

Can There Be a Catholic Theory of Beauty?

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In this presentation I attempt to address, in rather informal and anecdotal way, the question of whether or not is it possible, or desirable, to formulate a theory of beauty in distinctly Catholic terms. My view is negative. Although the issues are made rather complicated by the current state of the question, the difficulty of terminology, and the many traditions of speaking about beauty, I conclude that a Catholic theory of beauty would fail in two respects: first, it would not be a genuine “theoria” in the classical sense because it would not be truly universal and not grounded in the universal experience of beautiful things; second, that it could only be formulated at the expense of fusing discrete values, a fusion that would do little but impair each of the values involved. The need for distinguishing values is the central thesis of this paper. The presentation as a whole discusses art, rhetoric, beauty, faith, value, philosophical method, and other matters relevant to the analysis of the problem. In a turn at the end, I do affirm that the conclusions I arrive at do have some connection to a Catholic worldview, and this connection needs to be respected and developed.

I should perhaps begin by apologizing for a few matters. I have been, over the years, the grateful recipient of many papers given in this forum that were rigorously philosophical and analytical in their direction and presentation. I regret to say that I will not, under the circumstances, be reciprocating in kind: my presentation will be more distinctly rhetorical. I will engage in a lot of personal, anecdotal information; I will make many brief allusions without explaining them, advance broad and maybe breezy collective judgments, drop names all over the place, scatter around the most shameless obiter dicta one could imagine, and do my fair share of special pleading; my process will be, by and large, to move sideways through concepts, rather than arranging such concepts in hierarchical order; I will be profuse with enthymemes and paradigms; I will tell stories and veer off into sententious asides and captious digressions; I will kick around metaphors from time to time. So I warn you about this in advance. My talk will be casual, informal, perhaps somewhat rambling in construction. But my intentions are good (I think). I would like to get some of these ideas out in front of you, even if I don't have the opportunity to present them with the kind of back-up they need. So keep your intellectual Glocks in their holsters—for the meantime anyway.

The question that was posed to me was: Can there be a Catholic theory of beauty? At first blush, this question seems innocent enough. One is tempted to blurt out an answer and be done with it. But further consideration reveals a treacherous and difficult terrain. The question itself is loaded with semantic problems. I can see no other way of approaching it than to adumbrate, as best I can in a reasonable amount of time, what I think are the issues involved. This may require a rather circuitous route around the basic question, preparing, as it were, the conceptual

parameters I wish to draw before returning finally to the question itself. Though some of what I will have to say may well appear unfamiliar to many of you, I do not see myself as attempting to induce you into an arcane sect with its own ritual words and gestures; to the contrary, what I think I am doing, if you can accept such a description, is, on one hand, to retrieve a very old and sensible tradition and, on the other, to flesh out what really is common sense, the ordinary and obvious procedures we pursue in daily life. In that sense, it is precisely from the esoteric cults generated with such prolixity in so much of contemporary intellectual life that I seek for myself, and for you, a suitable reprieve.

I will take up, in the following order, those considerations that, if they do not make a convincing case for my eventual answer and do not answer the myriad of objections that can be raised against them from many different quarters, at least present my stand:

I. The terms of the question:

- A. The problem of terms
- B. The problem of “beauty.”
- C. The problem of “theory.”
- D. The problem of “Catholic.”

Excursus on Rhetoric

II. The distinction of values:

- A. Introduction: on value.
- B. A family portrait.
 - Personal value
 - Art-historical value
 - Financial value
 - Representational value
 - Decorative value
 - Moral value
 - Religious value
 - Art value

Excursus on Art

Aesthetic value

Excursus on Beauty

III. The problem of fusing moral and aesthetic value.

IV. The problem of fusing religious and aesthetic value.

V. Conclusion: why there cannot, nor should there be, a Catholic theory of beauty.

VI. And yet....

I. The Terms of the Question

A. The problem of terms:

Allow me, at this juncture, to give you some reasons why I back off from a systematic exposition. The field of aesthetics, or what I take to be the philosophy of beauty, or what I take as the process of investigation whose terminus is a theoretical (i.e. universal) grasp of the nature of beauty, is so complex, runs off in so many directions, raises so many fundamental as well as ancillary questions (all of which branch off into their own multitudinous subsidiary issues), that it is very difficult to know how to mediate a coherent picture of what is involved in answering my question without spending an enormous amount of time doing the necessary preparatory work—and, by that, I mean years of work. Does one really need to do this? I think yes—a comprehensive dialectical approach to any philosophical issue is critical. I don't think that one even really knows what a philosophical issue is until or unless one knows a great deal of the history of it. Even defining or understanding aesthetics as the philosophy of beauty is a controversial assertion—many think of it as the philosophy of art (an inquiry, as I see it, whose object, in principle, is different from what is pursued in the philosophy of beauty), or as the philosophy of such phenomena as emotions, imagination, styles, special forms of cognitive insight, certain subsections of the art of rhetoric, or even, among others, as the art of applying cosmetics and mudpacks and doing pedicures. According to some, aesthetics is a moribund discipline and, among those sufficiently savvy, best abandoned. Anyway, for many of the cognoscenti there is no such thing as beauty, and no such thing as theory (in the classical sense), and those arts that the still benighted among us refer to as the “fine arts” really have nothing to do with beauty at all. Their purpose is to be “outrageous,” or “disturbing,” or to present works startling for their ingenuity, their archness, their idiosyncrasy, even their ability to violate and subvert the beautiful as a value.

Obviously, one is not going to get very far in a discipline if, at the starting point of that discipline, its basic axioms and purposes are not reasonably well-defined. And I should point out, in this regard, that the vocabulary, the lexicon of terms, that gets tossed about in aesthetics is a nightmare, a chaos. Much of its crucial terminology is inherited from the past and carries a large and very confused historical burden with it. It functions as a “lay” vocabulary, the talk of salons, coffee houses, opium dens, cocktail parties, Bohemian garrets, theater openings (and closings), and newspaper and magazine articles and reviews, though, lamentably, professional people (whatever that means) rarely move their own discourse significantly away from the practices of such, for the most part, unseemly venues. Much of it is a shallow and jejune vocabulary: words once perhaps relatively meaningful and rich have been contracted, diminished, impoverished, compromised, though archaic remnants of original meanings may still be around, buried deep in our habits of speech though often in blatant contradiction to more prevalent usage. One only needs to think of the field of ethics where, as A. Macintyre has pointed out, a word like “virtue” has been so thoroughly corrupted that it is almost impossible to use it anymore. Consider words like prudence, or justice, or others. A recent participant in this conference (Joshua Hochschild, 2013, made similar points about the term “substance.”) Of course, one can argue that it is normal

for words in a language to work like this, and not much will serve to correct the inevitable lexical confusion in popular usage. I accept that; I also accept that it is not our role (whoever “our” is) to be an “enforcer” of meanings; but I do think cogent philosophical reflection, at least among those who regard such reflection as having any intrinsic value at all, demands a great deal of sifting and sorting through a lexicon to bring it into a reasonable order.

Beyond the realm of lexical meanings (though certainly related to it), anyone growing up in a civilization or culture, of any kind and in any niche of its multiform subcultures, is subject to the massive and habitual ingestion of common opinions, of *loci communi* or commonplaces, of *doxa* or *topoi koinoi*, items of conventional “wisdom” held by that culture to be roughly true. Call these “mind-sets,” paradigmata, memes. Such ideas are vague, often contradictory, expressed in a wide variety of conventional speech formulas, and may sometimes be true, or have a greater or lesser probability of truth, or may be false: but, in so far as they are held as conventional opinions, it is difficult to know which of these possibilities they embody. But they cram up our brains—like the stuff stacked up to the ceilings in the houses and garages of the much recently televised “hoarders”—they block our vision, misguide our actions, falsify our judgments, and even the best of us (whatever “best” means) will succeed, in our lifetimes, in shedding, or at least sorting through and assessing, a very small amount of it. It constitutes the “junk food” diet of our brains. Certain educational projects—such as getting a college education, or even a graduate school education—should ideally assist us in knowing how to deal with this. But they don’t; they just cram much more of it into our necessarily limited storage facilities. I bring this up because somehow it seems that the discussion of the arts and beauty in our time is rather especially subject to this kind of egregious conventionalism. In any event, I do think that if one is interested in conducting a serious investigation into something and in communicating one’s results, one cannot be satisfied with this state of affairs. One has to try to “clean house” as it were, at least a corner here and a closet there. Even under the best of circumstances, however, one cannot merely dismiss the past and present and all its confusing baggage. We must accept history and all its problems and labor our way through them. We do not simply want to arrive at a calculus of stipulative terms, a product of our own devising and accessible only to a sub-cult of those properly initiated into it. Rather, we wish to sort through the history of terms to arrive at what some modern logicians might call “focal meanings”—meanings which gather up and consolidate what is best in a traditional and public and historical vocabulary; this demands not only a complex dialectical confrontation with such terms as used in the past and by many thinkers but also a preliminary analysis of those things they purport to refer to. It is not easy to do this, but it is indispensable. And, frankly, we have no other choice.

Let’s take “art” for example. The use of this word has become so disordered that it would take a few hours at least to untangle its various meanings. By and large the term means to most people the sort of stuff that gets put into “art” museums (paintings, sculpture). Here the word art refers to what more precise usage would indicate as several subtypes of a subtype of art called by some people “fine art.” Clearly this meaning collapses a generic concept (art) into one of its differentiae (fine art), and that concept in turn into several of its own sub-differentiae (art of painting, art of sculpture). Moreover, this use of the term art is not consistent with the use of the

term when we refer to a “liberal arts” college or a “state of the art” computer. As I speak to you right now, I am exercising three arts simultaneously: I am conjoining phonemes, morphemes, lexemes, sememes, and syntagmatic forms into complex speech acts as concordant with the rules of the English language (hence I am practicing the art of grammar); I am addressing a specific audience in a specific place and a given time, coming out of a specific tradition, using a certain kind of vocabulary, a wide range of communicative instruments, etc. (hence I am exercising the art of rhetoric), and I am (I hope) aligning the conceptual structure of my subject in reasonably inferential and hypotactic patterns of ordination and subordination (hence I am exercising, granted at a fairly primitive level, the art of logic). Not only am I doing this, you are doing it as well as you process mentally what my speech delivers to you. Grammar, rhetoric, logic: the medieval trivium by the way. (If I could run universities the way I would like to run them, the first two years would be devoted exclusively to the study of the trivium—for without an accurate and detailed knowledge of grammar, rhetoric, and logic, no academic seriousness *in any field* is possible. I should be so bold as to point out that philosophers tend to be woefully ignorant of the art of rhetoric, an ignorance which afflicts grievously the practice of philosophy.) Now what I want to accomplish in this specific case is perhaps obvious—to retrieve, to restore the ancient sense of *techne*, or *ars*, not for archaeological or some putatively revanchist reasons, but because I think the original use of the term is richer and more accurate than ours and because our use of the term art is derived from and still retains, in however haphazard a way, part of its original meaning. Of course, I can’t just assume this: I would have to make an argument for it, and I would if I had time. Incidentally, I have brought up the term art here not only as an illustration of our lexical problem but also because I want to make use of the term later on in a restored classical sense as referring to all those thousands, or tens of thousands of activities, from the simplest things like driving a car to the most complex technologies that human beings practice every day of their lives.

B. The Problem of “Beauty”

Now I don’t want to leave the impression, as perhaps I have, that in the ancient world lexical matters were clear and unambiguous. Plato’s dialogues are excellent models for both the need and, partially, for the method of going about resolving some of the issues involved in pressing for semantic and its corresponding conceptual clarity. We may not always be happy with the outcomes of these efforts, but they point us in the right direction. Consider the attempt in the *Euthyphro* to arrive at some understanding of what piety is as a distinct virtue. Socrates consults an “expert” and together they sort through various uses of the term piety, and conventional opinions about it, not simply as a dictionary exercise in spreading out multiple lexical usages, but, by reference to the phenomena which piety is taken to signify, they are looking for a “focal” meaning—one which, while doing some justice to the broad penumbra of meanings which the term, or any term, has, also specifies most exactly the distinctiveness of what they are discussing. The dialogue is also “about,” in some preliminary sense, the kind of process in which they are engaged and an illustration of how it should be conducted.

A similar dialogue is *The Greater Hippias*; there is some doubt among scholars about the authenticity of this work, but I think it resembles closely enough the Platonic dialogue to merit serious attention. Here Socrates corners another “expert,” in this case Hippias the Sophist (whom he calls “beautiful and wise”), and inquires about the nature of the beautiful. There are a number of fairly complex issues presented in this dialogue, so I will extract only a few points relevant to our concern here. Socrates asks, “What is the beautiful?” Hippias first defines beauty as a “fair maiden.” Besides begging the question and giving an example, rather than stating a principle, Hippias has come up with a common understanding of beauty: the identification of it with feminine attractiveness. This happens again and again throughout the history of the question in quite a few different ways, even among serious thinkers, and is today probably the most common, what we might call “popular,” association of the word. It is also one of the primary reasons why the response to beauty is regarded as so subjective (“beauty is in the eye of the beholder”) because predilections in this sphere depend on so many personal factors. Socrates quickly points out the inadequacy of the example for universal generalization. What about a mare? What do a beautiful maiden and a beautiful mare share in common? Other possibilities are broached: a good, well-lived life; a noble character (*kallon* in Greek means noble as well as beautiful); the color of gold; ivory in a gold setting; the appropriateness of one thing for another (a figwood ladle for a pot of soup?); the useful (eyes are beautiful because they enable one to see); the beneficial; the pleasurable. Finally, after rattling around a variety of conventional opinions (and engaging in some of the questionable argumentative strategies so common in the dialogues), they give up their inquiry, and Socrates concedes to Hippias the opportunity to have the final word. The concession may be a trap. Hippias cuts loose and probably says what he has been eagerly waiting to say all along: beauty is rhetorical eloquence, it is communication through elegant, persuasive speech (Hippias’s professional specialty, by the way, or so he, as well as his reputation, claim). Moreover, the exercise of rhetorical eloquence is not for its sake alone; its ultimate purpose is “winning”—control, authority, domination, making one’s opinion prevail over other competing views (and, for Hippias, making an income).

Now Hippias has been presented throughout this dialogue as something of a dolt, subjected mercilessly again and again to Socratic irony, and we have to wonder what Socrates is up to here by letting him have the final word. But, whatever that is, we must not be too quick to dismiss what Hippias has to say: for the idea that beauty is some kind of impressive, elegantly ordered and convincing mediation of a view, a statement, a vision—in short, rhetorical eloquence—is one of the most dominant, recurrent positions about beauty in western civilization (and eastern civilization too, by the way). We can add two other widely accepted *loci communi* that attach themselves to this position and arise out of the entire western rhetorical tradition rather especially among the Renaissance humanists and bequeathed to our time: eloquence is wisdom; wisdom is possession of the truth; ergo, since beauty is eloquence, beauty is truth. Assuming a sort of easy correspondence of word and thing, *res et verbum*, the effective and beautiful arrangement of words follows from the perspicacious grasp of the real; conversely, the perspicacious grasp of the real will follow from the effective and beautiful arrangement of words. Keats will indite, “Truth is beauty, beauty truth: that is all ye know on earth and all ye need to know.” Scores of learned mandarins, beside Keats, of fine and august stature and subtle

minds, have said the same thing; have said it over and over again in dozens of different ways. I don't know what Plato would have thought of this final correlation. He probably would have objected to it as arrived at through the humanist (and for him, sophistical) rhetorical route, though in his highly influential *Symposium*, beauty is the attraction of, and to, the highest Good; a kind of gorgeous cosmic rhetoric leading us on, like Goethe's *Ewig-Weibliche* perhaps, the "eternal feminine" in the final line of *Faust*, *zieht uns hinan* (and here the feminine element is reintroduced, although where we are being led to is unclear, but it is the ultimate, the fulfillment of all striving). In any event, Plato's own *Drang* towards a monistic metaphysics would have brought him, probably does bring him, to the same place—the good, the true, and the beautiful are all finally the same thing. Plotinus and all who have been influenced by him do as much; as it has been done in all the monistic idealisms that have flourished ever since; as had been done in all ultimately monistic, henotheistic or pantheistic religious traditions that flourished before any of this happened: the *ma'at* of ancient Egypt, the *Tao* of ancient China, the *dharma* of the Buddhists, the *Brahman-Atman* of India.

But let us tromp around for a bit through the great jungle of what people call beauty, and which Hippias and Socrates might have had to deal with if they had lived in our time. I warn you that I collect definitions and applications of the beautiful the way some people collect beetles, so, if one is in a hurry (and has better things to do in life), it is best to skip the following paragraph. In addition to beauty being feminine grace, rhetorical eloquence, and the Oneness of All Things (to say nothing of the Absolute Idea), beauty is applied to any kind of system wherein parts function effectively in constituting a whole: an organism, a fine machine, an eco-system, a constellation, a mathematical or a logical demonstration or proof, a tool and its fitness for a specific application. Beauty is what we can intellectually conceive of, or imagine to be, the unity of the cosmos (one of the meanings of the Greek "*kosmos*" is beauty—we get the modern word "cosmetics" from it). Beauty is anything that provokes a powerful and positive emotional response—astonishment, wonder, admiration, love. Beauty is amazement before an ingeniously or richly imaginative presentation. Beauty is anything particularly apposite or appropriate for its occasion or situation. Beauty is perfection of an individual thing in terms of its active correspondence to, or embodiment of, a potential type or kind—e.g. the perfect tomato is a beautiful tomato. Beauty is an intuitive and non-conceptual insight into something, an intellectual or often "imaginative" penetration that makes sense of everything else related to it. Beauty is the powerful evocation of an experience. Beauty is exquisite sensual pleasure of multiple kinds where this pleasure is actually centered in the organs affected by it: the bouquet of a wine, the aromas of perfumes or flowers, the flavors of haute cuisine, the tactile and haptic delights of the body such as a restful sleep, diving into a cool lake on a hot day, the warmth of a wood stove in winter. Beauty is virtue, the possession of a "beautiful soul." Beauty is a life well lived. Beauty is a particularly adroit and impressive execution of some action, as in athletics. Beauty is a stylish way of life or of doing something, a measured, disciplined and generous routine, a moral code of courageous and magnanimous priorities. Beauty is kindness, sanctity, civility. Beauty is evidence of the divine, the validation of a scientific hypothesis, or representational accuracy. Beauty is a noble gesture: it is dash, panache, a swashbuckling feat. Beauty is an innate idea, born into our souls, a template by virtue of which we see other things as

beautiful, an innate idea in the mind of God, which, as *causa exemplaris*, He bestows upon created things. Beauty is a happy family, or any other cohesive social group bound by affection and common purpose. Beauty is the presence of awe-inspiring power: a waterfall, a volcanic eruption, a cloudburst, a tornado, huge waves, a vast migration of animate life, an imposing or magisterial leader, the grandeur of a cavalry charge, or of a tank battle, or of jet-planes dog-fighting, or of naval bombardments (in the eighteenth century, they would have called this “the sublime”). Beauty is Krishna resplendent in his cosmic chariot. Beauty is a resonance of a harmonic order inside us with a harmonic order exterior to us. Beauty is anything cute and cuddly and sweet—puppy dogs, babies, antique cottages surrounded by picket fences and trellises and flowers, Christmas decorations, Easter eggs, *ad infinitum*. Beauty has no distinct object—it is in the eye of the beholder, it is whatever an observer either finds or chooses to find interesting and memorable. Beauty is the expression of deep inner feelings. Beauty is being zonked out on heroin or alcohol or the bright delusions induced by hallucinogenic drugs. Beauty is a serotonin rush. Beauty is what the super-sophisticated “art-world,” in all its manifold (and demonic) avatars and glitzy media outlets, tells us it is (and you better believe it or back to the sticks with you!). Beauty is a brooding tension, the expression of the deepest and darkest recesses of the artist’s soul. Beauty is the preference of the dominant power group in a society, used to control and dominate the underlings in a social order. Beauty is the activation of certain neuron pathways in our brain (a common view, though expressed in different terms, even as far back as the eighteenth century). Beauty is a utopian dream, the “city on the hill,” the *visio pacis*, the ideal social order of the future, the workers’ paradise, the perfectly egalitarian earthly community, a throng singing ecstatic songs and carrying banners and marching with locked arms (often along a corpse-strewn boulevard towards the edge of a cliff and towards its own joyous self-extermination). Beauty is the affirmation of a Zeitgeist, of a civilization and all its highest aspirations and projects; conversely, beauty is protest against a Zeitgeist, against a civilization and all its highest aspirations and projects. Beauty is the brainless, blind, somnolent, all-affirming while all-denying cosmic dance of Shiva or of Zorba the Greek, the sheer formlessness of Zen mediation, the *paranirvana*, the ultimate extinction of consciousness and being. Beauty is what we are emotionally attached to in the multifarious interrelations of our lives. Beauty is the synthesis of antinomies, the *Aufhebung* of opposites into metaphysical unity. Beauty is the inexorable march of history. Beauty is analogy, the most consummate *analogia entis* known to the human intellect. Beauty is the sole and/or most powerful sign of transcendence in human life. Beauty is infinite playfulness, the cyclical, non-telic shimmer and dash of a cosmological glass-bead game, the eternal return. Beauty is the S-curve. Beauty is the golden ratio. Beauty is the stirring and profound confrontation with the ultimate absurd in life, the incongruent, the dislocated, the radically fortuitous and inexplicable, the asymmetrical, the disproportionate, the systemic *derèglement* of all sensitivities and rationality. Beauty is an adaptive mechanism developed within human evolution for locating and enriching environments most conducive for organic survival. Beauty is sublimated sexual selection. In effect, beauty is anything that thrills and engages us emotionally and/or intellectually.

And so it goes. I have terminated my list not because I have exhausted the subject but because I figure I have exhausted you. Thank goodness, Socrates didn't have to deal with a list like that.

Yet, in my view, none of these things on this list is properly referred to as beauty or is actually beautiful in the true sense, except for—yes—some fair maidens (Hippias got that much right), the S curve and the golden ratio, both which can contribute to beauty but in an extremely limited way. What constitute the proper referents of the term beauty have scarcely been mentioned yet. As common as these uses and understandings of beauty are in our discourse, all of them, jointly and severally, function primarily as associational and/or analogical (as well as careless and misleading and sometimes downright perverse) applications of the term. Many of them are variations on the rhetorical eloquence theme, depending upon which rhetoric agitates and/or flatters most successfully the demands of one's psyche. The phenomena to which they refer may, of course, in some cases, be concurrent with authentic beauty in a thing, or be ancillary to it, or be produced by it, or be associated with it, or induce a powerful response that is difficult to distinguish from a response to the beautiful. But all of them can be, and ideally should be, indicated by terms more appropriate to them than the term beauty. Further, all of them, to a greater or lesser extent, embody norms and values that if transferred to, or superimposed upon, a beautiful thing may well impair our ability to appreciate beauty and certainly will impair our ability to engage accurately in reflective analysis of what accounts for that beauty. None of them, besides the exceptions I made above, should be mistaken for what I understand as aesthetic beauty—the only real kind of beauty, and to this I will return later on. Let me remind you that a term that can be used to describe just about anything has been divested of most of its authentic descriptive power.

With such a spread of meanings, it is no wonder that efforts to find a common ground give up in despair unless we reduce the meaning of the word to something trivial, in which case it is almost impossible to characterize in a meaningful way what is common to those objects, or to those aspects of objects, we call beautiful. Meanwhile, if we opt to leave the meaning of beauty, as many do, spread more or less indiscriminately over all these variant meanings, we can have no *theoria* of beauty, because we will have no determinate object of investigation; we will be talking about everything in the universe that can command our attention and evoke a pronounced and emphatic response. It is no wonder that so many persons involved in the pursuit of "aesthetics" give up in despair (well, I don't think it is actually despair—for some reason they don't want to pursue the question and are happy to find a reason not to). But I don't think we should give up, as difficult as it is. We recognize in our experience a distinct source of value, a source that is radically unlike any other—for which no other word other than beauty will do, which elicits no other concept under which it can be justly subsumed, and whose claim to being beauty is both exclusive and irreducible. We must, under all circumstances, pay homage to the distinctiveness of this value and the objects to which it pertains, even as we must pay homage to the distinctiveness of all other values in the universe and the objects to which they pertain.

C. The Problem of "Theory"

Then there is the word “theory”: another term certainly degraded from what it originally meant. I will not attempt to broach this problem with any great depth. In this lecture I will use the term as consonant with the Aristotelian “*theoria*” referring, as I take it to be, any intellectual effort to arrive at what are traditionally called “universals” or, as some prefer to say, “distinguishing principles”: the analysis and conceptualization about what is common to a set of particulars, what accounts for them, either partially or wholly, as the kind of things they are, or at least whatever tries to separate out the different aspects of things and to discern some order of relations and priorities among them. I am aware of the multitude of problems in doing this, and its complicated history, and obviously cannot address those here. But I would like to emphasize that, in my understanding, the purpose of *theoria* (and I shall henceforth use the expression “*theoria*” to differentiate it from modern “theory”) is not to arrive at a set of abstractions and then abscond with them to a philosophical Acapulco somewhere and do a rumba under the moonlight with a flashy chorus line of Platonic forms. To the contrary, the purpose of the universal, the *katholou*, as I see it, is to help in penetrating the particular as deeply as possible, to understand the coherence and dynamism of its details, to know where to separate out, from among the vast number of aspects and accidental elements a thing may have, its most important features, and, most importantly, to specify the source and end of its particular being and value. For me, *theoria* is always driven by my sense of the value of, and in many cases a value in, a thing and what distinguishes and accounts for that value. I am interested in the nature of the beautiful, but that’s because I am interested in beautiful things; I am interested in the beautiful because I am interested, among many other beautiful things, in the poetic (which is beautiful speech); and I am interested in the poetic because I am interested in Shakespeare’s sonnet 73 (among many other beautiful speeches). In point of fact, the way I have experienced and developed this effort has been in the opposite direction. I have started with Sonnet 73 and worked from there. To engage in *theoria* properly, one begins with the particular and ascends from there; the impulse to do this, for me, arises from the demands of the particular. Something is happening in this particular that I want to understand, that calls out to me for an explanation. *Theoria* is grounded, must always be grounded, absolutely in the particular, in *historia* (in the classical sense), in the ontological concreteness and density of the historical thing, in sonnet 73 for example, and must always answer to the particular.

Obviously, an effort to arrive at this understanding will be enhanced by making observations of other particulars which exhibit shared aspects with, as well as differences from, the object of concern. This allows me to isolate, to subtract, what is important from what is less important. *Theoria* has a value in and of itself, its insights are a source of joy and wonder; but it can also be used cautiously and flexibly as grounding analytic procedures (as well as practical applications). In the classical philosophical sense, it identifies a “formal object.” *Theoria* as such, if done correctly, never imposes attributes on a particular thing *per se*, but it does point at those aspects, intrinsic to the particular thing, which help to understand one’s response and to approximate an explanation of what is valuable about it, an explanation that will never be, under any circumstances, as far as the particular is concerned, exhaustive, or other than partial and inconclusive. *Theoria* helps one to look in the right places and avoid looking in the wrong places.

It will say something about what is relevant or irrelevant to the kind of judgment one is trying to make. The value of a given thing, for all one's analyses, however competently done, always remains a *mysterion*, an *ineffable*, in whose presence one can dwell and upon whose being one can meditate. Grasping its being as the thing it is, being enabled to discriminate, at ever greater levels of sophistication, what is both determinate and indeterminate about it, enormously accentuates it as a *mysterion*; but it can never be reduced to a predictable set of rules or algorithms. I cannot ultimately judge my judgment of a thing, even as probative as that judgment must be, if I do not know what that thing is, or what that aspect of a thing is that engages my interest, and therefore the condition of the thing, or aspect of the thing, as it presents itself to me. In the case of the beautiful, if I may appropriate and alter a phrase from Saint Anselm, all theoretical inquiry is delight seeking understanding (*delectatio quaerens intellectus*).

Of course, many will pose all kinds of objections to this procedure—some serious, some whimsical. There is a long history of the issues that such an understanding of *theoria* will raise; there are many in our time (especially, I guess) who, from many different directions, reject it altogether, who claim that the efforts of the rational intellect to define features of things is a project both regressive and fruitless and question-begging, and that theoretical abstractions in some way violate the concreteness and integrity of historical, existential phenomena (overlooking, of course, that erroneous theory does exactly that and ignoring that, without theory, history is impossible—for there has to be history of a something, and not just of an anything). Further, it is felt that efforts to engage in *theoria* simply terminate in the plethora of the competing, irresolvable and incompatible lexicons and paradigms that we see all around us, that the best we can do is construct narratives, or meta-narratives, or meta-meta-narratives about these matters, submitting all of it—as some are willing to admit and others trying to conceal—to the art of rhetoric, though little knowledge of the art of rhetoric is exhibited, or even that it is an art, and few of these so-called narratives are actually narratives at all in any technical or meaningful sense. The use of the term “narrative” to describe what are expository discourses is simply one more example of the egregious misappropriation of terms current in our time. The nice thing about these “narratives” is that they give us license to formulate enormously abstract conceptual systems without having to validate them empirically or to assess their truth. And the bigger the narrative, the more meta- it is, the more it wins some kind of contest. The great dream of those committed to rhetoric as the end-all and be-all of human striving is not only to collapse everything else into it, but also to construct the grand architectonic master-rhetorical synthesis that will silence all other rhetorics. And that will be, according to some, “beautiful.”

Once again, I cannot take on here such a set of complex issues with the consideration they merit, but I would like to comment, as an aside, that among my many wide-ranging safaris with gun and camera through the swampy savannahs of putatively aesthetic, literary, and other kinds of “theory,” I have discovered that even the most ostensibly anti-theoretical personages I have ever encountered have a theoretical, essentialist card concealed somewhere in their nominalistic (or sophistic) deck. Almost always it turns out to be a cliché; a commonplace; probably indefensible; always, if true, a partial truth at best, which is maybe why it is being hidden. But such a commonplace acts as the unspoken middle term of the enthymeme that

governs the putative logic of its rhetorical “narrative.” Human beings, among other things, are theory animals and they talk theory all the time. We name because we are trying, however feebly, to understand. Genuine epistemic or philosophically scientific theory is no more than an extension and refinement of what us common folk commonly do. Most of the lexemes in a linguistic lexicon are “theoretical” in some inchoate or primitive way, are conceptual, are abstractions from (or, as I prefer to say, penetrations into) the immense range of human cognitive experience to which any linguistic system, or all linguistic systems put together, only gives at best a miniscule witness. But that is where the problems reside: we don’t look closely enough at what we are talking about, we think with our imaginations and appetites rather than with our intellects, we make things up in order to appropriate them and manage them, we accede to conventional opinions because that makes us part of whatever group we want to be part of; our conceptions are blurred and our lexicons are enormously confused, and we need to rethink them and straighten them out. It’s like trying to achieve focus, high resolution, by moving our attention back and forth, from words to things and back to words, as one does with binoculars or a microscope, adjusting our vision, refining our perspective. In any event, all I can do is try to adjust matters so that things make some modicum of sense to me; I will have to leave it up to the philosophers to figure out what I may, and may not, have done.

D. The Problem of “Catholic”:

We still have yet one more term in our question that could be, is certainly I think, a source of ambiguity—the word “Catholic.” What makes the attribution “Catholic” in any given case a warranted thing to do? What makes anything, including any “*theoria*,” distinctively “Catholic”? If this term refers to whatever is somehow in accordance with the tenets of Catholic faith and practice, then I suppose that a “Catholic” *theoria* must have some essential note in it that ties it to a specific tenet of the Catholic faith. It will not be enough that a *theoria* of beauty be discerned and propounded by a person of the Catholic persuasion, or be developed within a Catholic institutional context merely, or any other purely circumstantial factors of that sort. It will not be a set of general directives about the production of a distinctly religious art in the sense of doctrinally or liturgically approved subjects and motifs, for such art may or may not be beautiful, and a set of general directives, ordinarily derived from sources extrinsic to the art work itself, can scarcely be a *theoria* of the beautiful. But what qualifies as a specific tenet of the faith? Too much experience in my life, of a not always especially positive nature I have to admit, admonishes me that I am not enough of a David to take on this particular Goliath, so I will abandon any effort in this regard. I hope that this acquiescence in the loosely conventional will be acceptable. But once again we are faced by a great deal of confusion: obviously, one could claim that there have been dozens, maybe hundreds of “Catholic theories of beauty,” depending on how one defines this—whether or not something authentically Catholic is being invoked, whether or not something called *theoria* is actually being attempted or achieved, and whether or not beauty is what it is really all about. I have seen new ones appear just in the past few months. The Association of Catholic Scholars has been hosting an “arts of the beautiful” lecture series in NYC; articles have appeared in *First Things*, on a variety of blog sites and on-line publications that extol the intrinsic and fundamentally religious character of the beautiful. These efforts

appear under many different titles, guises, emphases, and conceptual schema and are often replays of one another: a theory of the Catholic imagination, or of art, or beauty and holiness, spirit and beauty, and so on. In many accounts of the issue, the authors are really interested in theology rather than anything that can be called aesthetics; many identify aesthetics with rhetoric—a very conventional and usually unexamined assumption; many are in fact focusing on Catholic religious art and literature and music and its iconographical traditions and significance, rather than on beauty as such. Other authors want to turn all of fine art into a religiously and morally didactic instrument. A list of authors possibly dealing with a Catholic theory of beauty would be monumentally long. Many are familiar with von Balthasar’s work; but there are others, a virtual cornucopia. Two titles available from Ignatius Press are John Saward’s *The Beauty of Holiness and the Holiness of Beauty* and Thomas Dubay’s *The Evidential Power of Beauty*. In David Skeel’s book, *True Paradox*, (Intervarsity Press Books, 2014) the chapter devoted to “Beauty and the Arts” contends, among other things, that beauty, which is paradoxical, reflects the “creative tension” that is at the heart of the Trinity and of the moral complexity that is at the heart of human existence. The arguments and considerations laid out in these works are impressive and thoughtful. One also hears of the “beauty of the Gospel,” “the beauty of the saving love of God,” “the beauty of Christ.” Walter Cardinal Kaspar said in a 2014 speech: “Truth persuades by means of its beauty,” and the eminent Scottish and Catholic composer Sir James MacMillan has said, “Beauty is the heart of our Christian faith.” Although I scarcely would presume to count myself among such preeminent figures, I do have to subjoin myself to the list: I wrote a long senior paper in my senior year in college. I was being influenced by Maritain, Marcel, Rilke, Hölderlin, among others. Though I had not read Heidegger at this time, I came up with views remarkably similar to his, though mine were rather sacramental and Christological and with a kind of hymnic expostulation to “Christus Rex” appended to the conclusion. The sole, curt comment of the (unfortunate) professor who read the paper (who was trained in Protestant theology) was: “*There is no revealed theory of art or beauty.*” That put me in my place. It would be years later that I would finally assent to the truth of his critique.

There are also theories of beauty and art written by Orthodox and Protestant Christians: Dorothy Sayers, among scores of others, has written at least two volumes on the subject; the Russian-Orthodox thinker Nicholas Beryaev says in his *The Destiny of Man*, “The real transfiguration and enlightenment of human nature means the attainment of beauty. . . . [B]eauty is the salvation of the world. . . . The Transfiguration of the world is the attainment of beauty. . . . The kingdom of God is beauty. . . . [B]eauty is God’s idea of the creature, of man and of the world” (Harper, 1960: 247). There is a copious literature by non-Christians that is strikingly religious and mystical in its orientation: Heidegger and his emphasis on the holy; Mark Rothko’s blurred squares as imageless images of God; Kandinsky’s iconographic eros in his *The Spiritual in Art*. Some non-religious persons see in beautiful art work a kind of secular sacrament—a sign that effects what it signifies: they talk of a “real presence”—not of the divine, but of the ultimately real, the ultimate human significance of life. George Steiner’s *Real Presences* is a good and rather remarkable example of this. I might also add that the enormous ostensibly anti-religious animus present in much study of fine art today derives its impetus from the basically quasi-religious expectations that anti-religious people still have about works of art—that is, a

desire to acquire from works of art a sort of intuitive, revelation of ultimate truth, or ultimate concern, which one accepts on a faith vested in the authority of the creative act of the artist (who is understood as a secular prophet or seer, or, in extreme cases, as a worldly substitute for the Holy Spirit). Matthew Arnold's declared that "More and more mankind will discover that we have to turn to poetry to interpret life for us, to console us, to sustain us. Without poetry, our science will appear incomplete; and most of what now passes with us for religion and philosophy will be replaced by poetry" ("The Study of Poetry"; curiously prescient for the cultural elite, but not at all true for mankind). In this view, even works explicitly making use of religious materials and subjects can be considered "religious" in some secular sense even as their specifically religious materials are reconfigured as somehow subversive of articulate and institutional religious belief. I have read some interpretations of poems of Emily Dickenson, whose Christianity is something of a scandal to many moderns. These critics want to appreciate her work but reject her Christianity; their interpretations quite miraculously hijack her affirmations of Christian faith and transmute them into subtextual or interlinear rejections of Christianity. Of course, there are Christian scholars who have done the same sort of thing in reverse: they read into overtly atheist and/or non-religious works some kind of divine element, a "search for God" or some such thing (I guess any search for meaning or for meaningfulness can be thought of as a search for God); there is also a view among some Catholics that since all final truth is Catholic truth, and that beauty is truth, therefore any work that is aesthetically beautiful and/or artistically masterful, must be expressing Catholic truth. In any event, if we must pinpoint a few features of what might constitute loosely a Catholic theory of beauty, we might say that there will perhaps be some identification of beauty with evidence for the existence of God, with sacramental life, with the Incarnation, with the glory of God, with the inner life of the Trinity, with something ultimately salvific: "Beauty will save the world," said one of Dostoyevsky's characters—a theme taken up by Solzhenitsyn in his Nobel prize acceptance speech. Historically there have been multitudinous Catholic, or Catholic-compatible, theories of art and beauty, and in great abundance. Many are great achievements indeed, involving a lot of reading, research, erudition, intelligence, sensitivity to genuine beauty in the arts and in nature; many have gems of insight imbedded variously in them; many have been motivated by the desire to bring people to the faith and to celebrate the wonders of revelation; and many have been impressive, inspiring, and noble.

A few brief glances at some examples of what might be called a Catholic theory of beauty might be useful. Recent popes have weighed in on this subject, written and delivered essays, given sermons and lectures on art and beauty. Both John Paul II and Benedict XVI have, in these discourses, imparted a consummate, ultimate religious value to beauty and the arts. Francis has spoken of the *via pulchritudinis*—beauty of the gospel, the essentials of faith as beautiful, the beauty of images of the Lord, God's love as encountering beauty. Benedict has issued a number of statements on fine art and religious belief. I should begin by saying that I have the greatest respect for the intellect of Benedict; I have read at least a dozen of his books and also his encyclicals with interest, and his work has made a significant impact on my life. On 25 October 2012, (in relation to the premiere of a new film, I believe) Benedict advanced the notion "The language of art is the language of parable." There are so many assumptions squeezed into this sentence that it would take an hour or more to unpack them. It assumes,

among other things, that all “art” (all “fine art”?) is in fact a “language” (does he really mean “speech?”), that all this “language” functions analogically, and not just analogically but rather in the specifically religious form of analogy associated with the term “parable.” I would have been most happy if he had said something like this: “The speech of a certain sub-genre of rhetorical art is speech shaped by appropriating a device of extended narratory tropes usually employed for specified religious and moral purposes. A small number of the works of some of the fine arts, mainly literary and visually representative, make limited use of this particular technicality as a portion of their total composition, though works of poor quality can do this as much as works of high quality and therefore the appropriation of this device is entirely independent of its effective and fitting use in a work and any beauty it might have.” Elsewhere Benedict has made some observations about music: At the Castel Gandolfo, July 6, 2015, he asked the question: “what is music in reality?” He says that it has its origins in love, in sorrow, and in the encounter with the divine. He continues: “Divine mystery constitutes . . . the origin of music” and “music is the demonstration of the truth of Christianity.” Benedict makes these claims as universal propositions, yet I wonder if he would agree that all music really does pertain to what he has said: for example, punk rock, Apache war chants, or nationalistic, political songs. And does he leave any space here for pleasure, just sheer pleasure, as having anything to do with the origin of music? Why do infants enjoy music—because of love, sorrow, or the encounter with God? In another discourse (under the heading of “The Arrow of Truth” as I saw it on The Catholic Thing.org website, May 12, 2016—I do not know the original source), relevant to an impressive performance of Bach conducted by Leonard Bernstein in Munich, he stated: “True knowledge is being struck by the arrow of Beauty that wounds man, moved by reality. . . . [B]eing struck by the beauty of Christ is a more real, more profound knowledge than mere rational deduction. . . . [T]o disdain or reject the impact produced by the response of the heart in the encounter with beauty as a true form of knowledge would impoverish us and dry up our faith and theology. We must rediscover this form of knowledge; it is a pressing need of our time.” The statement assumes an opposition between the rational faculties (but without disparaging them) and the response to beauty and later mentions the work of von Balthasar as a model for where theology needs to move. It claims that rational arguments can arrive at many different cogent conclusions in which “Everything makes sense, is so convincing, whom should we trust?” When the performance ended, Benedict turned to a Lutheran Bishop sitting next to him and they agreed that, “Anyone who has heard this knows that the faith is true.” Now, to be “convincing” and to inspire “trust” simply restate the objectives of classical rhetoric: credibility (*to pithanon*) and confidence, or faith (*pistis*). An affirmation of faith is a fully intelligible response to the verbal (usually Biblical) rhetoric of a Bach cantata, but, as I see it, if, and only if, one believes *already* that the faith is true. A fundamental function of rhetoric is more often to reaffirm and consolidate belief, rather than to induce new belief. Now, what can we say about the millions of devotees of Bach (I know quite a few persons of the sort) who could listen to such a cantata and not believe at all that the faith is true (including probably Leonard Bernstein)? I read a book about Bach once, written by one who claimed to be a great lover of his music and who liked to do choral singing in these same cantatas. But he admitted to disliking the Christian texts he found in them, (to say nothing of the fact of also disliking the language of the texts). As far as I am concerned, his prejudices are his own problem; I may not want to go out and have a beer with him (nor, I

suspect, him with me), but I do at least respect his ability to make distinctions. He is distinguishing the musical values from the extra-musical values to be found in Bach. And it's those musical values which are properly considered beautiful, and he is not allowing his aversion to those extra-musical values to deflect him from his love of Bach's music. Meanwhile, if one is ready to affirm a response after listening to such music as "the faith is true," there is a real peril that, if one has used the experience of listening to the musical piece as a platform or a background for generating religious associations and memories and visualizing a panoply of religious images, one has not actually been listening to the music very carefully. One of the reasons that liturgical music, whose function is primarily religious, should not be too aesthetically attractive is that it should not draw too much attention away from the liturgy itself. I am also, to be honest, waiting for someone to tell me what actual knowledge comes from beauty—no one seems to know. I would like to add, in Benedict's favor, that the occasions when Benedict delivered these opinions were at ceremonial, official functions, and ceremonial rhetoric is rather particularly prone to grand but dubious assertions (as we all know from college commencements and funeral eulogies).

I would briefly like to take up another work whose primary argument seems to have a number of threads similar to those of Benedict. It is a long, complex, and very erudite work, and the sampling of things I will have to say about it will scarcely do it justice, but I think it can serve the purpose of illuminating some aspects of the state of the question. It is David Hart's *The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth* (Eerdmanns, 2003). Hart is coming out of the Orthodox tradition, but what he has to say doesn't appear to me to be much different from what one would find in a Catholic thinker who is pursuing the same line of thought; and he also cites von Balthasar, as Benedict did, as a major influence. Of course, I am puzzled right from the start with the title. I don't know how I could regard the infinite as beautiful, because I can't see it. One could answer that the reference to infinity is analogical: if I could see it, it would be similar to looking at a beautiful thing. Fine; but that does not tell me anything about a beautiful thing; or about infinity because I will never be able to see it anyway. And not fine: I can sympathize with the 17th century English poet Henry Vaughan when he has the speaker in one of his poems say, "I saw Eternity the other night," but then he goes on to say, "like a great ring of pure and endless light." Dante's pilgrim also sees Eternity, sees the Godhead in its Trinitarian glory, as a ring, or a series of three rings in one ring. Of course these are both dream-vision poems, i.e., with fictive action and with fictive voices speaking and using figurative speech to do so, but, even so, it is interesting that Eternity is presented as bounded, shaped, measured by a "ring." As a poetic utterance it works very nicely, though I doubt that I can take it philosophically or theologically too seriously, even though the philosopher Berdyaev asserts that Eternity and infinity are not the same thing: eternity has form; infinity has none. Eternity is heaven; infinity is hell. The blessed live in Eternity; the reprobate live in infinity. Berdyaev affirms Vaughan and Dante, "Eternity is . . . symbolized . . . by a circle" (288). There is no more closed, definitive, and hypotactic structure in the universe than a circle. But, to move beyond the title, Hart delivers for us a magnificent, erudite, sophisticated and quite stirring "narrative," what he himself acknowledges is a rhetoric, and, moreover, is largely a rhetoric about rhetoric, gathering into itself the rhetorical expositions (or presumptive "narratives") of many other

rhetoricians. In fact, it is a stunning rhetorical performance (and even dialectical, now and then, in spite of itself), marshalling and orchestrating philosophical and theological *doxa* of all ages. For Hart, Christian theology has a special affinity with “post-modern” developments: “The great project of ‘modernity’ (the search for comprehensive meta-narratives and epistemological foundations by way of a neutral and unaided rationality, available to all reflective intellects and independent of cultural and linguistic conditions) has surely foundered. . . . Christian theology has no stake in the myth of disinterested rationality: the Church has no arguments for its faith more convincing than the form of Christ. . . . [P]recisely insofar as the temper of ‘postmodernism’ runs against confidence in universal truths of reason, postmodern theory confirms theology in its original condition: that of a story, thoroughly dependent upon a sequence of historical events. . . . [T]he church cannot separate truth from rhetoric, or from beauty” (3-4). He says later, “the West awakes at long last from the nightmare of philosophy, even the last ghosts of Enlightenment reason having been chased away, to discover and rejoice in the irreducibly aesthetic character and ultimate foundationlessness of ‘truth’” (5). I think it is in keeping with his rejection of “metaphysics” that Hart is unwilling to offer a definition of the beautiful, “It is impossible however to offer a definition of beauty, either in the abstract or in Christian thought,” but he can “describe a general ‘thematics’ of the beautiful, a broad summary of the themes that will govern the meaning of ‘beauty...’” (17), which allows him to gather and spread the term over a variety of features—but he always emphasizes, or seems to emphasize, the concrete, the particular, the historical, and, of course, the rhetorical. Or later, “...whatever beauty means is grasped only by analogy. . . . [B]eauty is not some property discretely inherent in particular objects but indwells the analogical relationship of all things, each to the other, as a measure of the dynamism of their involvement with one another” (18).

It is not my intent to engage in any systematic critique of this work. As I have said, it is a very complex work with many strands of thought that would have to be explored comprehensively before a critique could be just. But I think a few remarks are appropriate, given my topic and my position in regard to it. Hart may not have much confidence in metaphysics, but he constantly utters universal, metaphysical propositions of a highly abstract nature, and he has arrived above at about as ultimate a metaphysical assertion one can make, an absolute total principle of “all things.” I do not know what half the terms of this final formulation mean (“indwells”?), but it is certainly abstract to the highest degree. When he says that “beauty is not some property discretely inherent in particular objects,” he appears to elevate beauty into the realm of pure abstraction, an ideational reality only, an abstraction controlled by analogy, which, as I understand it, is a mode of predication, not a mode of being, so that beauty is manifest as a semantic phenomenon, established and conferred through the agency of human speech. This correlation is made more than adequately clear by the later comment at the end of the first chapter: “. . . the Christian vision of beauty can be more truly recognized, more deeply understood, more richly explored only as one is appropriated by the language in which it unfolds itself” (34). The deepest (and, in a sense, most alarming) insight that the ancient commentators on rhetoric attained is that, in the rhetorical, speech controls thought about the real, rather than vice versa. Rhetoric, unless one is able to regard it as a specially revealed rhetoric, is the speech of Plato’s Cave. This is what post-modernism has recognized, advanced, and approved of with

stark acuity. Of course, postmodernism, by reducing everything to rhetoric, vitiates any distinctive meaning of the term rhetoric, as well as destroys its own credibility by making itself, of necessity and consistent with its own premises, a species of rhetoric. But there are yet a host of other questions raised for me by Hart's treatment of the subject. To fuse beauty, truth, holiness, God, and Christ into rhetoric is to subsume them all into what is ultimately an art, one of the arts of speech, and hence to transmute them all into artifacts—human artifacts. Is that what we really want? Is that what we are really given? Isn't to do so to turn the whole cosmos, and all that is beyond the cosmos ("infinity"?), and even its most sacred things, into a product of our own construction, of our own verbal ingenuities. Fine speech is ultimate reality. Speech is reality; speech is the only reality we have, meaning and being are one. Most postmodernists, if I understand them correctly, would say that that is exactly what we are doing, and doing all the time. I think that Hart would agree that that is what he is doing too, or having done to him as he is "appropriated by the language in which it unfolds itself." It also seems to me that Hart is ignoring that "stories" (actual stories, and not just putative "narratives") are also abstractions, verbal artifacts, as much selected and abstracted from the real things they purport to refer to as are philosophical abstractions, and can have just as highly attenuated, if not false or distorted, relationships with those real things, as theory can have with real things when done incorrectly. Of course, he says the Christian story is "thoroughly dependent upon a sequence of historical events"; that may be true (though only in a highly qualified way, even for the faithful who see divine truth in them "in part" and "through a glass darkly"), but Hart's statement is also a rhetorical and abstract claim in itself that can be accepted only on faith in a set of rhetorical documents which purport to authenticate themselves and to be authenticated by a rhetorical community which surrounded and produced them.

What I really miss in Hart's book is any contact with the concrete, historical particular, no matter how volubly and rhetorically that kind of concern is being promoted. To talk about referring to the particular is not to do it; one can talk a great deal about the historical and particular and still move about in a world of abstractions. Even to refer to "the form of Christ" (whatever that is) is to turn Christ into a partially mystagogic abstraction. Can't we just talk about the Christ, about the anointed one, about Jesus of Nazareth? We may note in this treatment, and in treatments of this kind, very little actual analysis of what rhetoric really is; nor do we ever get a real grasp of what makes a particular thing beautiful. I guess that doesn't count if it "is not some property discretely inherent in particular objects." But that is the thing I am most interested in, where beauty is concerned. Any theory of beauty that does not assist me in coming to terms with my response to a beautiful thing and the properties inherent in that thing and to be able to make sound judgments about it is worthless for me (it is never just one property and I grant that the word "inherent" is a problem). At one point, Hart does say, "Beauty arranges the world . . . according to boundless and 'superficial' parataxis, whose meaning is ceaseless sequences of supplement, addition, variation, departure and return . . ." (25). I have no idea how "beauty," except as a disembodied and personified Platonic form, could arrange anything (though I guess, with analogy, nothing is impossible). Beautiful arrangement in any particular thing is produced by natural or artifactual processes (or both, as is sometimes the case); in any event, at least we find here reference to potential inherent properties sometimes found in

beautiful things and sometimes not (“supplement, addition, variation, departure and return”). Parataxis, of course, is true of all structures in the universe, and therefore of all beautiful things, but so is hypotaxis, and parataxis and hypotaxis cannot exist independently of one another. Some beautiful works of art are predominantly paratactic and, in some artistic cultures, an emphasis on parataxis is evident (such as in modernity, East Asian traditions, etc.); but parataxis can never be “ceaseless” or “boundless”—it may be a set (a series with limits at each end), or it may use a sequential outlay of multiple hypotaxes, of serially repeated identities all with their own limits, but even this series has to have a limit. Most of the truly beautiful art works in history have had, nevertheless, a pronounced hypotactic or architectonic structure—maybe not usually as tightly organized a hypotactic a structure as Aristotle urged in his *Poetics*, and certainly not a structure dominated hypotactically by an idea or theme, as so many critics think it is; to the contrary, excessive parataxis is generally (and correctly) seen as a severe fault in artistic construction and a mark of the incompetent craftsman (except where this practice is exonerated by an enormously corrupt and dishonest artistic culture). A pure parataxis, even devoid of repeated hypotactic substructures (if such a thing is conceivable), would be an aesthetic horror, the quintessence of ugliness, a “thrown together” thing, a jumble of fragments; and, if unbounded, ceaseless, going on to infinity, an expression of, or induction into, madness. It’s of singular importance to works of art that, at some point, they stop; it’s important to a viewer that they know it will eventually stop, because the anticipation of a conclusion, while the process goes on, helps to understand the parts as potential elements in a unified gestalt. Central to the beautiful is the apprehension of, and delight in, the “holon”—the whole, in which the parts cohere and congeal together. Beginnings and endings are critical in beautiful literature. Borders and frames and limits are fundamental to the beautiful. Even parts of a whole need borders, and parts within parts have borders, and so on, until we get to base elements (yet these have borders too). The meaning, if it has any, of Hart’s citation of von Balthasar—“Crossing these boundaries so forgetfully . . . belongs to the essence of the beautiful and of aesthetics almost as a necessity” (20)—depends on almost the complete deliquescence of the terms “beautiful” and “aesthetic.” Even recognizing the beautiful in nature depends on the perception of borders, edges, horizons, limits of multiple overlapping and interacting kinds, central and peripheral principles, etc. Without that, we would have the primeval *tohu-wa-bohu* expressed so eloquently in Genesis. Biblical rhetoric presents God, again and again, as one who measures, gathers, draws borders, puts in place, sets limits. One of the early Anglo-Saxon words for God is *Metod*—the Measurer. We can see here the magnificent images in Milton and Blake of God using a compass as He creates the universe. All of this is the opposite of reducing the world to its elements again, the “elements” (*ta stoicheia*) to which the Epicurian philosophy of St. Paul’s time reduced the world, the atomistic fortituousness of the modern and postmodern *Weltanschauung*, sheer parataxis, without form and void. Furthermore, the beautiful, by its nature, is a closed system; which is why neither God, nor the universe, nor morality, nor a lot of other things, can be subsumed under the aegis of the beautiful in any real sense; they are not closed systems, or at least we do not know them as closed systems. God can be considered “beautiful” only if this word is being used as a loose synonym for wonderful, marvelous, glorious, an object of love. There is no problem with that as long as we are aware of what we are doing and as long as we are using a beautiful tree, or some such thing, as the prime analogue, functioning rhetorically not epistemologically, for an attribute of God, rather than God

as a prime analogate for an attribute of the tree, in which case the beauty of the tree, as a common everyday experience, has been rendered almost totally, and needlessly, unintelligible. Finally, the only attribute truly suitable for God is the holy, a value which transcends all others and is reducible to none of them. Meanwhile let us hope that God, and nature, and any artist worth his salt, will not be forgetful.

I have picked out Hart's work for this quite cursory examination not because I think it does not have merit (it is very rich in religious insight, I think, despite its immersion in abstractions), but because it illustrates the direction in which religious theories of beauty tend to go, which is fusion, and possibly the reduction, of beauty to rhetoric. In my view, distinct values can overlap in the same object, but, when they are fused, both values are injured. The religious value of an icon is one thing; its beauty is another. I have seen hundreds of religious icons which are not very beautiful but which, nevertheless, compel veneration of the deepest sort. A number of years ago I made an effort to assemble an anthology of lyrical verse celebrating the Nativity of Christ; my purpose was to select what I regarded as the best poems, from a literary standpoint, I could find. Among hundreds and hundreds of pieces, in ten different languages, it was difficult to find just forty or fifty that were suitable. It dramatized for me the difference between a religious work and a religious *and* beautiful work. I do appreciate that Hart makes no effort to sidestep this correlation (and fusion) of beauty and rhetoric and faces it squarely, even though the argument for his position is likewise rhetorical. It would be nice if people who write about beauty and about rhetoric would go through the trouble of actually looking at the concrete particular things relevant to those concepts, would know as much of their history as they can about them, would try to figure out what is going on in them, in dense analytical detail, and to master the complex and often deeply perceptive technical vocabulary that has developed over time to deal with them before engaging in generalizations about them. The postmodern movement, I might add, is not a repudiation of modernity, it is a logical and highly intelligible continuation of it, though it strips it of some of its pretensions. It's the Renaissance humanists, or perhaps the late medieval nominalists, who abandoned dialectic, and who, in effect, revived ancient sophistry, and much of modernity has taken its cue from them. The rationales provided for this move are always the same: philosophy has failed. But has it? And why? Because it doesn't give us the control we want? Is that what has "foundered"? If we control speech, then we control the universe (though we also consent to the idea that speech somehow is controlling us, "appropriating" us, which is true, as far as it goes). Modernity is the constructivist *libido dominandi* that emerges from the purported death of philosophy: postmodernism is the postmortem.

I wish to make it clear that, by and large, I understand the usual, and very frequent appropriation of aesthetic concepts to theological questions as being, as we have seen, a mode of rhetoric—a use of culturally approved *topoi*, usually with vague or negligent meanings but charged with emotional resonance, for the purposes of inspiration and persuasion. Still, it is alarming that, over and over again, people with very fine minds, highly developed in the disciplines to which they have devoted themselves, fall into what I regard as conventional, uncritical postures when addressing questions of art and beauty: they simply echo the *koinoi topoi*, the *loci communi* of thought common to their age. A standard technique in rhetoric is to

find common ground with an audience and to appeal to suppositions and attachments it already can be presumed to hold. In regard to Benedict's comments on music, for example, in Central Europe especially I think, classical music audiences tend to have a quasi-religious attitude to music, one that is supported and affirmed by the abiding musical romanticism of its circumambient elite culture. A musical performance is experienced as a kind of surrogate liturgical act. Hence, if one can make an argument (well, assert a position) that music has its grounds in divine transcendence and is an encounter with the divine, then one might have, presumably, some access to what is left of a religious sensibility in the modern secular mind as a minimal common ground and to use this access as providing leverage in evangelizing, in drawing members of such an audience to the faith. I think it is naïve to trust that this will actually work. Nevertheless, the fact that this is done in no way necessarily impairs the validity of theological positions expounded or even, in some cases, the subtlety of their analyses. It makes such exposition apparently more convincing to its audience. To object to it, as I do, sometimes seems to be an unnecessary distraction and a semantic quibble. I too find rhapsodic epideictic rhetoric emotionally moving, that is, until I have a chance to think about it. To remove such intellectual blurs from a discourse, or to substitute more precise terms, probably would not only make little difference for the main drift of that discourse, it would hobble that discourse and make it unintelligible to most of its addressees. Understanding precise terms, even understanding the need for them, is acquired only after an arduous process of dialectical analysis and after one has had the experience of how effective and illuminating such analysis can be. How refreshing, how liberating it is to have blinders of conventional phantasms stripped from one's eyes and to be in touch with something real! But who has time (and interest) for that? Furthermore, I assume that such rhetoric is often being used analogously, though that is not always clear; audiences can't be expected always to recognize analogy, nor to understand through its quite wonderful expressive capacities what a very infirm epistemological instrument it is. I do not wish, under any circumstances, to impute improper motives to those who use such speech; they are only doing what everyone else is doing, including world authorities on the fine arts, college professors, museum curators, critics, auction houses, artists themselves, and so on. All everyday use of speech is vague and negligent, and that will never change. Despite my sympathy with Plato (and with Confucius) to rescue speech from its ordinarily innocent malefactors, I don't expect that such a project will ever succeed. Nor do Plato (and Confucius) point finally to a valid way of doing it.

Excursus on rhetoric: I would like to conclude this section by making two general points about rhetoric. First, I do not wish to denigrate, or be understood as denigrating, rhetorical eloquence as such. It is one among the many values that human beings encounter, and it should be appreciated as such. Further, it is an especially important one. The art of rhetoric is one of the most necessary and universal of all the arts. We can appreciate it for what it is and what it accomplishes. We are exposed to it and practice it every day of our lives. A four-year old child can be as persuasive and eloquent (or not) as a Cicero, a Bossuet, or a Newman. Like all other arts it can be practiced well and poorly, for good purposes and for bad purposes. It helps to bond people together, to lift their spirits, to move to action, to confirm beliefs, to induce trust, to remind people of their history and promote their sense of futurity. The life of families, nations,

churches, and all other social institutions depend to a great extent upon it. It is marked and elevated, on occasions, by utilizing genuinely aesthetic phenomena, which is why the great orations, sermons, liturgical texts, prayers, sacred scriptures, aphorisms, histories, essays and epistles and other rhetorical genera, besides whatever else they do, constitute an important part of our literary history. The function of effective speech can sometimes be enormously successful both in building up the image, or ethos, of the speaker, giving him or her a magisterial, authoritative prominence as well as in celebrating the emotive cohesion of the community addressed as bearers of common values and purposes (the pathos of the speech). Often it is inspirational, ceremonial, “epideictic” or “display” speech; a great deal of traditional political oratory and sermonic speech strives for this kind of eloquence. Sacred scriptures are rhetorical documents and are marked by many highly eloquent passages and sections: we might point to the opening chapter of Genesis, the Book of Job, the psalms and canticles, many of the prophets, the Prologue to the Gospel of John, the hymnic pericopes in the epistles, and others as good examples of these. Some of the speeches of Abraham Lincoln are superb examples of eloquent political rhetoric. Papal encyclicals tend, by and large, to be extended exercises in a Ciceronian kind of grand rhetoric. An enormous amount of scholarship is rhetoric; perhaps all historical writing is essentially rhetorical (some have made this argument); even a substantial number of the famous “philosophers” are engaged, arguably not in philosophy per se, but are moralists in the tradition of rhetorical eloquence (Camus, Pascal, Sartre, Nietzsche, Hume, Bergson, Santayana, and droves of others). Eloquence in rhetoric occurs when the art is being exercised at a particularly skillful level, often by adding in many of the so-called “colors” of rhetoric—figurative language, parallel and antithetical syntax, an orotund phonology, the so-called clausulae or metrical sections frequently appended to terminal structures, the use of both fictional and nonfictional narration, of lyrical evocation, of a dense tapestry of many-leveled topical allusions, the echoing and integrating of other kinds of speech in a social and historical ambiance—all of which impart an aesthetic veneer to the speech. Further, rhetoric provides a source and compendium of devices, strategies, materials indispensable for the poet to use for the distinct purposes of his art. Metaphor, synecdoche, chiasmus, metrical rhythm, and hundreds of others all exist as rhetorical instruments before they are transmuted through the aesthetic chrysalis of the poetic. All poets subsume the art of rhetoric into their poetic art. What a loss it would be not to have any of this! But still, it is important to recall that rhetoric reaches deeply into, picks and chooses from, and consolidates the scattered and otherwise disconnected sentiments, those *doxa* or *loci communi* I described above, that a given audience already affirms, so that, as impressive and as moving as rhetorical eloquence may be, its apparent truthfulness (its credibility) always depends on a body of prior opinions conventionally accepted as true. As I have said before, such opinions may be true or false, or (more typically) partially true or partially false, but there is nothing in eloquence as such which either validates or invalidates them, even though it makes them more convincing. Few things strengthen conviction, at least temporarily, more than the emotions evoked by the pathos of rhetorical speech (at least as long as the emotions last). As in all rhetoric the response is one of *pistis*, of *fides*, of faith: confidence in the speaker who speaks, and his or her solidarity with the community that is presumed to be listening. The success of rhetoric qua rhetoric is primarily to be convincing, incidentally perhaps to be true.

Secondly, as much as we want to praise and honor the glory of eloquence, we must never take it, as is often tragically done, as a surrogate for moral action itself, for truth and knowledge, for sanctity, for virtue or beauty or work or the exercise of other arts or any of the other great sources of value in life. Further, eloquence, even as exercised at its highest level of craft and accomplishment, can be used for intolerably evil purposes—for seduction, betrayal, and fraud. Where religious faith is concerned, I think we tend to attribute too much power to rhetorical speech, even of the most compelling sort as we understand it in evangelizing and proselytizing. But I do know from my own life that, on the scale of influences, the inducement and strengthening of faith has, in the final analysis, least been effected by religious rhetoric, even scriptural rhetoric, though I have, and generally do devote myself extensively to trying to absorb it. When I do actually respond to it in any serious or long lasting way, it is only because there are prior things, a great number of them, events, people, real things and not just opinions about them, that have made me receptive to it and that are the real sources of my convictions. Religious rhetoric fortifies this but doesn't make it happen. One of these sources, among many others, has been for me a truly intellectual awakening: distinguishing values. To recognize rhetorical value for the good it can and cannot do, to recognize aesthetic value for the good it can be and cannot be, is to assist in being able to recognize what faith is and what is special and different about that. Faith is not simply a response to rhetoric and an assent to its proposals; it is a virtue, a life of action, of response to actual concrete human situations, of interaction with others, of prayer. Moreover, I am aware that a deep absorption into religious rhetoric, verbal and iconographical and musical, liturgical and scriptural and architectural, as well as the aesthetic aspects that can attach itself to all of these things, can project a rich imaginative world, yet an abstract and detached world of *religio*, a gorgeous iconostasis that sometimes obstructs rather than mediates, one which I could be very attracted to, and yet leave me as much a *de facto* atheist as ever, without *fides*, without confidence or attentiveness paid to the action of providence in my life and the demands it makes and the gifts it offers. For me, to separate out my own intense *philokalia* (love of beauty) is to make sure that it does not become a barricade for me (as the love of beauty can often do). It clears an important path. Finally, I regard it as one of the great tragedies of Christendom that the Protestant Reformation vested so much of its identity in religious rhetoric and made the sermon the center of Christian worship, even as it isolated scriptural texts away from a living, concrete ecclesial entity, the lives and witness of saints, and sacramental action. Last of all I mention the Eucharist, the sacrifice of the mass. The consecration of the mass may have powerful rhetorical elements and even some aesthetic features, but, in the end, it is an event, not a story about an event, not an analogy, not a symbol of an event, but an event, an action, singular, particular, concrete, personal, anchored to Being, and still universal, as nothing else is.

II. The Distinction of Values

A. Introduction: On Value

I would like to begin this section of my presentation with a brief aside devoted to Augustine. I am convinced that here was a man deeply attentive to and appreciative of beauty, and I think that our having lost his treatise devoted to the subject is one of the great misfortunes of western civilization. Nevertheless, his scattered comments on beauty are very rich indeed, especially in *De ordine* and other works, and he demonstrates a deep assimilation of the tradition of classical thinking about the nature of the beautiful. In *The City of God* he makes again and again a distinction between what he calls material beauty and intelligible beauty. I take the former to mean roughly what I would call aesthetic beauty—that which is perceived by the senses; the latter seems to indicate a kind of beauty in a Platonic or neo-Platonic sense, as immaterial and “intelligible,” a transcendent idea or form of beauty, almost having, perhaps, an existence of its own. Beauty, in the ultimate intelligible sense, may be God Himself. But Augustine is exceptionally sharp about “material” beauty. He knows, for example that “material” beauty has something to do with arrangement and proportionality of elements in a structure. Furthermore he can make distinctions: in his great paean to natural beauty in the final book of *The City of God*, he distinguishes again and again between the functionality of a thing and the beauty of a thing, two aspects of the same thing, sometimes seeing an interrelationship between the two and sometimes not, but never identifying them as a single value. In Book Fourteen, he refers to some poetic verses of Vergil as glorious (“*luculentis versibus*” XIV, III) even while pointing out how morally and philosophically false they are. Here clearly, as far as material beauty is concerned, beauty and truth are not the same. Augustine was also distinctly aware of how attractive and yet how morally corrosive entertainments like the theater could be. Now I don’t know how Augustine worked things out in the end, and whether or not he reconciled the potential contradictions that one might see in his account of beauty, but he is interesting because, while being a great Catholic thinker, he is introducing what I want to take as the keynote for what will follow: the distinction of values.

Now, I am well aware of the discomfort that the term “value” arouses in people, especially of a more traditional bent, and of the many difficulties it entails. Once again I cannot turn aside to engage with what, by all rights, deserves to be engaged with; but, as I use the term, it implies no commitment to a purported “relativism” of any kind. Terms like the “good” or “end” might be appropriate substitutes but will involve no fewer problems. I like to think that “value” connects nicely with the Greek “*axios*” or “worthy,” or with “*to prepon*,” the “fitting,” both terms with noble credentials in the Greek philosophical lexicon. What I like about the term value is, first, its flexibility: it allows us to talk about what we might here call “goods” but in both a potential and actual sense—to have a term we can use to refer to achievement and failure, presence and absence. Second, I like its relational emphasis; all values, as I treat them here, are relations—relations within an entity, relations of an entity with things outside the entity, relations between the entity and the perceiver of the entity. The things—the objects, activities, processes, phenomena of all kinds—which we value have concrete properties, conditions, aspects, identities, qualities, quantities grounded in their ontological density as the things they are; all of these things we know, and can only know, as relations, as structures of contrast which allow us to differentiate and coordinate their elements. We have no control over these; they are what they are. And we are what we are; responsive intellectual creatures who apprehend these things either

truly or falsely, accurately or inaccurately, rightly or wrongly. Values also pertain to the relationship of a thing and the intellect that apprehends it. I invoke, for the sake of convenience, what I understand as the traditional notion of connaturality. To be responsive to things requires capacities in us to react to them; a crude example would be the inability of a tone-deaf person to enjoy music. This does not imply that there is no fine music there to be enjoyed by those who can do so, or that the failure or success of enjoyment is relativistic and subjective. Along the entire horizon of human responses, education, talent, experience, opportunity, attentiveness, maturity, special types of intelligence and other factors impact deeply our ability to enter into value relations with things. As we know, only the person well habituated in a virtue can understand what that virtue is and how to judge an act in terms of that virtue. Or only a person in possession of certain insights into and knowledge of a thing can advance to further insights into and knowledge of that thing. As complex and immensely variegated and often spontaneous and immediate to time and place as these relations are, as much depth of reflection and perspicacity is required to differentiate and understand them, there is no question of “relativism” involved here. Those who would ideally like to defend the putative “objectivity” of value from “relativism” or “subjectivity” impair their project no more effectively than by denying or ignoring the deeply relational character of Being itself and of all values whose “objectivity” is nowhere more grounded than in the extraordinarily complex nexus of relations which constitute and surround them. In fact, the apodictic desideratum of something called “objective value” in a given case all too often represents a demand for an imposition, a conferral (often determined by conventional agreement and authority), rather than a discernment of value, and therefore the practice of doing so is itself an arbitrary and subjective act, the implications of which all too often lead to a *sub rosa* endorsement of subjectivism and a collapse of genuine objectivity in valuation. To yield to authoritative judgment, or to conventional judgment (the same thing), is partially to abandon authentic judgment. There are often, in some areas of life, good reasons to accede to judgments of those whom we trust, whom we think have credentials to make judgments for us; but, even in these cases, if we are acting intelligently at all, we still make some kind of individual judgment about why we should trust someone, and such a judgment will usually include some reference, not simply to the credibility of those who make the judgment, but also to that phenomenon, however inadequately we know it, which is being judged. It is pertinent to remark, in this regard, that one must be willing to challenge, nevertheless, accepted opinions; in the fine arts the quality of work of many “famous” artists has been blown up out of all proportion to what they actually achieved, and even the best must be subject to scrupulous standards and rigorous assessment.

What is disturbing to many people in what I have to propose is the amount of indeterminacy it introduces into the reflective judgment of the beautiful (or anything else). If reflective judgment is based, in the first place, upon a capacity to make distinctions among a variety of values evoked by different aspects of a single object, and, in the second place, upon a capacity to bring to the assessment of each value the kind of knowledge, both generic and particular, apposite for that value, and that value alone, then judgment of a single object, and the isolation in the object of that aspect by virtue of which it can be called beautiful, is subject to an enormous number of variables and conditions; further, if a value is grounded in a relationship

between a perceiver and the object, abilities to see, to discern, to respond, then judgment is always probable to a greater or lesser extent, never final and absolute (though it can come close to that in many cases). The level of difficulty involved in judgment, of adjudicating multitudes of often conflicting considerations, of the intellectual sophistication and detachment required, is often daunting and easily causes us to back off from the necessary effort by branding such an approach as relativistic and subjective. The position I advance here is an effort to pursue objectivity at its highest level, even if that means being critical of claims to objectivity that are inauthentic or even false. It also involves not only knowing the value one is considering and its relation to other values as well as the priorities of values relative to a given thing, it involves knowing a great deal about oneself and one's circumstances. Good judgment must be circumspect and cautious, but without losing its spontaneity and robustness. Isn't all of this rather complicated? Of course, it is; the human intellect is just too amazing in its ability to deal with complications and should never be tempted to back off from the effort required. All that I have posited above, all the work it requires, all the cultivation of connoisseurship and discrimination it demands, would make absolutely no sense at all if it were not for the quite terrifying objective reality of the true, the good, and the beautiful which the intellect is trying to apprehend in its fullness; terrifying for two reasons: that the intellect seems so explicitly made in order to reach outwards to do this, and, even more, that the true, the good, and the beautiful reach inwards to meet this demand.

B. A Family Portrait

But first, my story—a very personal story: I hope you will be patient with it. I tell this story because it is very immediate to me, having happened recently. I was privileged, for a variety of reasons, to grow up in a household surrounded by many fine works of art—of many types. Among these was a portrait of my maternal grandfather painted back in the 1920's by Edmund Tarbell, an eminent painter of the time and the doyen of the Boston school of art for several decades in the early part of the twentieth century. This portrait was displayed rather grandly over the fireplace in our formal dining room. It is worth mentioning that the person depicted in this painting had assumed a rather mythic role in our family's life. He had left behind him a significant legacy. He died before I was born, but I admired him particularly for what I understood was his near professional ability to play both the classical cello and piano; and I learned to play the classical piano using his Steinway grand. Now, for reasons too tedious and too awful to tell, when I was about the age of eighteen, all of this fine art (and the piano too) vanished out of the life of my family; the Tarbell portrait of my grandfather disappeared. Nobody knew where it went. I never expected to see it again in my life. Then, on Easter morning, April (2015) my daughter handed me a catalogue of the University of Michigan Art Museum and instructed me to open up to a certain page. And there it was, still familiar to me in every detail, fifty-six years later, the portrait of my grandfather.

I think we have a lot of those extraordinary moments in our lives, of greater or lesser intensity, relative to many different kinds of things. They are important, spontaneous, happen again and again; my life, in some respects, has been a miraculous sequence of them: the birth of

child, the discovery of a new idea, a whole new realm of a fine or decorative or other kind of art opening up before one's eyes, an amazing person, a fine experience, a bear up in one's pear tree, a thousand different things, again and again. "Value erupts" constantly into our lives, perhaps because, more than anything else, we are valuing creatures (which is also why we are theorizing creatures). Our lives are filled—if we pay attention to it—with the richness and meaningfulness of Being. All value response is a relationship. What I am confronts something that is. But why "erupt"?—because, as much of ourselves as we bring to values, we are not in control of them. They astonish us because we ultimately don't determine values; more often than not, they determine us. Inside that astonishment, a lot of different things are happening—sometimes a value, sometimes many values are experienced all at once. We are also judging creatures: we step back from some of those experiences and reflect upon them, we think analytically about them, we place them in context, we remember similar ones, we try to identify what they are, and, where a cluster of them are involved simultaneously, as so often happens, we make the effort to discriminate among them, to differentiate them, correlate them, distinguish them. We judge them: that initial response is a judgment already; in reflecting upon them we sharpen and refine that initial judgment, we judge the judgment, we engage in a judgment of a judgment (*judicium judicii*). There is no esoteric discipline involved here. This is what we do every day of our lives.

Okay, so we return to the portrait. Let us distinguish values.

Personal value: Obviously this work has incomparable personal value for me, in a variety of ways. I am bringing something very complex and multifaceted of my own to this work, and I need to understand that, I need to understand myself, in my reaction to it. This is not a "subjective" phenomenon: I'm not making it up, I'm not imposing anything. That is the picture I grew up with, that's my grandfather represented in the picture. What comes into relation here is unique, inimitable. It is as real and objective as anything ever gets. Because that portrait is the portrait it is, it is exercising a powerful control over my response, it is activating something in me—not just anything: family memories, personal history, perhaps some residual sense of an ancestral *pietas* not altogether common in our time. But as powerful as my reaction was, would I be justified in saying this is a great painting, or something to that effect? Obviously not. Would I expect anyone else to have that response? Not particularly. Is that the reason why it is in the Univ. of Michigan collection? Certainly not. But it has other values—relationships it can promote by virtue of what it is and what it can be both for myself and for others who are looking at it.

Art-historical value: 1) It was painted by Tarbell, a significant and influential figure in his time. 2) It is, as I suppose, a fairly typical instance of a certain kind of conventional portraiture of its period (1920's). There are thousands of these around. The magisterial-looking portraiture of prelates and princes had quite voluminously devolved upon the *haute bourgeoisie* by the late 19th century; and my grandfather looks magisterial enough in his role as captain of a rather small and now long defunct industry. I imagine that the University of Michigan has it in its collection for these kinds of historical value. Museums often do. If it were hanging in a museum in Boston, it could conceivably be part of a collection that illustrated something about Boston's commercial

history in the late 19th and early 20th century. So it has value as an art-historical work: but not much, I assume.

Financial value: I bring this up, not because this was part of my initial response to the portrait, but because the world of fine arts (despite the mythology that surrounds its putative aloofness) is so intensively commercialized, as commercialized as anything else is in our culture, that it is difficult to be completely detached from this. My recent forays into a limited sort of art collecting (19th century White Mountain landscapes) has made me aware of how curiously arbitrary are the financial values of art works—depending relatively little on the aesthetic and artistic value of works but rather on trends, fashions, what's in and what's out. This applies not only to the visual fine arts but to all of them. It's rather appalling, but I don't see that it could be much different. But now, having been at many art shows, participated in live as well as on-line auctions, read scores of catalogues, and so forth, I can hardly avoid having this question not occur to me. Frankly, since I never pay attention to portraits, I have no idea how it would be appraised on the art market. Nor do I care. That it is a Tarbell piece (name recognition for a tiny number of people) might make it worth something, though I don't especially understand having portraits around which are not relatives, unless the portrait is by Rembrandt or Gainsborough or someone like that.

Representational value: many of the arts have representational (or mimetic) value. All arts of speech are representational, as are pictures, sculptures, photography, some kinds of music and dance, and others. Part of the value to me of my grandfather's portrait is my supposition that it more or less looks like him, and I guess it does, having seen a few photographs. But portraits do tend to glorify their subjects somewhat, so it is difficult for me to tell how reliable it is. For people who commission portrayals of relatives, yachts, houses, horses and dogs and cats, gardens and landscapes, etc., representational accuracy can be an important value. At various times in the past, there was a great deal of argument about "verisimilitude" as a value in the fine arts. The achievement of representational accuracy, however, is a practical art, in whatever métier, but it can and often does provide resources for fine art. In the fine arts, the artist can take quite a bit of liberty with representational values; they still count, and quite a bit in some kinds of works, though finally, purely as such, they are irrelevant to aesthetic judgment. In many great portraits, for example, we do not know what the original person looked like, and that does not matter. Most fine landscapes look very little like what they are supposed to represent. I know the White Mountains quite well, having climbed most of them, but few of the White Mountain landscapes actually look like what they are supposed to depict. No loss here. Modern abstract non-representational painting has only advanced what the decorative arts have always known, as well as non-representational fine arts such as architecture and music, that accurate representation, even any representation at all, is not a requirement for beauty.

Decorative value: I remember that portrait of my grandfather looking very good where it was positioned in my family house at the time. Since it is a large work, it needs a large house with formal rooms, formal furniture, and ceilings about 10-12 feet high. Since most of the portrait is in dark and somber tones, browns and blacks, it fits easily into many color schemes. If,

for some odd reason, I owned it, I would not be able to hang it in my present house. It just wouldn't fit. We often don't like to think that decorative considerations—a range of lower level aesthetic considerations perhaps—are relevant to art works; but they certainly are, and people who are considering a purchase make many decisions about where some things will or can go and how they match other things in the vicinity. It is wise to be aware that the value of art works of any kind can be deeply affected by the environment in which one perceives them—how much light there is, the acoustics of a place, and hundreds of other factors. I would like to say, as an aside, that much decorative art is as rich and rewarding to the aesthetic response as is fine art. I think of porcelain works of all kinds, of oriental carpets, of fine furniture, and a dozen other things including even weapons such as ornamented swords and suits of armor.

Moral value: portraits and sculpture of important personages, saints, artists, etc., are often thought to inspire us, to give us models of effort and achievement. That may be true, of course, if we know something about the person portrayed, in which case it is really our knowledge of the person, rather than the representation, which affects us. The portrait of my grandfather might have that effect for me perhaps and for some of my relatives, but I doubt very much it would have any impact of that kind on anyone else. Some persons would very well find this portrait at least generically offensive, a commemoration in a certain style and of a certain period, of independent entrepreneurs who were reasonably successful at what they were doing. If I admire that my grandfather helped to secure the livelihood of his employees (mainly Irish and Italian immigrants), and helped to “gladden the hearts” of his customers who enjoyed his confectionary products and services, there are others who will contend that he, by definition, must have exploited workers (all accounts that I have heard belie this) and also helped to give his clientele cavities (probably true, especially if they didn't brush their teeth, but then at least dentists benefitted). Such moral, practical, and political considerations will frequently attach themselves to works of many kinds. There are times when an adverse moral response to a work can destroy our ability to respond to other values in it. There is no problem with this; it's just important to understand what we are doing or what is happening in that situation. Three more points are relevant here: first, it is good not to make these kinds of judgment out of all those subtle prejudices we can, sometimes unknowingly, harbor, or, if we do, we should be aware we are doing that and admit to it ; second, even when we recognize that, in a work of fine art, aesthetic considerations should be given priority and should mitigate somewhat our moral judgments, we should still address moral considerations and give them the rigorous sort of assessment they often deserve; third, it is not always easy to make these distinctions and to pull apart the principles which explain them.

Religious value: not relevant in any direct sense, unless one has been nurtured in some tradition of ancestor worship. Nor can I discern any “insight” into the depths of my grandfather's soul by looking at the portrait. If I believed once that portraits can actually give that kind of access, I no longer do; but it is nice, at times, for fictional purposes, to pretend that it can happen. Photographs can capture sometimes an expression on a face that might reveal something about a person's character and disposition; but one must be very guarded even about making a judgment based on this.

Artistic value: this is perhaps substantial in this painting. Artistic value has to do with the skill that goes into something, the work, the process, the mastering of conventions, the expertise, the sophistication, draftsmanship, the preparation, the representational accuracy if that is relevant. I can't be sure that I am judging the artistic value of this piece correctly, because that requires a great deal of technical knowledge, but the work looks very polished and competent to me. This value, of course, is relevant not only to the fine arts, but to all arts. In the fine arts, it needs to be distinguished from aesthetic value, for objects, performances, and everything else can exhibit very high levels of artistic capacity and yet be quite negative in aesthetic terms, such as a pianist playing a piece much too fast in order to show off his technique. We could supply countless examples of how this can happen. Some of the Sistine Chapel panels are really very beautiful; others rather ugly; but they all show about the same level of artistry. Some authors, I think especially of Thomas Mann and Proust, are dazzling virtuoso writers but their works are of questionable aesthetic quality.

Excursus on art: The restoration of a rich and comprehensive understanding of art (or *techne*) in the classical sense (as I adumbrated above) is enormously important for two reasons: first, it allows us to appreciate the way that the multitudinous and multiform processes and products of art permeate all aspects of human life, touching and shaping everything we do in all our waking moments. All of them involve what Aristotle would refer to as the intellectual virtue of art and are one of the most astonishing and pervasive manifestations of human intelligence and creativity at work. Of course, we take most of this for granted, which is a shame, for all the thousands of arts which are functional in our lives (we are so habituated to hundreds of them that we are scarcely aware of the amazing things we are doing with them), from the simplest act of sweeping a floor to brewing beer to practicing medicine, to the technological complexities of building space ships or the artistic intricacies of creating the aesthetically beautiful piano concerto, are worthy, or can be worthy of, the most concentrated admiration we can confer upon them. (Read St. Augustine's praise of the arts in the final book of *The City of God*). When we understand the fine arts as a subtype of art and as subject to many of the same considerations as all other arts, it helps to demystify them; it is a sound corrective to the lavish myths which surround images of artistic and "creative genius." It is salutary when the French poet Valéry compares writing poetry to mixing chemicals in a lab, or when some schools of Chinese thought compare the art of poetry to high cuisine. Second, the more we can appreciate what art is, and the manifold features all the arts share in common qua arts, the more we can differentiate them from those things which are distinctly not art, which provide humane contexts much broader than that of art, and which should never be reduced to art and are deeply corrupted if they are—I speak here of moral insight and wisdom, the exercise of prudence and justice, philosophical and scientific understanding, the capacity for aesthetic contemplation (of both natural and artifactual things), the theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity, the intellectual and spiritual contemplative life itself. None of these things is ever simply "technique," or a product of technique, or should be treated as such, even though they must ever be highly concerned with techniques and often make use of them—for they nourish the arts immeasurably and are nourished in turn by these same arts. Even the art of logic as an instrument of philosophical and

scientific reasoning (to say nothing of its common sense applications) depends ideally on prior insights and assumptions that are not themselves grounded in the art of logic per se.

All exercises and applications of art are affected, are conditioned by considerations broader than art itself. Many of these considerations are moral: arts can be used for good or evil purposes without thereby damaging the integrity of the art itself. We all know too well that the art of rhetoric can be used for immensely good and immensely evil ends, and yet remain, in either case, exemplary applications of rhetorical technique. Many arts—those we often specifically refer to as technologies—could not exist without the scientific discoveries that ground them; the medical arts are particularly good examples of this. But none of these phenomena are subject to the kind of control that an art has or aspires to: art is all about construction, assertion, control, though the higher and more sophisticated an art is, the more it relies on a freshness of approach in each application and hence a prior tolerance for a certain amount of indeterminacy. Art itself, in its fullest meaning, is so important in human endeavor that there is a tendency to reduce life purely to art and to understand life itself, and everything in life as an “art” (A former professor of note at Saint Anselm College, John Julian Ryan, made a valiant and praiseworthy effort to recover the ancient sense of art, and then, lamentably, reduced all of life to it); to think of morality in terms of artistically contrived and enacted codes—systems of etiquette, the chivalric code, the Confucian code, the British gentleman, the cosmopolitan aesthete, the boundless multiplication of religious and/or social rules that control everything that one does; to conceive of life as a kind of life-style or as a “narrative” in which one “plays a role” and which is conceived as having a “plot” or “project” of some kind, with a controllable and predictable trajectory and outcome; to think of moral virtues and actions as arts (Erich Fromm’s famous “The Art of Loving”); to organize spiritual mysticism as a set of steps or procedures, as is so common especially in far eastern thinking; to affirm that something called “social engineering” (and its many facsimiles) can actually solve the problems of a polity; to think of the state as a “work of art” wherein all the members of the commonweal occupy a place and a function assigned to them by some higher social authority whose position emulates that of the artist in relation to his or her materials; to reduce all human knowledge and understanding to the exercise of verbal artifice, to the art of rhetoric and rhetorical eloquence, or, in somewhat more exalted cases, to the subtleties of dialectic art which develop from hypothetical premises; to subordinate moral reasoning to a legal skill in manipulating a calculus of predetermined rules, thereby dismissing the freedom and individuation of human acts and the dignity of the human agent altogether; or, among so many other things, to conflate a fictive artifice with reality itself, wiping out at the same time both the deep appreciation of a mimetic art qua mimetic and of whatever there is to be understood, seriously, as real things and as the exigencies of human life itself. We all know that a real giraffe is very different from a painting of a giraffe, even though there are those, in the “art world,” who would claim that the painting is actually more “essentially giraffe” than the real giraffe (hence giving human artifice priority over nature). Once again, I return to my constant theme: to distinguish among things is to recognize, at the deepest level, what is most valuable about each distinct thing, or about the aspects of a distinct thing, as well as to be enabled to recognize, again at the deepest level, the relations that exist among them, in multitudinous and infinitely variable and unpredictable ways. Distinctions are not oppositions,

by the way; what they refer to are often experienced initially as a unity, as side by side, or overlapping, or subordinated, one to another, in complicated ways.

Aesthetic value: is the portrait of my grandfather beautiful? (That is obviously not the same question as asking whether or not my grandfather was beautiful, which I rather doubt he was, though I always heard he was a good-looking man.) Here my capacity for judgment can easily be too influenced by my personal, familial response to the work, but I think I can become disengaged enough to say that the work is, in fact, aesthetically beautiful, though in a very modest way. There is nothing in the portrait that disrupts the harmony, the fineness of the composition; nor is there anything that really sets this off as a strikingly beautiful thing. If this were not a portrait of my grandfather, I doubt very much I would pause for more than a second or two if I walked past it in the University of Michigan of Art Museum. I might think, “well, that’s nice,” and move on. And I could not recommend to anyone, except relatives, to make a big effort to see it. The Afghani carpet in my study or the view out of my window would merit more aesthetic attention than that portrait, as deeply connected to it as I am.

Excursus on Beauty: So what do we mean here by “beautiful”? One way of understanding the aesthetic, the beautiful, is by a kind of *via negativa*: the aesthetic is not: moral, philosophical, political, erotic, religious, cultural, patriotic, historical, ethnic, gender, representational, and many other values; most importantly, *Hippias*, it is not rhetorical eloquence—that may involve measures of aesthetic figuration, but not the domination of the aesthetic. The aesthetic can and does make use of everything it finds at hand—it can appropriate and synthesize materials from all of these things, all of these domains of life, and people who have partisan and specialized interests and agendas of all sorts can argue about what can go into works and how they should be presented; all of these interests can shape motivations for art work, and for their placement in the larger, non-aesthetic perspectives of human life as these are conceived of by social groups. But none of these things determines the inner value of the aesthetic per se.

The other way is positive: beauty is a function of form; being beautiful is being full of form, *formosis*; beauty is where form, turned in on itself and serving no purpose beyond being itself (purposive purposelessness in Kant’s terms) draws maximum attention to itself and yields the maximum delight by its extraordinary internal relationships. The *telos* of the form, the good of the form, is the form. In Sanskrit the word for beauty is *rupa* which is also the word for form. Our original Anglo Saxon word for form in English is “shape” and being beautiful is being shapely, and making a beautiful thing is shaping something into shapeliness. Saint Thomas refers to beauty as “that whose perception itself gives pleasure”—“*id cuius ipsa apprehensio placet*” (*Summa theologiae* 1.5.4.ad1). The *apprehensio* refers to an act of perception (*perceptio est quaedam ratio*) that discerns order or form in a thing, and thus is a distinctly cognitive or intellectual activity in an immediately intuitive or contemplative sense. The *ipsa* reinforces the self-contained, immanent nature of the apprehension that is disengaged from ordinary moral and ratiocinative activities (or “disinterested” as this tradition holds). Beauty does not mediate anything; it does not stimulate desire; beauty is. Such an apprehension takes place in respect to the formal structure of a particular thing (*pulchrum proprie pertinet ad rationem causae*

formalis—beauty pertains to the reason of a formal cause). Beauty is the splendor of form, *splendor formae*.

Now Saint Thomas and many others have made an effort, more haphazard, I think, than systematic, to posit the properties of beautiful things that warrant the kind of attention the *ipsa apprehensio* implies. Often people think that if you define beauty as form, one can or should come up with formulas that will determine what a beautiful thing must have, a set of necessary and sufficient conditions. They want predictability. Some other values you can predict to some extent. But not beauty. Though works of art, for example, as objects created within specific social environments, are heavily influenced by external, conventionalized rules, a mark of the beautiful work is also the establishment of its own internal rules as well as the non-conventional internalization of the conventional external rules to its own specific formal identity. That is one reason why every work of art has to be judged individually and in terms of its own internal features. But other properties have been advanced as necessary for beauty: proportionality, brightness, contrast and similitude, harmony, organic relation of parts to a whole, boundedness, correlation and replication of internal units with the unity of the whole, recursiveness and iteration, and so forth. Though these properties can never be defined in a fully satisfactory way and do not always seem to be sufficient to explain beauty (for things in nature and art can have one or several of these qualities and still not be beautiful), this does not mean that such terms are useless or meaningless: in most contexts they are very helpful indeed, and, in all contexts, they succeed in pointing attention at the internal relations of form itself and at helping to prevent some of the myriad distortions that so often affect the discussion of beauty in works of fine art (as well as in the discussion of beauty in nature). There are also a host of other terms and concepts which can be used to elucidate formal attributes of beautiful things: and since the universe itself is full of forms, one can draw upon the immense vocabulary of the descriptive sciences, linguistics, cybernetics, gestalt and cognitive psychology and mathematics not just for analogies, but for actual mimetic replications of forms to describe what one finds in a work of fine art: such as systems and series (hypotaxis and parataxis), binary and ternary, axial and non-axial, feedback loops, open and closed junctures, close and distant intervals, multiplanar overlaps and offsets, etc.

You don't need to know all or any of this to appreciate beauty—you just luxuriate in it. It is your spontaneous response that is important. However, if you do come to know some of this, it helps to sharpen that response, makes it more alert and intensified. The more one can discipline oneself into that focused and concentrated attention, the greater the delight becomes. And also the greater is the disappointment when one sees relationships fail, collapse, left incomplete, fractured, obscured, destabilized, blocked out, drab because of too much repetition, ugly because of too much clashing differentiation.

Now for the sake of semantic convenience here, I am going to refer to this understanding of the aesthetic, this emphasis on form *per se* as the ground of beauty, the sole ground of beauty, as classical formalism. It is an awkward phrase and I don't especially like it, but it will have to do. I will refer to all those opposed multitudinous views of beauty that posit a certain kind of

material as the core of beauty as romanticism. My terms are not completely just here—I use them for convenience. Romanticism refers especially to those views of beauty which finally equate beauty, as Hippias did, with rhetorical eloquence vis-a-vis any kind of subject, which see beauty as a kind of privileged, elegant communication, both in nature and art, in which beauty is sign which refers to something beyond itself, that “beyond” being the really important thing about it. The more extreme forms of romanticism identify beauty with a special kind of insight into reality, of knowledge unavailable to any other sort of perception. Now there are a huge number of issues here that I cannot address. How did all of this happen, where did it come from?

But first, I want to make clear that classical formalism is not some weird, eccentric view. It is the view of Aristotle and of a great deal that falls within the Aristotelian purview; it threads its way, in many different formulations and emphases, though not always consistently, through many thinkers. One finds it in Dionysius of Halicarnassus, in Horace and Dante, in medieval views of “*belle conjointure*,” in Saint Thomas Aquinas, Albertus Magnus, and many other medievals, in a variety of Renaissance thinkers (such as the Italian architect Alberti), in French and Italian sources, in Kant, Lessing, and Schiller, in Hogarth (*The Analysis of Beauty*), in R. L. Stevenson, Henry James, Edgar Allen Poe, Mark Twain, the American philosopher C. I. Lewis; French authors such as Theophile Gautier, Mallarmé, and others, especially Paul Valéry, the most eminent French poet of the 20th century; many music and painting people—Whistler; Eduard Hanslick; the sculptor Adolf von Hildebrand; Igor Stravinsky, George Ballanchine the choreographer; G. M. Hopkins, A. C. Bradley—one of the finest of Shakespearian scholars, Edward Bullough, Oscar Wilde, Bell and Fry, Harold Osborne, Michael Oakeshott, Mary Motherwell, a shade of it in C. S. Lewis; Jan Mukarovsky the Czech scholar; Roman Ingarden, the Russian formalists, Ortega y Gasset, Mario Vargas-Llosa, some inclination to it in Eliot, Pound, and Robert Lowell, and in the American New Critics; a touch of it in James Joyce, *The Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*; Reuben Brower; Seymour Chatman; Zimmermann—an amazing Austrian formalist aesthetician; and countless others. Curiously, some film critics tend to be formalist, and look at purely formal qualities of films in their criticism. Ebert was a fairly good example of this (at times). Moreover, it is not somehow a distinctively western view: one finds a multitude of parallels in the east to all the trends in the West, and the traditional treatises of Japan and China, for example, have powerful threads of primary emphasis on design, proportion, and form running through them from the earliest periods.

Yet in some curious way, classical formalism tends to be the minority position, the odd position. The identification of beauty with the rhetoric, the Romantic position, holds sway as the dominant position, in the west and the east, though it often identifies itself as a kind of revolt against a oppressive “formalism” which it views as the majority position and equates with a system of entrenched compositional rules. The Romantic position dominates the universities. It transforms almost the entire study of literature, for example, but the other arts as well, into a process of interpretation: what does the work tell us? what is its social, psychological, political statement, its message, its artistic vision? Now that would be fine—works of art have such things in them as compositional resources, as secondary or other values in the work; but interpretation should be, as much as possible, under the control of the formal structure of a work. It should

proceed from what is actually there in the work. Genuine exegesis is often necessary, especially as applied to works of the past where the signification, if relevant, is not always very clear, though it is a limited and purely propaedeutic process. But this is not what happens. For what happens is eisegesis: not extracting things out of the text, but putting things into the text: putting things into it which meet the receiver's own expectations.

Take Shelley's *Defense of Poetry* as an example. It is archly romantic: wildly, ecstatically so. Shelley clearly loves two great works—*The Iliad* and *The Divine Comedy*—and considers them to be beautiful. But he wants to think of the beautiful as expressive and revealer of the greatest and highest truth. However, he doesn't like what he finds overtly in those two works in that regard. They are beautiful but untrue. He abhors the warrior ethic of *The Iliad* and the Catholic theological framework of *The Divine Comedy*. Therefore, since they must meet Shelley's demands, they must coincide with what he thinks is the greatest and highest truth. He does not, or will not, make a distinction of values. Hence the real meaning of the texts are concealed beneath a "veil" (to use his term), the texts are codes, systems of esoteric symbols, whose hidden message must be penetrated. The works are not really what they seem to be. One now goes to work to rewrite (reinscribe!) the texts, to make them into something other than what they really are. The reader and his interests dominate and control the texts. Shelley is not just a postmodernist *in ovo*; he simply represents an entire tradition of dealing with beauty as Hippias did, as rhetorical eloquence.

This process is the *modus operandi* par excellence of the modern approach to the fine arts. It is the result of the failure to distinguish values in a work, to recognize priorities, to ignore formal design, to see everything as rhetoric, as communication of meaning. It is toxic: it destroys literature and all the other arts; it debilitates and debases every value that it fuses together. I cannot tell you the struggle I have gone through with students to stop them from reading into texts—they have been taught to do so from high school on, and the more far-fetched the interpretation is, the more they are rewarded for it. I cannot tell you the thousands of professional introductions, essays, reviews I have read which have little credible and recognizable relation to the text they purport to describe.

To the contrary, as I see it, literary meanings are highly determinate, formed, crystalline. In aesthetic response, you have to hear or read or see what is there, and to do that pretty instantaneously, to pay maximum attention to it, not superimpose your own meanings on it. The same is true with music and every other fine art; one should not bounce off and go into orbit around it, thinking one's own thoughts. What is behind the surface, if there is anything, is not what is important. It is the organization of the surface that is important.

Now I advance the classical formalist view as universally true of all beauty, in nature and art; and in the fine arts of all cultures and all times. I see it again and again, in the carved prows of Fiji Island ocean canoes, in Sung landscape painting, in the music of India, in Chinese ceramics, in Iranian rugs and Urdu poetry, Amerind decors and head-dresses, Montenegrin robes, and on and on. One can appreciate all these things the moment one sees them, their

instantaneously startling beauty, without any knowledge of what other values they had in their original cultures, or even without any knowledge of what cultures they come from. The carved prows of Fiji ocean canoes can be recognized as beautiful without any knowledge of Fiji culture (though it is nice to have that too). Music sometimes requires a short period of, as it were, “re-programming” the cognitive musical faculties in order to hear the form; I know that is difficult to do for many people, but one can habituate oneself to do it so that, even in very new encounters, it only takes ten or fifteen seconds to accomplish. Beauty is form; beautiful form is recognized and loved in all civilizations and cultures. It is one of the many things that all human beings share in common. Many will object to this, however, asserting that the formalist premise reflects a distinctly cultural bias, one formed in the west, and, if applied to a non-western culture, represents an imposition and violation of that culture. I don’t think that it does, and for many reasons; but my brief riposte to this kind of critique is that so-called western culture is too multifaceted to be subsumed into a single attitude or set of attitudes, that other cultures also are multifaceted and have a range of perspectives in them, many of which are identical to the range one finds in the west, that the way the word “culture” itself is being used is a western idea that may not, in fact, apply to anything or anywhere, and that any other perspective about beauty is subject to the same critique. The effort to reject a universal claim, as I have pointed out before, always ends up letting loose another universal claim from its underground chamber.

My purpose here is not to force or contain the value of beauty in fine art into some rigidly narrow framework available to, or able to be appreciated by, only a select few, by experts, but rather to free it up from entanglements which often hinder or compromise its appreciation, to isolate out what I truly think people are reacting to in any event, however inadequately, so that their enjoyment can be just that much more intensified and enriched. I am not trying to take away anyone’s enjoyment; I am trying to increase enjoyment by advancing the notion that enjoyment, in the final analysis, is what it is all about.

III. The Problem of Fusing Moral and Aesthetic Values

The fusion, either partially or wholly, of the moral and the aesthetic can take a multitude of different guises. One of its most extreme guises is where the aesthetic, from the side of the aesthetic, seems to take over and absorb completely the moral, where all questions of the moral good are reduced purely to putative considerations of “good form.” The so-called “aestheticism” that became popular in some circles in the late nineteenth century and that is associated with figures, either correctly or incorrectly, such as Pater or Oscar Wilde, seems to displace altogether moral principles with the aesthetic. In that sense, it is assumed positively as an archly “immoral” position, or perhaps a deliberately amoral position, overtly flaunting (so it fancies itself) the conventional morality of the society that surrounds it. “Aestheticism” has, unfortunately, given a concern for the distinctiveness of the aesthetic a bad reputation, especially because it is able, in some cases, to distinguish validly the moral and the aesthetic, at least in principle, and to make, apparently, its choice between them. The effort to do this in practice, of course, collapses, as it must, for moral reasoning and action remain what they are, no matter what is being thought about it. The moral action of an “aesthete” remains moral action nevertheless; and “aestheticism”

is purely a rhetorical ploy to justify and exonerate what is often immoral or narcissistic or debasing moral activity. There is not, and can never be, anything authentically aesthetic about any moral activity.

The much more common fusion, or confusion, of the moral and the aesthetic takes place from the side of the moral, where moral concerns, often quite valid and earnest, are partially subordinated to what can be thought of as aesthetic considerations. History shows many instances of this; these instances are often remarkable and impressive, so that it is difficult to be negatively critical of them. Wherever moral principles are embodied in a code, or set of codes, a certain aesthetic veneer can be attached to them, more so in some cases than in others. “Good form” can sometimes assume a kind of priority in how actions are carried out and sentiments shaped. This may take the guise of a cohesive and elegant set of rules for social behavior as one might find in a Confucian way of life, or in medieval chivalry, or Castiglione’s courtier (with his carefully honed *sprezzatura* or gracefulness and elegance), or the “gentleman,” or the cosmopolitan *bon-vivant* with his flair and panache, or many military or religious or professional routines, or the concern for “life style” one sees in much of contemporary culture. As we have already noted above, not a few people are inclined to think of life as an “art” and would like to arrange their lives into a perfectly harmonious composition. Now much of this may be supported by truly noble aspirations, and much of it is not. The peril in all of it is that the form itself will become the end, the formal cause will absorb or displace the final cause (as it does in the aesthetic), so that the genuine ends of human action will disappear into the methods designed partially to achieve them. In religious life, this is the essence of pharisaism: a punctilious observance of religious duties displaces the attainment and exercise of the theological virtues. One could document at length how the style of a way of life, no matter how attractive and satisfying that style is, can subvert and destroy that way of life when it becomes centered in itself and is no longer directed at its purpose. At the same time, those who are too rash in wanting to overthrow a set of rules or a manner of doing things can often make the identical mistake: importance is still placed on the rules per se—for changing the rules never guarantees purposes will be better served by the new set of rules, and the new rules can become just as obsessive as were the old set of rules. Both the upholder of the old rules and the upholder of the new rules can posit too close an identity between the form and the purpose. One of the most questionable ideas to emerge in the modern period (although there is nothing explicitly modern about it at all) is that “form follows function” (with its implication that function determines form). In fact, with limits, a given function can be served by many different forms, and a given form can serve a multitude of functions.

There are three other impulses to fuse moral and aesthetic value, all well intentioned (for the most part). They arise from the side of the moral. One is the view that the cultivation or refinement of aesthetic sensibility will bring about a cultivation or refinement of moral sensibility. This is a very common view, one that takes many forms throughout history. Its corollary is that exposure to refined art, to beauty in its highest manifestations, will advance a person’s overall moral sensitivity; and that, conversely, exposure to lower art forms, to a kind of meretricious and gaudy attractiveness, will have the opposite effect—it will desensitize a person,

make him crude in judgment, and deform his moral character. I will concede that this thesis is highly seductive—lots of important thinkers and moralists have held it. Augustine often declaimed the morally debasing quality of dramatic productions; he even said that he thought that people who enjoyed stories about murder did so because such productions helped them to nurture their own murderous inclinations (what would Agatha Christie, Dorothy Sayers, or Chesterton, plus multitudes of others, have thought about that?). But the evidence is just too powerful against it. I know lots of very good people who enjoy music of questionable quality; I assume that my fellow parishioners are decent people despite the dreadful hymns they insist on singing; I also know people who can barely stoop beneath a classical string quartet in their musical affinities who may well have thoroughly corrupt characters. It is even arguable, in fact even more plausible, that the development of aesthetic sensibility may actually corrode moral character, makes it superficial (after all it is a heightened response to complex surfaces), and dehumanizes a person (possibly encouraging him to cast other human beings in roles and seeing them as artificial characters rather than as substantive realities). As much as one rebels against such a generalization, I think one can say that aesthetic taste and moral reasoning are wholly separate things, and the rarely do the twain meet (though they can overlap). Even above and beyond that, even if moral sensitivity were sharpened by aesthetic sensitivity, moral action depends upon a great deal more than moral sensitivity. I can have all the compassion in the world, yet not do a single compassionate act (or else expect someone else to do my compassionate acts for me). The pathos of the moral life, its convictions, its sympathies, its declarations, are never the same thing as the praxis of the moral life, the action itself and the habits it requires.

Another kind of moral/aesthetic fusion actually arises, ironically, from the out and out moral condemnation and distrust of the aesthetic. Let's call this the "puritan" ethos. Once again we can see many different forms and degrees of this propensity. Here the concentration on the moral good is so intense that it derogates any and all acquiescence in the aesthetic. The aesthetic may even be condemned as demonic. Such a rejection of the aesthetic may range all the way, in its cruder manifestations, from eschewing all outward forms of aesthetic activity to, in its more sophisticated manifestations, converting or justifying all kinds of aesthetic activity in purely moral terms. The former, such as we might identify with, let us say, the puritanical religious movements of the 17th century, would include the prohibition of dancing, of music in most of its forms, fine clothing, decorated houses and churches, literary works of most kinds, and so forth (though it is surprising the aesthetic things such an ostensibly anti-aesthetic culture can produce). This kind of rigorous religious moralism can often morph into a non-religious rigorous pragmatism that is equally anti-aesthetic in its choices. The latter is a much more prevalent cultural tendency than the former. The moral and pragmatic repugnance to the aesthetic (whether real or feigned, as it often is) or the real but morally guilt-ridden attraction to the aesthetic is then palliated by conferring upon the aesthetic a moral function. The aesthetic is made acceptable because, with a few adjustments, is thought to be actually moral. The purpose of the aesthetic, whether in art or nature, is to teach us moral lessons, to lift our minds from the material world to the spiritual world, to make us better people, to inspire us with religious and metaphysical truth.

Its moral message will make us better people, and, once this has passed through a certain kind of strainer, being better people will make us more successful people (i.e., wealthier).

An interesting footnote to this discussion is provided by Kierkegaard's distinction of the aesthetic and ethical life. Here the aesthetic is defined as, or identified with, the sensate or sensuous life—the life of comfort, pleasure, material enjoyments, good food, satisfactory bank account, and so forth. All of that is contrasted with the ethical life. Now this definition of the aesthetic here is somewhat eccentric and need not detain us, but it does illustrate the opprobrium into which the idea of the aesthetic sometimes falls among religious thinkers. The solution is to turn the aesthetic into a religious value, and then one does not have to worry about it anymore. Of course, the aesthetic runs into the same problems with political thinkers, especially those with a statist and revolutionary bent. Here, the aesthetic in fine art gets subordinated to the needs of the state and its propaganda and the artists or critics who advance the aesthetic over the rhetorical are branded as “decadent” and are considered worthy of—well, you know what! But, as ever, issues are often confused and contradictory; totalitarian ideology is frequently quite aesthetic in its basic impulses and identifies the state itself as aesthetic—the state as work of art, or the disappearance of the state as the achievement of the absolute aesthesis of the human condition. Of course, both these objectives require, as does all good aesthetic design, elimination of anything, or anyone, that does not fit.

A final point is simply to remind ourselves that there is a fair amount of “great art” which is worthy of aesthetic attention, but which, from the standpoint of the moral attitudes it may embody or propose, is insufferably trivial, debased, incoherent, worthless. The aesthetic quality may make it difficult to see that, but see that we must, and hold it to account.

IV. The Problem of Fusing Religious and Aesthetic Values

What is it about beauty that so powerfully elicits a “religious” response and encourages the development of religious theories of beauty and the fusion of values upon which these theories depend? There are many reasons. Each of them presents a source of potential confusion.

First, for educated, cultivated, and well-traveled persons of faith (precisely those who are apt to reflect on something like the value of the beautiful in the context of religious belief), there is a tendency to associate religious belief with its more artistically and aesthetically successful representations, so much so that the two are practically identified as one and the same thing. Past epochs of history have left us an immense amount of incredibly beautiful religious art in all its manifestations. But there are several problems here.

First, it's easy to be so blinded by this dazzling cornucopia of beautiful religious art that one pays little attention to the quantitatively much greater amount of religious art of mediocre and poor quality—which art may, and does, often serve its rhetorically devotional function as well as beautiful art, if not actually better. I know that my own response to a Raphael Madonna or a Velasquez crucifixion or a Bach cantata is primarily aesthetic and minimally, if at all,

devotional, whereas my response to an ordinary plaster statue and to some rather ordinary religious music may be genuinely devotional. I grant that it is often difficult to make the distinction. To approach this issue from a negative vantage point, sometimes a particularly ugly or offensive setting, iconography, or music can be an obstacle to devotion, though, strictly speaking, it shouldn't be; and one can get over that soon enough (as I learned by being a graduate student in the shadow of the Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington for five years).

Second, the making of value distinctions itself is not, unfortunately, a significant part of our educational process, so that it seems rather "natural" (though it is utterly conventional) to ignore them, even despite the overwhelming evidence that urges them and that we do it all the time anyway—when we buy cars, go to restaurants, vote, and thousands of other activities involving value distinctions. I may, for example, find a particular automobile rather beautiful; but, if it can't get me where I want to go, I will not purchase it.

Thirdly, one of the many uses of the word beautiful is connected to the wide range of emotional attachments and sentiments we have. Hence, what we love, what we have grown up with, what inspires nostalgia, what we associate positively with our lives and loves can all be thought of as beautiful. Now for many people the place of religious faith is vital in their lives, and the association of many artifacts with this can evoke feelings of all kinds that are identified as being a response to the beautiful.

Fourth, it is difficult not to posit at times that there may be some similitude between what we might call a religious and an aesthetic sensibility. I think there is one, though it is difficult to define. In talking here about a religious sensibility I am referring to the tendency in some people to be in the grip of a powerful eros, perhaps more affective than intellectual, that hankers for the absolute, the transcendental, an ultimate grasp of things, of the Leibnizian "*plenum*," the Faustian urge to apprehend "*was die Welt/ Im Innersten zusammenhält*." Such an impetus may or may not be aligned with a specific religious faith. I think of a Nietzsche or a Camus or a Bergson as figures of powerful religious sensibilities without religious faith. In any case, this religious sensibility is spread over many persons and cultural phenomena and at many different levels of intensity. So how is this like the aesthetic? First, in their more refined and perhaps authentic forms, both sensibilities tend to move beyond, even indeed well beyond, the everyday practical things of life. The aesthetic object, qua aesthetic object, is profoundly impractical, even as it is profoundly valuable; it is also profoundly unconventional, no matter how many conventions it uses as its resources; its value is absolute and self-contained—it makes no reference beyond itself. So is the *nous*, the vision, the depth penetration of the real, sought (although not always successfully) by the religious mind: non-pragmatic, non-conventional, absolute, self-contained, non-referential because it is the terminal point of all reference. I think it is possible also to say that the aesthetic and the religious, in their non-practicality, share a common proclivity to "liberate" the human intellect, to set free the human intelligence (some might say, incorrectly I think, the "imagination") to envisage potentialities and enact relations, combinations and recombinations, that otherwise could never happen. I would even venture, though with a great

deal of caution, to say that the extraordinary achievements of religious art, in architecture, music, poetry, etc., (both Christian and non-Christian) may result, to some extent, from a resourcefulness released by the concurrence of these two sets of values in the same objects, one of which aims at affirming an absolute immanent order in a given thing by putting things together in a way ultimately unwarranted by how they appear together in any other natural or conventional order; and the other which aims at affirming an absolute transcendent order in all things by the discernment among them of the totally strange, the uncanny, the miraculous, the “other,” the holy. It is difficult not to notice that the most beautiful architecture in the world is to be found in edifices connected to religious practices and memorials: churches, mosques, synagogues, monastic foundations, ancient temples—classical, Egyptian, Hindu, Buddhist and others. Secular edifices, of course, mimic these achievements, but rarely with the same success. They tend to be humdrum and ordinary by comparison.

Fifth, response to aesthetic phenomena sometimes bears a close resemblance to certain kinds of religious responses, that sense of being wholly drawn out of oneself and into another thing—a condition of *ecstasis*. One can use expressions like wonderment, spell-binding, rapture, seizure, the *mysterium tremendum* of Rudolf Otto. Aristotle describes the reaction to beauty in poetry (in Chapter 25 of the *Poetics*) with a Greek word that sometimes refers to the moment of riveted astonishment, that “freezing in place” as when a patrol of soldiers suddenly spots the enemy for the first time. I have sometimes (once in Rome, once in Innsbruck) enjoyed watching people, one after the other, enter through a door and suddenly notice a beautiful thing and practically stumble, catching their breath, having been stunned by it, frozen in place.

Sixth, the aesthetic is such a source of wonder that it takes its place along a horizon of other things that attest to the fecundity of the natural and artifactual world and to the capacity of human mind to apprehend it in various ways. In that sense, the experience of beauty, even and maybe most of all as taken purely in an object itself, points beyond itself to the totality of values in life; and this can act as one of several preambles of faith, of manifesting the order in the creation and to the power and beneficence of a Creator. Though I am convinced that that beauty as evidence, by and large, confirms and strengthens a belief we already have, many see it as establishing belief. But I am well aware that for plenty of people it has no such effect on at all. The contrast of beauty with moral evil is frequently given as a reason for denying the existence of God.

Seventh, the experience of the beautiful thing itself, non-referential, not a meaning but a being, is perhaps one of the most intense experiences of a particular thing one can have, not analogously, but actually of the being itself, of the presence of the thing experienced as sheer presence for its own sake. It can be, as such, an exemplary contemplative experience, no matter how frequent it is, and this inducement to and satisfaction of a contemplative state may give it for some a religious overtone. However we can also do this with things that are not beautiful—it is largely a question of the willingness and self-discipline to pay maximum attention to the substantive reality of anything.

Eighth, it is difficult for people not to be influenced by powerful intellectual trends. The gradual attribution of an implied, non-doctrinal religious eloquence to art works during recent centuries has a complex history, but it is fully evident in the intensely secularized religious language that Wordsworth used in his “Preface” to describe poetry (“Poetry is the breath and finer spirit of all knowledge. . . . [The poet] is the rock of defense for human nature; an upholder and preserver. . . . [T]he objects of the poet’s thought are everywhere. . . . Poetry is the first and last of all knowledge—it is as immortal as the heart of man.”). Coleridge, most overtly in his *The Statesman’s Manual*, seeks out the theological and sacramental in his analysis and fusion of symbol and synecdoche as being at the heart of the poetic: “. . . a Symbol . . . is characterized by a translucence of the Special in the Individual, or of the General in the Especial or of the Universal in the General. Above all by the translucence of the Eternal through and in the Temporal. It always partakes of the reality which it renders intelligible; and while it enunciates the whole, abides itself as a living part in that Unity, of which it is representative.” Coleridge models what he says quite explicitly on the sacramental models of the Incarnation and the Eucharist. We are reminded here, of course, of the Hegelian “concrete universal.” Ralph Waldo Emerson, in “The Poet,” reaffirms many of these preoccupations: presaging Heidegger in a variety of ways, he says: “The poet is the sayer, the namer, and represents beauty. . . . The poet . . . is an emperor in his own right. . . . The condition of true naming on the poet’s part, is his resigning himself to the divine aura which breathes through forms. . . . The poets are thus liberating gods.” Or we might listen directly to the words of Heidegger himself in his essay “What Are Poets For?”: “Poets are the mortals who, singing earnestly of the wine-god, sense the trace of the fugitive gods, stay on the gods’ tracks, and so trace for their kindred mortals the way towards the future. . . . Their song over the land hallows. Their singing hails the integrity of the globe of being.” From his “The Origin of the Work of Art,” we can extract an assortment of pronouncements: “The art work opens up in its own way the Being of beings. . . . The work lets the earth be an earth...to create is to cause something to emerge as a thing that has been brought forth. . . . [T]he work’s becoming a work is a way in which truth becomes and happens. . . . Art then is the becoming and happening of truth. . . . Poetry [taken as the paradigm of the arts] is the saying of the unconcealedness of what is” Iris Murdoch, though hardly belonging to this tradition in the broader sense, makes the same kind of claims. In *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, she says: “The work of art unifies our sensibilities. Its authoritative unity and thereness guarantees and stabilises our existence. . . . Art sets us in order, the ideal unity of the object makes us also one. . . . [A]rt is a great source of revelation.” We could go on and on with this at some length. The pageant of those who embrace this modern need to replace a lost or dying sacramental presence grounded in religious revelation with a new sacramental presence grounded in the Fine Arts is interminable.

What is so remarkable about all of this is how close some of these thinkers come to elucidating what the aesthetic really is and how acutely responsive they are to this kind of value. In fact, so powerfully are they under the spell of the aesthetic, so rapt they are by the presence of what in effect they recognize as the self-sufficiency, the autonomy of the beautiful object that, beyond what is already rhetorical in the imagery of art, they transform the aesthetic itself into a rhetoric of “ultimate concern,” of revelation, both religious and metaphysical. This very self-

sufficiency, in its mysterious absoluteness, is taken as an epiphany of being—not just of the being of the object, but of Being itself. For so overwhelming is the experience of such works that, if these thinkers have nowhere else to look for such ultimate value, they wish to apply those terms which were once only meaningful in an entirely different context. And how eager one is to accept their conclusions! How inviting it is to want to substitute the immediacy of aesthetic pleasure and rhetorically inspired feelings of awe and sublimity for the supreme, dry, plodding, day-to-day difficulties of artistic composition, of prudential decision, of metaphysical inquiry, of living a life of fidelity and love, of the persistent renunciations that life demands of us. How gratifying it would be to dissolve all of that effort into a sensibility of religious feeling, of a religiosity that requires no faith and no action, of a social or a personal cocoon well-buffered by a pseudo-religious imagery and a ritualized life, no matter how rich and complex that may be. Moreover, it is difficult not to admire the effort to put back the sacramental at the heart of human life. But why ruin the fine arts in the process? And why, even more importantly, ensure that genuine sacramental recovery will not happen because its grounds, in the very process of that retrieval and the very nature of that process, are inexorably denied?

The difficulty with all such views is that they can provide no actual account for the excellence of works, and, in effect, direct our attention away from them and towards other things. They take such excellence for granted—such views are applied only to “great works,” which may be fine as long as the work in question really is excellent. The problem is that such presumption is also accompanied by ascription of greatness to many works that have merited that ascription only by fashion. Further, such views of the fine arts can tell us nothing at all about the enormous amount of failure in these arts. We could ask: What is it about, let us say, a Raphael Madonna that gives us transcendent revelation, yet would not give us a transcendent revelation if the central image were nudged about three inches to the right or left—thereby destroying many of the proportionate relations in the painting? Of if the Madonna’s nose was extended by an inch or two? If one has experimented with a car radio by switching quickly from the “Messiah” into a jazz combo and back and forth again, one gets a jolting lesson in the importance of unity of form. One needs no transcendent explanation to account for such a jolt. One does need knowledge of harmonic structure, of rhythm, and a dozen other technical items.

The curious fact about these claims to a revelation, a disclosure, a metaphysical or a transcendental truth afforded by the fine art work is that such revelations have no apparent content and no apparent staying or formative power. One does not walk away from the work actually knowing anything one did not know already, other than knowing that one has known, in some sense, that work. Whatever is known is constrained somehow to the immediate experience of the work; that experience is that knowledge. What one does remember is a gratification, a pleasure that was given by the work, a distinctive value erupting in and manifested by that very distinctive and particularized experience itself; and that is an unqualified good. That makes life better, renews and refreshes, for a while anyway, one’s sense of well-being, of being “at home” in the universe, though in situations of real human stress and suffering we realize how epiphenomenal all of that is, how much the fine arts are really connected to moments of

cultivated and privileged leisure, and how little they actually act upon the deepest resources of human moral sensibility and obligation.

It is perhaps appropriate, at this point, to return to the notion of “real presence.” Beautiful works of art are, of course, for us “real presences.” The actual concrete entities that they are, the composite, determinate nexus of relations they present us with, are very much real things; indeed, so powerful is the presence of these real things—and the more beautiful they are, the more powerful is their presence—that it is easy to attribute something “numinous” to them, something divine and translucent that shines through them. The tendency to want to do this is made all too evident by the copious history of persons doing precisely that. But what is generally not done here is to put this kind of impulse into perspective. For there are many other kinds of real presences in our lives which impose themselves upon us with as great an immediacy and as permanent an effect. These are people we know, obligations we have, events that occur, knowledge that we attain, mysteries that we affirm. The character and conditions of these “real presences” are radically different from those “real presences” we experience in relation to the fine arts; it is that difference that we are trying to understand, that all authentic “*theoria*” of the fine arts is attempting to explain, and that is essential for reasonable criticism and for a just determination of where and how these “real presences” fit into the larger structure of those other “real presences” of our lives.

From the sacramental side, and aside from those sacraments duly established as authentic sacraments in their own right, if we are going to recognize the objects of this world as sacramental in their particular and concrete historical actuality, that their goodness as created things are invested with transcendence and otherness, with holiness, then we must recognize that all existent objects, the ugly as well as the beautiful, the crass as well as the elegant, the squirrel crushed beneath our tires as well as Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony, and every other dichotomy we could posit here have this same sacramental value. And no *discrimen*, by virtue of which we can identify and judge the work of fine art, is thereby provided. In that respect, the work of fine art is no different from anything else that commands our reverence and, to use an expression of Martin Buber, our “metaphysical tenderness” in the same way as all other things do.

V. Conclusion: Why There Cannot, nor Should There Be, a Catholic Theory of Beauty

I am against it for the same reasons that I am against any specified interest advancing what is supposed to be a genuinely theoretical claim. A theoretical claim, if it emerges from genuine *theoria* is universal, and any specification of that claim in terms of some specialized interest divests it of its universality; it becomes either a contradiction in terms, or it is, in effect tantamount to an identification of everything in the universe with that specialized interest (which is what usually happens). If applied to beauty, the result is a weakening and compromising of the aesthetic and, perhaps more seriously, a weakening and compromising of other values that need to be distinguished from it. Such a consideration applies to any or all such claims, not only in aesthetics: no Catholic theory of the state, no Catholic economics, no Catholic physics, no Catholic theory of rhetoric, no Catholic ways of plumbing, bricklaying, shoe-making, composing

symphonies, constructing computers; no Catholic linguistics, metaphysics, logic; no Catholic natural ethics as such. Is there a Catholic theology?—yes, based on revelation—but as such it cannot be a real *theoria*, though it can be a highly sophisticated form of dialectic. If it is only a rhetoric, then it is just one more sermon.

A Catholic theory of beauty will be, would be, is, one more romantic theory and it will do exactly what other such theories do and which are, I think, in the end, inimical to the Catholic faith. It will invest works of art (of all kinds) and the artists who make them with a kind of extraordinary moral, religious, philosophical authority. It will confer upon works values they do not have, and it will invest what are really secular things, sometimes of a very negative kind, with a pseudo-religious significance. Further it will engage in the same sort of reductionism of similar theories, reconfiguring everything into a matter of rhetorical eloquence. It will and does elevate the imagination into a higher faculty than reason and could transform Catholic doctrine itself into an aesthetic phenomenon whose appearance is everything and whose substance is nothing.

A Catholic theory of beauty will result in something that, in a quite practical sense, I cannot use. My bottom line in all of this is criticism. How do I evaluate the aesthetic quality of a work of art (or nature)? No Catholic thing will help me in the slightest bit in that. In assessing nineteenth century landscape paintings from the White Mountains, I will notice elements that are sometimes out of place: a fallen log in the depiction of a forest whose diagonal line cuts through the vertical lines of the surrounding trees in a way that destabilizes the entire painting by drawing too much attention to itself. Or in an Eric Satie piece I can play where, in a fine musical composition, there is one false, sour note that hits me like a screwdriver rammed through my ear. It's not enough to injure the whole composition, it's just a problem in that particular measure. I have heard that same false note in professional performances of that piece as well so that I know it is not a misprint in my musical score. I have even taken it upon myself (arrogantly?) to correct it at least for my own rendition and pleasure; I know enough about musical composition to attempt this and have come to realize how hard it is to do and why Satie, who fails here, may have given up on it. I have come up with a solution—it is barely satisfactory, rather bland, but at least it is not ugly. And that's the way I play it for myself. But the point is that the decisions that must be made about achieving aesthetic beauty in such a piece have nothing to do with anything but the relations of adjacent notes to one another and to the general rhythm, key, repeated modalities in harmony and melody of the piece. Now *theoria* doesn't solve particular concrete problems, but it tells you where to look, what is relevant or irrelevant to solving the problem. Nothing Catholic or religious (or any other extra-musical consideration) will help you do that.

I have to say that I can imagine, and have experienced, few better things in life than hearing Mozart performed in a dazzling rococo church with gorgeous liturgical accoutrements, a magnificent erudite sermon studded with impressive citations of patristic sources, and a fine, appreciative, well-dressed, cosmopolitan congregation in attendance—all to be followed by a sumptuous Sunday repast. *Herrlich!* But that is not finally what it is all about, the life of faith. Faith is the trust to be able to bear up under the most frightful obligations. Faith is when one's

whole being cries out to heaven, viscerally, “Remove this cup from me” and then taking and drinking of that cup. Faith is descending *ad inferos*, into the hour of darkness, giving oneself over in trust to the power of providence. Faith, in its most serious moments, is not pretty, nor beautiful, nor sweet, nor edifying. Faith is Damian of Molokai, living among abject poverty and disease and the most heart-rending ugliness, about whom Robert Louis Stevenson, in his famous defense of him, would write, “. . . the man who tried to do what Damien did, is my father, . . . and the father of all who love goodness; and he was your father too, if God had given you grace to see it.”

The position I am advancing here in no manner obviates the potential importance of religious faith in motivating an artist, in grounding the seriousness of his work and his pursuit of excellence, in seeking adequate preparation, training in, and understanding of his craft, in affecting his choice and treatment of materials and subjects, in desiring to adorn religious entities and activities with beautiful things, both to celebrate that faith and to draw others to it, in recognizing and appreciating that artists work within the parameters of more or less determinate artistic traditions whose associations and applications prescribe to some extent what is, or is not, appropriate for certain kinds of institutional contexts, in making no outrageous claims about his work by asserting some kind of privileged immunity from criticism, in attending conscientiously and justly to the multifold activities that are ancillary to his work such as getting it done on time, observing the terms of a contract, exercising respect for others’ work by not plagiarizing it, charging a fair price, and so forth. Furthermore, a fine artist is subject to the same moral norms as is any other human being; being an artist affords, in no fashion, a pretext for violating these norms or for regarding oneself as somehow being superior to the expectations and obligations that govern others’ lives. But what I am saying is that there is nothing in the nature of religious faith, no norm or rule that can be derived from it, that will help, in any way, to make a formal decision that affects the purely aesthetic character of a work. Beauty as such is an autonomous value, ever a closed system, making no reference and being of no utility to anything beyond itself and judged rightly only according to its own internal demands. Beauty is revelatory of nothing but itself; but from the existence of beautiful things in nature and in artifacts, in their very self-containment and autotelic essence, one can infer circumstantially the radically free and irreducible action of creative aesthetic principles in nature and in human intelligence, a phenomenon so miraculous that it can, among many other things, help to kindle, confirm, and strengthen a nascent as well as a strong faith in a Divine Logos. I repeat that all objects have more than one value and thus can be judged, and often should be judged, according to more than one value, as long as we remember the priorities of values, as determined by the kind of object it is, and the social context in which it is presented, as well as how one value can impinge upon, impact, collaborate, and even contend with another value.

VI. And Yet...

I have tried to make a case for why aesthetic value should be kept distinct from other values, and hence, from the religious values of the sort that a Catholic theory of beauty would tend to identify with the beautiful. But, of course, my case depends on a formal understanding of

the nature of beauty. I have, however, confronted a great deal of opposition on this matter. An interesting objection, ironically, sometimes comes up: “Oh, that’s sooo Catholic,” the word “Catholic” obviously being used as a sign of disapproval in this context. When I advance a *theoria* which attempts to divest itself of all partisan connection of any kind, I am accused of having given into the most pernicious partisanship imaginable—that of being of a stealth Catholic, a secret agent in disguise, an *agent provocateur*, maybe even a Jesuit. Now before you jump to any quick conclusions about this, someone who labels me with that opprobrious designation, without even knowing whether I am Catholic or not, is in fact revealing some kind of knowledge about Catholicism, even a slightly sophisticated knowledge. It turns out that they are, more often were, Catholics, and often—yes, I have to say it—Jesuits.

Now, if this keeps happening often enough, one begins to get a sneaking suspicion that there may be something Catholic about my position after all. Might there be a connection between being Catholic and holding to what I have tried to explain as a classical formalist view of beauty. I think one must tread carefully here and be wary of making what may be finally untenable claims, or of dipping into what could easily be a foray into an insufferable Catholic triumphalism. As I have noted earlier in this discourse, there are droves of outstanding thinkers, including many pagans, who have embraced this position and who have no connection at all with the Catholic faith. Still I think it is worth exploring some special links that many exist.

First, a genuinely formalist theory of beauty has to presuppose some degree of a metaphysical foundation to what we experience in the world and what we can know about it. It makes genuinely universal claims—claims about the natures and interrelations of things that are grounded in the being and conditions of things and the relationship of that to the being and conditions of our intellects; the prospect and actuality of universal values, values that are trans-historical, trans-cultural, transpersonal, eternal, built into the being of things, forever. None of this has a deleterious effect on the historical particular. Indeed it magnifies, unites it. Now one does not need to be a Catholic to affirm such matters; and most educated, *bien-pensant* Catholics in our times probably would not. I had the opportunity once at a conference to engage in a private conversation with John Silber, the president of Boston University. He had just given a talk about the nature of a university—one which embraced a Renaissance humanist model. I remarked to him that I thought the center of the university should be the Aristotelian “*bios theoretikos*,” the pursuit of “*theoria*.” I said nothing about religion. He didn’t disagree but said that could only happen at a denominational university, which I presumed meant “Catholic.” Why would he make this correlation? Well, for one reason, one could argue that, as a matter of historical accident perhaps, Catholic educational systems have preserved, in one fashion or another, the tradition of what many call *philosophia perennis*, which, as I understand it, preserves, maybe not always faithfully, not always accurately, a lexicon of terms and concepts from the ancient world. The classical formalist view of beauty is deeply ensconced within that tradition; indeed, it is, as some have called it, “the great theory of beauty” of that tradition. But the tradition is not an argument for its truth; its truth is an argument for preserving that tradition. Catholic systems have also preserved a veneration for philosophy itself, still put it in a central place in its educational vision, and respect its impetus to make distinctions, observe the canons

of logic, and understand the identities of things. However, it is more than historical accident. The formation of theology in the classical world preserves, maybe in spite of itself, a great deal of classical antiquity and its preoccupations and conclusions.

Second, if the Catholic Faith is saturated with rhetoric, it is also true that it is saturated even more powerfully with the non-rhetorical: the sacraments are first and foremost acts, acts which effect changes in things from one state to another, historical acts—they may be signs and have therefore rhetorical significance, but that significance is grounded in action. Further, the Church is more than an idea, an inspiring concept; it is a concrete historical entity existing and acting in time. The saints are saints not merely by virtue of what they said and believed, but by virtue of what they did, the lives they led, the deaths they endured. Faith, in the Catholic context, is not merely an assent, not merely a sentiment or an opinion or a feeling, but is resolute action directed into a promise given and shared. Theological reflection on the Catholic faith, by and large, has preserved through the ages a perspective that is still profoundly metaphysical and substantive in its structure and in its claims—an insistence on logic and dialectic and even epistemic inquiry that, while making use of the rhetorical substratum of faith, invests it with a deep affirmation of human intellect and reason in “pondering” these things. The Church has never ceased to understand the intellect as one of the highest gifts of what it means to be human. I should also add that the Catholic faith may be unique in seeking to ground its moral claims, not just in rhetorical exhortation no matter how eloquent and inspiring that may be, but in a set of norms universal and connatural to the human reason in its search for the good. Pascal said that the heart has its reasons that the head knows not of; he may be right. But the reasons of the head are the only thing that can safeguard and preserve the reasons of the heart. I think that all of these conditions are conducive to understanding and embracing a formalist *theoria* of beauty. The intellect makes distinctions, attempts to see the real, and strives for clarity of understanding.

Third, the Catholic emphasis on the sacramental, especially the Eucharist, resists, and should resist, all efforts to dissolve the faith into a flat, subjectivized, emotional, vaguely aestheticized sentimentality, a weak and shabby kind of “poetry,” for that is where the common denominator of the fusion of values leads. Catholic sacramentalism both affirms and rivets attention on the concrete, historical, particularity of things. In classical formalism, one really does pay attention in detail to the object of beauty rather than deflect attention away from it to something else or ascend to some Platonic idea disconnected from historical and concrete realities.

Fourth, it makes sense to me that a person who is in possession of an articulate, orthodox faith, a faith which affirms that the cosmos is a divine gift, would be able to appreciate and reverence the autonomy of created things and their distinctive ends while at the same time understanding them as being part of a universe both created and sustained by God and sanctified by the Incarnation. Such a universe is filled with variety and splendor, the *processio creaturarum* of Being itself. Beauty is just part of this. I think that the formalist views of artists such as Balanchine in the ballet or Stravinsky in music were deeply concordant with their Christian faith. I am struck by the number of Catholic thinkers who have embraced and explored the classical

formalist view. I mention here especially Jacques Maritain, Etienne Gilson, and Francis Kovach. I also think that one who affirms a transcendent and supernatural order is much less likely to attach ultimacy and finality to created things, whether fine art, or nature, or the state, or anything which would act as a vortex drawing all values down and into itself. The English Jesuit poet, Gerard Manley Hopkins, wrote the following about poetry:

Poetry is speech framed for contemplation of the mind by the way of hearing or speech framed to be heard for its own sake and interest even over and above its interest of meaning. Some matter and meaning is essential to it but only as an element necessary to support and employ the shape which is contemplated for its own sake. Poetry is in fact speech only employed to carry the inscape of speech for the inscape's sake—and therefore the inscape must be dwelt on . . . repetition, *oftening, over-and overing, aftering* of the inscape must take place in order to detach it to the mind and in this light poetry is speech which afters and oftens its inscape, speech couched in a repeating figure and verse is spoken sound having a repeating figure. *G. M. Hopkins, The Notebooks and Papers of G. M. Hopkins*, H. House ed., (Oxford University Press, 1937), 241.

“Inscape” here means “individuated form,” the form of the particular. Could any statement about poetry be less Catholic than that? Could any statement be less religious than that? (Compare it to Wordsworth, Emerson, Heidegger, Arnold.) And yet it may be true that it took a Catholic to write it, someone in contact with the ancient and medieval world, who can take that world seriously and consider it as continuous with a tradition in which he lives day by day, who can regard a figure like Duns Scotus, who partially influences this statement, as a mentor and guide. But, even more important than that, there may be something about the Catholic mentality that grounds it in an irreducible ontology, the created order of the universe itself, that makes it appreciate things for what they really are.

Finally, I guess it's worth saying that I ran into an authentically and pervasively classical formalist approach to literature and to beauty as a graduate student at the Catholic University of America in the 1960's. As I learned eventually, this was probably the only place in the United States it could have happened at the time (although there were a number of people at different places who imparted some aspect of, or approximation to, this position); it still is the only place where this kind of orientation, as far as I know, still has some programmatic status, though one can find certainly a few dozen isolated persons who have taught, or who teach and develop such an approach here and there in the United States, but most of them are connected originally to Catholic University, or are at one or two removes from the influence exerted from that source, as minute as it is. Most of them are Catholic, are at Catholic institutions, and many are in religious orders. I might also add that, in the first class, in the first course I attended at Catholic University, in the first five minutes, I heard for the first time a question asked by a professor that involved distinguishing an identity—a “What is...?” question. In the four years I spent at a respected undergraduate secular institution, I never once heard that kind of question, except when I asked it of a professor, and he replied, “We don't ask that kind of question.”

So is there some link between the Catholic faith and the position I have tried to elucidate here? It's hard not to think so. Obviously, it takes a Catholic to discern that something is not Catholic at all. But I also think that a Catholic may have a special vocation to be catholic, a catholic Catholic, to penetrate to the *katholou*, to seek and embrace what is universally true about all things in creation, not just in general but in their particularity, so that all such things may be honored according to what is meet and just.