference in appreciating what it is, to differ in assessment; to the idea that beauty is in the eye of the beholder. Sheppard, despite contesting that view, allows herself to drift into it because she confuses general, law-like or rule-declaring propositions with characterizing judgments.

Anthony O Hear has recently said that judgments of beauty are 'non-cognitive' under 'the acceptable aspect of that claim' in that they cannot be justified by appeal to any general rule or precept independently of the experience of this particular work of art'.[16] My only quarrel with this is that I do not see that the grasp of an individual configuration is, just because unable to be generated from a finite set of grasped universals, aptly described as non-cognitive. That is why 'aesthetics' is so central to our conversational and reflective lives.

Something's beauty, I suggest, is like moral goodness as discussed by Aristotle in this individuality and complexity. And this connects with the thought that beauty is a quasi-determinable relative to more determinate, hence more de-scriptive attributes. Determinate or specific attributes, like elegance or subtlety or gentleness or liveliness are commonly but defeasibly kalific virtues—defeasible, if virtues, by other salient properties—the delicate tablecloth was inappropriate to such a boisterous occasion.

This also connects with a rejection of the Kantian axiom of personal experience of particular beauties, that 'judgments of taste' are distinctively dependent on the validation of personal response. This is connected with the idea that judgments of beauty are 'non-

[14] Op. cit. 78.

[15] Op. cit., 81

[16] Anthony O'Hear, 'Prospects for Beauty', in *Philosophy at the New Millennium*, (ed. A. O'Hear), Cambridge University Press, 2001, pp. 175–91, at p. 181.

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cognitive'. I think Kant is confused by a notion of the factual statement as a universal law statement. If I know my Interflora florist in Sydney, I can be certain that the gardenias will be lovely on arrival. If the florist were to let me (and my mother) down, there would be some determinable defect in the gardenias. On the other hand there are many obviously 'descriptive' contexts, with little necessarily to do with evaluating responses, where understanding a true description will not prepare us for the reality: you didn't realize it would be like that! (Our descriptions under-characterize reality: a necessary if rough truth.) We need, moreover, to distinguish the conditions of our enjoying and appreciating beauty—conditions of 'empirical' acquaintance, from the indefinitely complex determinations which make the inference from previous similar acquaintance, or from an set of descriptions, more or less fallible—conditions of description. (You accurately imagine something corresponding to a given description of a portrait, but given necessary dimensions of indeterminacy your image fails to correspond to the actual object.) We expect the unexpected in this pluralistic world of complexity and contradiction. Personal experience is necessary to judgments of beauty because of their dependence on the complex constituting the object, action or situation judged, not because of a lack of objectivity in such judgments.

In focusing on this 'objective' pole, with its phenomenological insistence that we think of ourselves as discovering or being struck by beauty, I am expressing resistance to a drift of Kantian thought which appears to dissolve beauty into the experience: 'aesthetic pleasure', taken in appearances and images. Just what is enjoyed 'for its own sake'? I want to say that it is (the beauty of) something, some situated activity say, that is enjoyed for its own sake in appreciation; but not in the thoughts of the envious, the huckster or the trophy-hunter, where beauty is recognized but not itself enjoyed. I reckon I can get what some contemporary aestheticians call an aesthetic experience by blurring my vision as I look at my bookcase. If a scientist tells me of the beauty of his specimens, I want to look at them and to understand something of them. When I visit his house, I might find something less beautiful in the way his scientific interests seem to lock out his children. But, that is a different issue, and one I might be mistaken about. So there is a cluster of propositions I want to get away from, at least for a while. Expression of critical appreciation is not, at least for the most part a matter of see-it-as-this and see how it satisfies your tasteful will—not all picture-ducks are also picture-rabbits—but, as the vocabulary implies, expressions of purportedly true or truer views, subject to revision by

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experience, reflection and discussion. In any case, tradition has it that some of the most beautiful things: fine thoughts and actions, for example, are beautiful partly because they never will be objects of 'aesthetic evaluation'. Unlike works of art, they do not exist-to-be-appreciated.

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