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The Futurity of Beauty

Aesthetic Intimation and Eschatological Design

The aesthetic perception of *beauty* has long evoked in man the feeling of being drawn from the present moment toward a *future*, however imperceptible the actual consciousness of temporal sequence may be, which offers promise of higher value¹. Who has not, through an encounter with beauty, become conscious of a dissatisfaction with the world as it usually appears and felt at the same time a dim premonition of the possibility of its re-creation along the lines of his dreams?

This intimation of being called by beauty² to participate in a realm of wholeness still unknown is movingly but disturbingly portrayed by C. E. M. Joad when he laments that there is “no sky in June so blue that it does not point forward to a bluer; no sunset so beautiful that it does not awaken the thought of a greater beauty. The soul is at once gladdened and disappointed. The veil is lifted so quickly that we have scarcely time to know that it has gone before it has fallen again. But during the moment of lifting we get a

¹ The word aesthetics arises from the Greek αἰσθάνομαι “to perceive by the senses”, and was first used in the philosophy of art by Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten around 1750 in his *Aesthetica* to distinguish sensuous perception as a means for experiencing beauty from analytical logic which leads to a knowledge of truth. – The somewhat indeterminate nature of contemporary aesthetics as a discipline within philosophy is characterized by Edouard Morot-Sir, when he explains rather enigmatically that aesthetics “is like a savage child who wanders gaily through the corridors of the House of Man’s knowledge, without ever managing to settle down in a home of his own. On some occasions he refuses to let a willing person adopt him; on others, he is thrown out after a while because of his strange and independent nature... Perhaps the savage child which is now wandering through the House of Man’s Sciences will eventually play the role of the Prodigal Son”: E. F. Kaelin, *An Existentialist Aesthetic. The Theories of Sartre and Merleau-Ponty* (1962), pp. vii. xi. Excellent current discussions on the history of and introduction to aesthetics can be found in J. Ritter, *Aesthetik: Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, 1 (1971), pp. 551–580; M. C. Beardsley, *History of Aesthetics: The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 1 (1967), pp. 18–35; J. Hospers, *Problems of Aesthetics: ibid.*, pp. 35–56.

² The close linguistic affinity which the ancient Greeks allowed between their word for beauty, καλός, and their verb to call, καλέω, is observed by Thomas Aquinas when he speaks of God as the cause of beauty and harmony because it is He who calls all things to Himself for His purpose: *Exposition of Dionysius on the Divine Names*, chapter 4.

vision of a something behind and beyond which passes, before it is clearly seen, and which in passing leaves behind a feeling of indefinable longing and regret."³

Although every awareness of excellence seems determined to confront this chasm between expectation and realization, ideal and form, the discrepancy between the realms can be an indication not only of one's distance from his goal but of the inescapable presence of a more enduring good. Perhaps there is reflected here, even within the created order, a fragmentary knowledge of man's divine origin which he has never totally lost and the hope of a destiny which the crushing demands of life cannot destroy. The lure of beauty may, therefore, possess an inherent eschatological quality that reflects and anticipates a kingdom of joy which one hopes shall be even yet more fully revealed and established in days to come. Surely the discovery of a futuristic propensity in aesthetic experience need not disparage the intense delight in the satisfaction of the moment. It does, however, imply that the enjoyment and contemplation of beauty in all its intended richness can never be attained where this dimension is not perceived.

1.

Any attempt to *define beauty* is destined to bring disappointment because of the sheer breadth of the concept and the vitality of the creative energy which moves it toward expression. However, an effort must be made at least to trace a conceptual outline of its features or discern an intelligible pattern within its varied manifestations in order for the emotions it calls forth to find their integral place among the rational relations of human discourse.

It is quite possible that beauty first stimulated artistic insight in man, as Alfred North Whitehead imagines, because of cravings generated by the physiological functionings of the body which were accompanied by the psychical need for re-enaction. Man desires through some manner of symbolic presentation to protest the mere factuality of his existence. This he does by freely and dramatically portraying the past and the future so as to relive and project emotionally the truly vivid moments of his struggles with the

³ C. E. M. Joad, *Matter, Life, and Value* (1929), p. 398.

threatening necessities of life. The arts, in their elemental force, permit the strength of the initial creative trauma to be felt again but, fortunately, now the crisis is past: "The strain is over, but the joy of intense feeling remains. Originally the intensity arose from some dire necessity; but in art it has outlived the compulsion which was its origin. If Odysseus among the shades could hear Homer chanting his Odyssey, he then re-enacted with free enjoyment the perils of his wanderings."⁴

However valid this particular hypothesis regarding the original appearance of the experience may be, a certain amount of objective content must be assumed to be present in beauty if an aesthetic judgment is to be meaningful at all. This, of course, does not mean that every aesthetic evaluation will be valid and rewarding, but that each can be meaningful only to the degree that it assesses the worth of its object realistically and without illusion.

It would be difficult to improve here on the logic of Immanuel Kant, who, though his stress falls overwhelmingly on the importance of the subjective categories of response, sees nevertheless the necessity for positing an objective and moral referent in aesthetic judgment, declaring: "Now I say, that which is beautiful is the symbol of moral good, and it is only in this regard (a relation which is natural to every man, and which also every man assumes in others as an obligation) that it pleases, with a claim for agreement of everyone else in a manner whereby this disposition becomes conscious of a certain ennoblement and exaltation above the mere sensibility of pleasure which is received through sense impression."⁵

A responsibility is, therefore, laid on men collectively and, as far as it is conceivable, universally, to discern and acknowledge beauty as the creative ground and structural basis for the symmetry, brilliance and purity of being which become tangible, in beautiful

⁴ A. N. Whitehead, *Adventures of Ideas* (1933), p. 350.

⁵ I. Kant, *Werke*, 5. Kritik der Urtheilskraft (1793, hrsg. von O. Buek, 1922), I, I, 2, 59, p. 430: «Nun sage ich: das Schöne ist das Symbol des Sittlichguten; und auch nur in dieser Rücksicht (einer Beziehung, die jedermann natürlich ist, und die auch jedermann andern als Pflicht zumutet) gefällt es, mit einem Anspruche auf jedes andern Beistimmung, wobei sich das Gemüt zugleich einer gewissen Veredlung und Erhebung über die bloße Empfänglichkeit einer Lust durch Sinneneindrücke bewußt ist...» Essentially the same realistic accent falls in one of Kant's major theses in his definition of beauty where he understands, *ibid.* I, 22, p. 311: «*Schön* ist, was ohne Begriff als Gegenstand eines *notwendigen* Wohlgefallens erkannt wird.»

forms. In its highest manifestations beauty often reflects a numinous quality closely akin to that which men experience religiously as "the holy".

It is in this sense that Martin Heidegger, in an early essay, "The Origin of the Work of Art", speaks of aesthetic sensitivity in terms of consecration, reasoning that «Weihen heißt heiligen in dem Sinne, daß in der werkhafte Erstellung das Heilige als Heiliges eröffnet und der Gott in das Offene seiner Anwesenheit hereingerufen wird. Zum Weihen gehört das Rühmen als die Würdigung der Würde und des Glanzes des Gottes. Würde und Glanz sind nicht Eigenschaften, neben und hinter denen außerdem noch der Gott steht, sondern in der Würde, im Glanz wohnt der Gott an. Im Abglanz dieses Glanzes glänzt, d. h. leuchtet sich jenes, was wir die Welt nannten.»⁶

The consciousness of beauty thus understood awakens feelings of both security and discontent. For a moment one enjoys a sense of well-being because he believes he catches a glimpse of reality as it truly is and human existence as it ought to be, but soon he becomes uneasy and knows that he is at least partially responsible for wresting from the earth a place where beauty may be enshrined and live unveiled for a while among men.

That which one perceives as beauty is brought to formal expression in the *different arts* through selected media that quite naturally and frequently are interrelated but which, nevertheless, betray a certain uniqueness which accounts for their particular employment⁷: in sculpture, line and color are involved but its outstanding feature appears to be its isolation of an image into a *massive spatial compactness*; architecture, insofar as it expresses a beauty beyond mere utility, organizes space in such a manner as to give a *linear focus of symmetrical unity* to that which before was only bare openness;

⁶ M. Heidegger, *Der Ursprung des Kunstwerkes*: Holzwege (1950), p. 33. The essay as it now stands consists of several parts which appeared in lecture and written form during 1935, 1936.

⁷ The writer is indebted to Johannes Pfeiffer for encouraging the attempt to distinguish the peculiar feature of selected arts, and while the emphases shown here are not identical nor even the arts chosen always the same ones, gratitude must be acknowledged for the suggestion: J. Pfeiffer, *On Karl Jaspers' Interpretation of Art*: P. A. Schilpp (ed.), *The Philosophy of Karl Jaspers* (1957), p. 711.

painting, in its endeavor to reproduce its impressions on canvas, works with a definite limitation of area and surface dimension but strives to allow an almost unlimited imagination to become embodied in *color and perspective*; standing midway between prose and music, poetry, like painting, knows also the freedom of the imagination but, being a verbal art, has greater capacity to convey the conceptual and tonal qualities of a trans-sensuous *ideal in language*; music, which is possibly the most potentially creative of the arts because in actuality it need not re-present anything and is only indirectly related to things in space, creates audible harmonies and contrasts which, if they in fact correspond to anything at all, mirror the sequences of nature and man in their *temporality*; drama and prose both possess the means to address issues of value, or lack of it as the case may be, by portraying life existentially in its personal interconnections in the context of its origins and limits - that is, as it may be viewed in its *totality*.

While recognizing, however, that beauty may be experienced and reproduced in an infinite number of cultural and communicative patterns, the unitary principle which endeavors to penetrate to a common ontological and creative source explains most satisfactorily the qualitative kinship which exists between the forms⁸.

Otherwise, asks Teilhard de Chardin, how can we account "for that irresistible instinct in our hearts which leads us toward unity wherever and in whatever direction our passions are stirred? A sense of the universe, a sense of the all, the nostalgia which seizes us when confronted by nature, beauty, music - these seem to be an expectation and awareness of a Great Presence."⁹

Even Jean Paul Sartre, whose passionate concern with the here and now of existence appears devastating to any comprehensive interpretation of reality, acknowledges that the artist must recognize the universe in its totality and strive toward a re-creation of the world which is surrounded on all sides by infinity. According to Sartre, a work of art is "never limited to the painted, sculpted, or narrated object. Just as one perceives things only against the background of the world, so the objects represented by art

⁸ In his definitive article on the historical development of aesthetics Ritter (n. 1), p. 565, interprets Immanuel Kant as pre-supposing that beauty is essentially «Zweckmäßigkeit der Dinge ohne Zweck, 'als ob ein Verstand der göttlichen Welt den Grund der Einheit des Mannigfaltigen... enthalte'». The quotation from Kant can be found in Kant (n. 5), *Einleitung*, IV, p. 249.

⁹ P. Teilhard de Chardin, *The Phenomenon of Man* (1960), pp. 292-293.

appear against the background of the universe... If the painter presents us with a field or a vase of flowers, his paintings are windows which are open on the whole world. We follow the red path which is buried among the wheat much farther than Van Gogh has painted it, among other wheat fields, under other clouds, to the river which empties into the sea, and we extend to infinity, to the other end of the world, the deep finality which supports the existence of the field and the earth. So that, through the various objects which it produces or reproduces, the creative act aims at a total renewal of the world."¹⁰

Far from being a thing of pure facticity, then, beauty is best comprehended and integrated within the larger spectrum of human experience when it is considered as a worth which offers itself to rational beings to be esteemed and preserved for continued enjoyment and enrichment. This can take place only within a universal structure where the excellence of that which is given and the appreciation of the one perceiving are believed to coexist in a common field of intellectual value. The need to assume this analogical relationship between the two spheres is stressed by Robert Leet Patterson when he declares cryptically, "Beauty in a mindless world would therefore be as much a contradiction as a shield with only one side."¹¹ However, a mere rational concept of the unity of aesthetic experience between the one interpreting and the object observed taken alone is not capable of providing adequate criteria for the categories of value. Unless the comprehensiveness of the experience is related to an originaive mind whose worth is in essence *good*, aesthetic judgments remain suspended in the void or at best isolated from the highest personalistic values known to man¹². The contem-

¹⁰ J. P. Sartre, *Literature and Existentialism* (1949), p. 57.

¹¹ R. L. Patterson, *A Philosophy of Religion* (1970), p. 279.

¹² Although a recognition of the personalistic nature of reality is usually wanting in Plotinus' larger system, he nevertheless voices a similar dissatisfaction with a mere rational understanding of beauty and even provides a vivid example of the way beauty is dependent on a moral foundation and the manner in which it often points forward toward a higher goal, *Enneads*, VI, 7, 22: "Beauty is dead until it takes the light of The Good, and the soul lies supine, cold to all, unquickened even to Intellectual-Principle there before it. But when there enters into it a glow from the divine, it gathers strength, awakens, spreads true wings, and however urged by its nearer environing, speeds its bouyant way elsewhere, to something greater to its memory: so long as there exists anything loftier than the near, its very nature bears it upwards, lifted by the giver of that love."

plation of the beautiful and its accompanying awareness of aesthetic obligation leads one to believe, therefore, that there exists a common ethical ground from which they both arise and within which a comparative estimate of their worth has relevance. Without this supposition both the desire for sharing inspiration which lies at the root of creative effort and the conviction one has of participating in personal communion through works of beauty would be incomprehensible.

When beauty is believed to reflect the true nature of being and this is understood to be grounded in value that is personalistic and essentially good, then a genuine appreciation of beauty can and should be distinguished from that which is merely enjoyable and gives pleasure, because the true experience will enrich the beholder and contribute to the fullness of his own personal being. There is, however, always a latent danger in aesthetic experience that it degenerate into a mere "aestheticism" where one seeks to retreat into the ornamental excitement of the moment and remain there in non-committal suspense avoiding the claims of responsible self-hood. It is precisely this kind of escapism that betrays the shallowness of the familiar phrase "art for art's sake". Surely the maxim has a valid role to play in order to prevent art from becoming prostituted by lower aims and detracted from its best expression by higher ones; however, it would be well to remember that according to this formula art can easily lose all value reference and become virtually meaningless.

When this happens, as H. H. Farmer warns, it means that art "becomes in due time art for the artist's sake, art for the sake of the artist's own self-expression, with no questions raised as to whether he has a self worth expressing or whether other selves have claims in the matter at all... This I say is rank impersonalism, and it is inevitable so soon as man's life, even in its highest creative reaches, loses its true centre in the claim of God."¹³

The appropriate response to beauty, therefore, asks that one commit himself responsibly in singleness of purpose to that which he has been granted to discern of the divine unity and design underlying all things. When one understands and truly surrenders to this demand there can be no desire to substitute the appearance for the

¹³ H. H. Farmer, *God and Men* (1948), pp. 75-76.

reality for, as Jacques Maritain so uncompromisingly maintains, it is only with God that a man can "give himself totally *twice at the same time*, first to his God and second to something which is a reflection of his God".¹⁴

2.

If beauty may be assumed to have an integral *relation to truth*, and truth can only be defined here provisionally as the understanding man has of reality in its wholeness which makes possible meaningful intercourse between the world as he encounters it and his own intelligibility, then beauty must exist in relation to the disteleological and tragic aspects of human existence. While the enjoyment of beauty involves a necessary selectivity and at times near isolation of that part of the world which reveals its most pleasing and perfected characteristics, the experience invariably transpires in the presence of offsetting proportions, common hues and threatening forces. The artist, moreover, must wrestle with these unbalanced and often chaotic aspects of his world and create through his gifts a work which serves as a symbol of conquest over them and possibly even as a pledge of a world beyond.

This capacity to face without evasion the harsh and unpleasant chords of life and modulate them into a hymn of triumph is perhaps nowhere more clearly illustrated – if one may be allowed for a moment to stand in the glow of Karl Barth's adoration – than in the music of Mozart. With a persuasiveness convincing one that more than a matter of personal taste is involved, Barth commends the relevance of Mozart for Christian theology because the composer, Barth believes, was permitted in purity of heart to behold something of the total goodness of creation and its eschatological goal. But Barth reminds us this was 1756–1791, the time when God was being attacked on all sides for the Lisbon earthquake! Nevertheless, Mozart possessed the peace of God which enabled him to face the problem of theodicy with a joy transcending the critical and speculative reason which merely judges or condones, for "he had heard, and causes those who have ears to hear, even to-day, what we shall not see until the end of time – the whole context of providence. As though in the light of this end, he heard the harmony of creation to which the shadow also belongs but in which the

¹⁴ J. Maritain, *Poetry and the Perfection of Human Life: The Responsibility of the Artist* (1960), p. 114.

shadow is not darkness, deficiency is not defeat, sadness cannot become despair, trouble cannot degenerate into tragedy and infinite melancholy is not ultimately forced to claim undisputed sway."¹⁵

Such heights of ecstasy can be sustained as enduring value only if there is in fact at the foundation of all existence what Gabriel Marcel calls an ontological mystery which secures every worthy hope, only if there is "at the heart of being, beyond all data, beyond all inventories and all calculations, a mysterious principle which is in connivance with me, which cannot but will that which I will, if what I will deserves to be willed and is, in fact, willed by the whole of my being."¹⁶ The indissoluble correlation between beauty and this kind of truth, or as the relationship can be more accurately described, a truthful interpretation of beauty, thus opens the possibility of an aesthetically grounded confidence for the future.

On the other hand, what about that dominating segment of contemporary art which is apparently preoccupied either with despair or the deontological absence of structural meaning in modern life such as is represented in Jackson Pollock's "art of the broken center", the cacophonous elements of "Woodstock", and the banal masterpieces of Campbell soup cans by Andy Warhol? Although many, the writer included, enjoy these expressive sensations for the moment, is it not possible to see at least a shadowy outline of purposeful awareness become visible in the colors, shapes and sounds that *do not appear* but are only left vacant or remain silent? Perhaps Picasso alludes to something like this in his oft quoted remark, "Art is a lie that makes us realize the truth". And it may even be as Paul Tillich dares to suggest: «Wer seine Endlichkeit ertragen und darstellen kann, zeigt so, daß er an der Unendlichkeit teilhat. Wer seine Schuld zu ertragen und darzustellen vermag, zeigt, daß er bereits von der 'Annahme trotzdem' weiß.

¹⁵ K. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, III, 3 (1961), p. 298.

¹⁶ G. Marcel, *On the Ontological Mystery: The Philosophy of Existentialism* (1956), p. 28. — Paul Tillich also indicates an awareness of this ontological principle when he tells how once he contemplated a work of modern art and felt compelled to ask the question: "What does this picture express in terms of an ultimate interpretation of human existence?" And his answer was, "It too expresses power of being in terms of an unrestricted vitality in which the self-affirmation of life becomes almost ecstatic": P. Tillich, *Existential Aspects of Modern Art: Christianity and the Existentialists*, ed. by C. Michalson (1956), p. 135.

Und wer die Sinnlosigkeit ertragen und darstellen kann, zeigt, daß er Sinn erfahren hat.»¹⁷

In other words, an honest aesthetic confrontation with life, even if this should demand of the disappointed a stark portrayal of the fragmentation and awful finality of nature and human experience, may serve to indicate the direction from which the solution to the deeper issues of existence must come if indeed there is one to be found at all.

Unfortunately there is a limitation inherent in aesthetic experience which prevents man from being satisfied with it as the bearer of the solution to his need for ultimacy. This inadequacy is not due solely to the fact of man's finitude, for this, of course, is an inescapable aspect of any human experience including the religious, but rather with the need for aesthetic insights to find relationships of meaning which are capable of rational expression in a comprehensive world view. If the ability to perceive and express that which lies beyond linguistic concepts is a virtue of aesthetic experience (and this pertains also to the verbal arts), then it must be recognized at the same time as a most vulnerable characteristic where categories of interpretation are sought.

The integral relation which exists between art and its eventual dependence upon verbal and reflective conceptualization is described quite convincingly by Karl Jaspers when he concludes: «Auch als vollendete bleibt Kunst, vom philosophischen Bewußtsein angeeignet, *nicht unberührt*: Die Unverbindlichkeit des Genusses wird durchbrochen, die Erlösung nur als Antizipation genommen und wieder in Frage gestellt; die Musik, über alles Sagbare hinausgehend, drängt am Ende wieder zum Wort, alle Kunstanschauung zum Gedanken.»¹⁸

¹⁷ P. Tillich, *Protestantismus und Expressionismus* (1959), p. 87. – Essentially this same emphasis is made by H. E. Bahr with a refreshing Christological boldness when he concludes in his splendid treatment of the subject, *Theologische Untersuchung der Kunst. Poiesis* (1965), p. 169: «Das Aufdecken der Bahnen, in denen alles Leben unweigerlich verläuft, ist Maximum künstlerischer Wirkmöglichkeit. Geschieht dieses Aufdecken in einem Werk, dann können sich davor Fragen erheben, auf die nur noch Gott antworten kann. Dann ist dieses Werk ungewollt Wegbereiter einer höheren Wahrheit, Zuchtmeister auf Christus hin (Gal. 3, 24).»

¹⁸ K. Jaspers, *Philosophie* (1948), p. 292.

Since aesthetic experience transpires in a world interlaced with manifold structures of meaning and there appears to be no prolonged escape from responsibility, there always remains, no matter how ineffable the ecstasy of soul, the task of understanding what one feels. There may be no immediate necessity for communicating the content of this enjoyment to others, but the arranging of impressions within cognitive patterns, even though this take the form of negative evaluation or unconscious compartmentalization, is a continual and, for a responsible person, unavoidable process. If, however, it is seen that aesthetic experience occurs in a rational world as a necessary and therefore moral component of response to environment and yet there is no language or frame of reference within it which is capable of relating it to other areas of comprehension, then there appears strong justification for looking outside of it for criteria to determine its significance. Many have known the disillusionment of which Augustine spoke when he described that period in his life in which he understood and enjoyed the brilliance of the great works of the liberal arts but still felt himself to dwell in the shadows and confessed: "I took delight in them, but knew not whence came whatever in them was true and certain. For my back then was to the light, and my face towards the things enlightened; whence my face, with which I discerned the things enlightened, was not itself enlightened" (Augustine, *Confessions* IV, 16, 30). Aesthetic experience, therefore, seems certain to arouse expectations which it cannot ultimately fulfill, for the realm of beauty alone, however intense the impression, can never really satisfy a contemplative mind. There remains always a need to hear an interpretative word, to address some responsible spirit and perhaps even encounter Someone who can give intelligible integration to those sublime sensations which often come in beauty's wake.

3.

It would, indeed, be presumptuous and misleading to give the appearance of being able to proceed lightly through inoffensive continuity from the phenomenal and noetic world of beauty to a teleological theism and more particularly the transcendentalism of the Christian *revelation*, for no such way of direct transition has yet been found. There is, however, enough correspondence between the

personalistic outline of aesthetic *limitation* and the positive radical personalism of the Christian interpretation of reality to warrant venture in that direction.

The correlation between the capacity for aesthetic experience and an awareness of the religious holy, which Rudolf Otto gives considerable and at times almost decisive emphasis in "The Idea of the Holy", offers provocative and perhaps classical illustration for encouraging one to assume that both streams of experience could well converge in a confrontation with the person of Christ. Otto maintains that everyone in an *a priori* sense is capable of being aesthetically receptive to beauty but that what is mere receptiveness or appreciation in most men emerges on a higher level in the artist as invention, creation and the originality of genius. This latter stage is of the nature of an endowment and is not derivable from the first for there is more than a difference in degree involved. A similar stratification, according to Otto, is observable in religious experience, for most men have only a predisposition for recognizing and responding to religious truth for themselves. A higher plateau, however, does exist which, like its aesthetic counterpart, is not evolved from the lower level of sheer receptivity and this, in the realm of religion, is represented by the prophet. The prophet in the field of religion corresponds, therefore, to the creative artist in the sphere of aesthetics for he is the one whom the Spirit endows with true discernment and the gift of creative energy. — Now in words which themselves partake of the numinous about which he writes, Otto presents the climax of his argument in these concluding lines of his work: "Yet the prophet does not represent the highest stage. We can think of a third, yet higher, beyond him, a stage of revelation as underivable from that of the prophet as was his from that of common men. We can look, beyond the prophet, to one in whom is found the Spirit in all its plenitude, and who at the same time in His person and in His performance is become most completely the object of divination, in whom Holiness is recognized apparent. — Such a one is more than Prophet. He is the Son."¹⁹

Just as judgments of beauty arise from impressions that are conditioned by nature and culture but receive their basic form through a highly personal and selective impression of that which in aesthetic faith is believed to possess worth, so a Christian estimate of goodness arises, in the midst of natural and historical phenomena, through a discerning and evaluating selectivity which, given through the Spirit, leads to the conviction that in Jesus Christ ultimate value resides. The Christian may say, therefore, that in this one whom he

¹⁹ R. Otto, *The Idea of the Holy* (1957), p. 178.

believes to be the Son, the goodness and intelligibility of God made comprehensible, he has discovered the logos-quality of eternal reality and every claim of worth or meaning, including the aesthetic, must be evaluated and interpreted for him as far as possible by the absolute standards which are implicit in the life and work of this person.

The parallel between aesthetic and religious experience may extend even further when one realizes that both realms, particularly in their highest expressions, witness not only to the rationale of existence, but also serve to intensify the feeling of distance between what the whole of life should be and the way it actually exists. In this regard art and religion, in fact, share a common concern for fulfillment and redemption.

For example, the essence of beauty, according to Jacques Maritain, is most fully grasped when it is apprehended not as final realization and perfection but as anticipation and desire. He gives eloquent testimony to the aesthetic significance of these receptive attitudes in his unexcelled *Creative Intuition* when he explains: "Beauty does not mean simply perfection. For anything perfect in every respect in its own genus – anything 'totally perfect' on earth – is both totally terminated and without any lack, therefore *leaves nothing to be desired* – and therefore lacks that longing and 'irritated melancholy'... which is essential to beauty here below. It is lacking a lack. A lack is lacking in any totally perfect performance (with all due respect to Toscanini). A totally perfect finite thing is untrue to the transcendental nature of beauty. And nothing is more precious than a certain sacred weakness, and that kind of imperfection through which infinity wounds the finite."²⁰

The Christian faith maintains in strikingly similar fashion on the religious plane that there must be a realistic acknowledgement of the limitations and failures of personal behavior and the self-destructive quality of evil embedded in the very structures of human life and society. This, it claims, is precisely what is given men to know through Jesus Christ in the reality and symbol of His cross. For the cross is, as Roger Hazelton points out, not only an event in history where the Christian believes something of ultimate redemptive significance took place, but also a symbol demonstrating what many contemporary theologians are recognizing as "the cruciform nature of human existence itself". Here as nowhere else one truly learns

²⁰ J. Maritain, *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry* (1953), pp. 166–167.

that the fulfillment of life can be found only on the other side of being willing to lose it in self-surrender and in a confidence that the excruciating incongruities of history will eventually be overcome²¹. It appears, therefore, reasonable to suppose that on the aesthetic level beauty in its incompleteness and positive aspirations corresponds analogously to the Christian understanding of the cross and resurrection and while the two spheres do not invalidate one another, nor dissolve into a third which is neither, they are manifestations of a common creative origin and offer compatible models for dealing with life in its depths of despair and the promise of a future dawn.

Only in the beauty and holiness of God the creator and redeemer, it may be concluded, have men an adequate image for what the world is intended to be, and at the same time secure ground for believing in what it through the Spirit and the grace of Christ may become. For it is in Christ that God offers Himself in all His unlimited potential as the spiritual source for every enriching human delight and creative endeavor. As though inviting one to the very threshold of creation's first morning, the apostle Paul identifies the initial creative word with which God thrust the universe into existence as being essentially that same transforming energy which surges in the life of the believer through the presence of Christ, exclaiming, "For it is the God who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness', who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ" (II Cor. 4: 6). Furthermore, God is glorious in such a way in Christian experience that the beauty of His purpose for life breaks in upon man, awakening not just feelings of mystery and awesome responsibility, but surprising him with grace and above all, joy.

This means – as Karl Heim stresses in his summary of biblical eschatology when he notes that both the Old and New Testament discussions on this theme employ words not only of power and blessedness, but also of brilliance and glory – that there is strong encouragement to believe "the thirst for beauty will be satisfied. Every really great piece of music, every great work of art therefore is the morning light of eternity, a first dawn of the perfecting of the world. Immortal works of music, classical works of art are like

²¹ R. Hazelton, *Theology as Conversation with the Arts: New Accents in Contemporary Theology* (1960), p. 25.

the fir trees on the slopes of the mountain, whose tops are already in the light of the approaching morning while the valley is still covered in mist".²²

One can hope that every such aesthetic intimation of a destiny beyond this world may one day be transposed into an even nobler theme when all who have known the beauty of God's creative and eschatological design will sing in radiant joy: "Worthy is the Lamb who was slain to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing. To him who sits upon the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might for ever and ever!" (Rev. 5: 12–13).

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²² K. Heim, *Jesus, The World's Perfector* (1959), pp. 195–196.