

The Beauty of Christian Art

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ABSTRACT This paper deals with beauty as we encounter it in Christian works of art. Three main points are argued: (i) beauty, as it appears in the Christian work of art, is an invitation to delight and gratitude; (ii) beauty, as we encounter it in the Christian work of art, asks of us both the deepening of discernment and the cultivation of desire; (iii) beauty, as it is manifested in the Christian work of art, is not created by the artist but is bestowed as a gift of God. Firstly, beauty must be recognised as giving *delight*. In defending this claim, the paper argues against theories which identify beauty with pleasure, and which devalue or dismiss beauty based on this false identification. Further, beauty does not only *give*, but also—as a gift—makes a claim upon us. *Gratitude* is the appropriate response to beauty's gift. Secondly, beauty as manifested in beautiful particulars embedded in the material and cultural world requires *discernment*. Moreover, we must embody a real receptiveness to beauty—by becoming beautiful ourselves—through *the cultivation of desire*. A full response to beauty entails the reorientation of our vision as well as our volition towards the infinite beauty of God. Thirdly, though beauty is manifestly present in made-made objects, it is so as a gift of God. This understanding is supported by emphasising the Trinitarian nature of beauty. It is proposed that beauty is best identified not with the Son but with the Holy Spirit.

KEYWORDS aesthetics; beauty; Christian art; theological aesthetics; Hart, David Bentley; Maritain, Jacques; Tolstoy, Lev Nikolayevich

INTRODUCTION

This paper deals with beauty as we encounter it in Christian works of art. It is not my intention here to give a theological account of the beauty of the Christian God. My account of the beauty of Christian art, however, will seek to position the beautiful artwork, and the experience of it, within a

comprehensive and intelligible theological picture; both so as to validate the perhaps bold claims I have to make about the beauty of Christian art, and to draw out the implications—for art as well as theology—of the encounter with such beauty. I will give solid grounds for the theological picture that I endorse, but my priority is to ask, and to answer, the question—if, as I believe, God is Beauty, what then may this mean for the beauty of the work of Christian art?

The account of beauty here given is prompted by my conviction that beauty is a necessary quality of any Christian work of art. Indeed, it is the aim of Christian art, on my thesis, to manifest the beauty of God.¹ Having made such a commitment to beauty, I must now provide a sufficiently strong and comprehensive case for a conception of beauty that is congruent both with Christian art and Christian theology. I need a conception of beauty which shows how any artwork that falls short of possessing this quality cannot be adequate as a Christian work of art, and a conception, moreover, which shows how the experience of such beauty, even in the man-made particulars of a painting or a poem, may be allocated a central place in Christian experience and Christian life.

Consequently my account—though given in response to a *philosophical* question about the role and nature of beauty as encountered in Christian art—will draw heavily on *theological* conceptions of art and beauty alike. It is central to my project that I seek to understand Christian art on its own terms, from a consistently Christian perspective. Indeed, I presuppose that only such an engagement, attuned to the beliefs which govern both the production and reception of the art in question, can be relevant and fruitful.

The paper will involve some examples of Christian art—notably works by Dante and Gerald Manley Hopkins—partly on the basis that these are seen to illustrate the points argued, but also partly because they seem to propose similar arguments themselves.

1. It falls outside the scope of this paper to argue at length for a *definition* of Christian art. However, it is a central thesis of mine that what we may call “Christian representative content” is neither a necessary nor sufficient criterion for Christian art. That is, the inclusion of an ostensibly or recognizably Christian motif in a painting or poem does not guarantee that the work in question is Christian, inviting and engendering a Christian experience; nor, importantly, does it guarantee that the work in question is a work of art in the first place. On the institutional, and broadly formalist, understanding of art under which I work, “representation” and “content” are not constitutive art-qualities. Consequently, the works I offer as examples of Christian art in this paper are chosen not for their “Christian content,” but for the qualities of their form, their invitation to a genuine engagement with Christian experience and, above all, for their *beauty*.

My account is very much an argument both from and for the *gratuity* of beauty. It takes its departure in the intuition that beauty, as we encounter it in the particulars of this world, has something generous, excessive and fortuitous about it; in short, that it remains a matter beyond our control, and that it comes to us as a *gift*.

I have three main points to argue, beginning with our immediate reactions to beauty as this appears in the work of art; then drawing out the implications, both aesthetic and spiritual, of this experience; and finally attempting to characterise the relation between the beauty of art and the beauty of God. It is my threefold position, then, that:

1. Beauty, as it appears in the Christian work of art, is an invitation to delight and gratitude;
2. Beauty, as we encounter it in the Christian work of art, asks of us both the deepening of discernment and the cultivation of desire;
3. Beauty, as it is manifested in the Christian work of art, is not created by the artist but is bestowed as a gift of God.

I. DELIGHT AND GRATITUDE

"The beautiful," says Jacques Maritain, "is essentially delightful."²

This must be our point of departure. We will get nowhere, will not pronounce a single meaningful word on beauty, if we attempt to ignore, deny or obfuscate this very simple and inescapable fact—whether we do so in the name of a higher aesthetics or with pretensions to religious sobriety. If we shy away from the joy beauty gives, or resist the desire it kindles, the beautiful will forever elude us.

To argue that beauty is delightful is to concede that beauty is in a sense pleasurable. It is *not*, however, to define beauty *as* pleasure. Nor, as we shall see, is delight all that beauty gives, or the full import of the gift. This is a crucial issue, which gives me cause to engage with Leo Tolstoy's position in *What is Art?*

It is often, perhaps chiefly, the element of the pleasurable which breeds distrust in beauty's detractors; it is also this aspect of beauty which leads to most mistaken definitions, not least along subjectivist and relativist lines. Thus, in Tolstoy's case beauty becomes a worldly and decadent thing,

2. Jacques Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism*, trans. James F. Scanlan (London: Sheed & Ward, 1932), 27.

instead of a spur to spiritual commitment; for he adopts the definition of beauty as pleasure. It is this mistaken attribution or definition which causes him to bar beauty from true religion, just as it causes Clive Bell to ban it also from the work of art. My own account is set squarely against both prohibitions—and so affirms the place of the beautiful artwork at the very heart of Christian experience.

For what Tolstoy fails to account for is the special desire for the beautiful which is other than, deeper than, and more spiritual than that sexual attraction which he so abhors. Similarly, the pleasure that beauty gives is not, as Bell would complain, a cheap and sugary sensation, the sentimentality of simpletons; it is rather the salt and sustenance of saints.

The argument in *What is Art?* suffers from a series of misinformed distinctions and misapplied prescriptions. Insofar as beauty is defined, in some theories, as pleasure, Tolstoy is right to be critical; but he should be critical of the definition, not of beauty. His great failure is to persist in his critique, based on that erroneous definition, without providing an alternative account of beauty. In this way he proves himself as blind as those he berates, unable to recognise beauty as beyond and other than pleasure. Importantly, however, a defence of beauty along the lines of my thesis does not need to endorse any of the theories criticised by Tolstoy.

According to Tolstoy, all the relevant “aesthetic definitions of beauty come down to two fundamental views: one, that beauty is something existing in itself . . . the other, that beauty is a certain pleasure we experience, which does not have personal advantage as its aim.”³

Tolstoy’s take on this apparent dichotomy, between the objective and subjective accounts, is to dissolve it, for, he argues, “the objective definition is nothing but the subjective differently expressed. In fact, both notions of beauty come down to a certain sort of pleasure that we receive, meaning that we recognise as beauty that which pleases us without awakening our lust.”⁴ He is mistaken, to my mind, both in his conflation of the objective and subjective accounts, and in his identification of the “sort of pleasure” involved in the appreciation of beauty.

It is wrong to assume that the objective or metaphysical account of beauty can be collapsed into, replaced with or paraphrased as, a subjective or sensuous one. For one, it does not follow that any objectively real beauty must either be recognised by, or yield itself as, a pleasurable sensa-

3. Leo Tolstoy, *What is art?*, trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (London; New York: Penguin Books, 1995), 31.

4. *Ibid.*, 32.

tion; nor would it follow, even if this objective beauty was so apprehended, giving us occasion for pleasure, that this beauty thereby would forfeit its objectivity and simply end up a matter of personal taste or predilection. Above all, Tolstoy is wrong to think that beauty's ability to offer any kind of personal pleasure precludes that beauty is also objectively real.

On my model, on the contrary, it is delight itself which leads us to recognise beauty's objectivity.

The delight which beauty gives is "a kind of pleasure," but not the kind of pleasure that Tolstoy has in mind; for it is precisely a pleasure in the *gratuity* of beauty. It is a delight in beauty's simply being there, at large in all kinds of objects and situations, without it *having to* be there; it is delight, not in a perceived necessity, or even harmony, but in something at once mysterious and generous. In the words of David Bentley Hart, "Beauty is there, abroad in the order of things, given again and again in a way that defies description and denial with equal impertinence."⁵ On this picture, I delight in the beautiful thing for what *it gives*, not for what I receive; for the qualities it possesses—and of which I may partake—not for the effect it has on me. We delight in it because beauty strikes us, and overwhelms us, as something extra-utile, granted by freedom and good will, as a kind of abundance for its own sake.

Gratitude, which follows or ought to follow from this kind of pleasure, owes far more to our moral faculties than to our sensory ones; for gratitude entails the recognition of beauty *as* gift, and of our own role as recipients thereof, and thereby entails the acknowledgement both of a quality and *reality* to beauty exterior to our senses and faculties as well as suggesting a *giver* wholly other than ourselves.

Tolstoy is not sensitive to the validity of either this delight or this gratitude. As regards gratitude, Tolstoy is not aware, as is Roger Scruton, that beauty engages our moral *responsibilities* as well as our aesthetic *responses*. Having barred beauty altogether, along with pleasure, from access to the moral, from any inclusion in considerations of the good, Tolstoy has shut himself off from any such mature engagements with beauty.

The point is this: beauty not only delights, not only *gives*, but also—as a gift—*makes a claim upon us*. This is understood by Scruton, and his intuition can be amplified by the experience of Christian art.

In Scruton's account, this "claim" amounts to our responsibility to treat

5. David Bentley Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 16.

the beautiful thing as an end in itself, not a mere means for our gratification. This certainly reaffirms the difference between delight and pleasure, and it anchors this difference in our conscious attitude and volition, revealing a kind of “ethical” dimension to the immediately aesthetic. Ultimately, for Scruton, beauty finds its place on the threshold of the sacred; it witnesses and lights the way to a whole spiritual order, a kingdom of ends, which most compellingly confronts us in the embodied human person, but which also meets us in great works of art. This stipulation of an “end” is philosophically compelling, and comes with a respectable pedigree. However, to my mind, the more fittingly Christian account of the claim would be this: that we treat the beautiful thing as a *gift*.

Thus, instead of the ethical injunction of respect towards the object, we postulate *gratitude* as the appropriate Christian response to beauty. We can say that gratitude is respect in a Christian key, directed towards that which is personal and divine in kind. We can also speak of reverence and veneration as varieties of this gratitude.

Concisely, we could say that if delight is the right response to the *gratuitousness* of beauty, then gratitude is the right attitude to the *gift* (and, through this, to the giver). We all know the delight of receiving, and excitedly unwrapping, a gift; and we know how this delight is transmuted into gratitude once the thing has been revealed, and how our gaze is lifted from the object to the giver.

I do not, therefore, propose a theory of “disinterested interest,” or “disinterested pleasure.” However helpful such terms might be, initially, in deflecting notions of beauty as subjective pleasure alone, they are based on quite a different understanding of beauty, metaphysically speaking, than the one under which I am working; and they suggest a relation of reserve which is quite foreign to both the desire and the delight that I identify as, respectively, the fundamental motive and the immediate response to beauty.

For the beautiful work of art, on my understanding, while stipulating a kind of distance between the object and the perceiver, simultaneously issues an invitation to us to seek out ever more of the beautiful. Thus beauty as manifested in the particular thing or artwork raises our vision, and directs our desires, towards what we may call, with Hart, the beauty of the infinite. For this reason, I not only allow that our delight and gratitude may encompass the attitude of reverence, but also hold that, ultimately, the beautiful object should so train and transform our desire so as to become an object of *love*. This is the topic of the section that follows.

By way of bringing this section towards its conclusion, then, this pointed passage of Maritain's, on the purity of art, may be invoked as a reaffirmation of my position and as a rebuttal of Tolstoy: "Art has to be on its guard," says Maritain, against such "foreign elements which threaten its purity. For example, the beauty to which it tends produces a delight, but the high delight of the spirit, the absolutely contrary to what is called pleasure, or the agreeable tickling of the sensibility; and if art seeks to *please*, it commits a betrayal and tells a lie."⁶

That is, Christian art does not seek "to please," but it does aim to give *delight*—just as it aims to be an occasion for gratitude and, as we shall see, a spur to the cultivation of desire. To be able to offer the right kind of pleasure, so to speak, is therefore not a concession to lesser faculties and pedestrian tastes, but is in truth an achievement having metaphysical implications.

My point here is that the experience of beauty is nothing other than a metaphysical experience: to stop at pleasure as sensation is not to experience beauty as what it is; to stop at pleasure as a concept is not to explain beauty but to explain it away, to erect a great wall between the perceiver's self and the reality of beauty. This is to forfeit the great opportunity that beauty offers; namely, the chance to cultivate our desires and direct our lives towards the beauty of God.

II. DISCERNMENT AND DESIRE

This second section will have two points to make: one, that our encounter with the beautiful is embedded in the material and cultural world, the other, that we ourselves must embody a real receptiveness to beauty, by becoming beautiful ourselves—not, of course, in the sense of becoming pretty or attractive, but rather in one that is more like becoming good. As I hope to make clear, however, the acquisition of beauty is not the same as the acquisition of virtue or goodness.

Beauty certainly makes claims upon us, both in the sense of us giving an appropriate response to beauty and its objects, but also—and here we must go further than Scruton—as regards our nature and growth as persons created in the image of God.

Scruton argues, compellingly, that the experience of beauty should be placed at the very centre of our lives. This is not for the sake of making our

6. Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism*, 65.

everyday lives more pleasurable, but to challenge us to grow as the rational creatures that we are; for, Scruton writes, “for a free being, there is right feeling, right experience and right enjoyment just as much as right action. The judgement of beauty orders the emotions and desires of those who make it.”⁷ The claims here are founded, I believe, on two firm intuitions, regarding two aspects and implications of the experience of beauty.

The first of these two demands of beauty, as we may call them, is the need for informed perception and judgement on our part, in order to achieve a full experience of beauty’s disclosure and beauty’s value. The second demand speaks more deeply still to the potentialities of our nature, as creatures capable of directing our will, no less than our perception and intellect, towards the highest realities and ideals.

In what follows, I will speak of these two aspects of beauty as the cultivation, respectively, of *discernment* and *desire*. The same two demands can also be identified, I believe, as the governing concerns of a Christian response to beauty—lifted from Scruton’s largely psychological-anthropological discourse and placed in the context of theological aesthetics. Thus David Bentley Hart, articulating an understanding not dissimilar to Scruton’s about the ordering of our desires, claims that “The beautiful is not a fiction of desire, nor is its nature exhausted by a phenomenology of pleasure; it can be recognised in despite of desire, or as that toward which desire must be cultivated.”⁸

Much is involved in the full perception of beauty. Thus, without diminishing or detracting from its essentially ineffable character, it is my understanding that beauty—as we encounter it in particular works and objects—is also, in a sense, a cultural and contextual phenomenon, *embedded* in human practices and values. The perception of beauty demands a discerning effort of understanding with regard to the forms and meanings where beauty is found.

To be clear, Beauty itself remains a transcendental, but the *beautiful* is indissolubly part of actuality, and part of a contextual fabric. Our experience of beauty is an experience of a beautiful particular, and a particular manifestation of beauty. I experience beauty in *this* sonnet or *this* sonata, through *this* process of discernment. I glimpse infinity through *this* finite thing.

We need to understand what Eliot says of time, history, and renunciation—or what Dostoevsky says of love, will and repentance—in order to

7. Roger Scruton, *Beauty* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 197.

8. Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite*, 17.

pronounce the *Four Quartets* a beautiful poem or *Crime and Punishment* a beautiful novel. These works need to play on our affections, intellects, memories and imaginations; and the realisation of beauty, if beauty is there, emerges as we engage with and submit to these significant forms. I cannot find beauty in Eliot until I begin to grasp the spiritual resolutions to which his words and images tend—and this begs of me not only a complementary reading of other poetry and of theology, but also a lived familiarity with experiences of loss, regret and regeneration.

It is not true, as Tolstoy says, that “[g]reat works of art are great only because they are accessible and comprehensible to everyone.” Art demands of us that we come prepared to make the effort of discernment and participation. It is no easy thing to meet the challenge posed by such vast and intricate creations as *The Divine Comedy* or *Canterbury Cathedral*: a full imaginative engagement is asked of us, with all that this entails.

At the same time, that which is real and beautiful in these works certainly gives itself to all who draw near, who have eyes to see, who surrender self and go forward in the readiness to be inspired and to offer reverence in return. To be prepared and equipped for such an engagement, however, may very well mean having undergone certain experiences, either in “life” or through other works of art; it may mean that certain ways of reading have been practiced, a certain literacy acquired, and perhaps even that certain values and beliefs about the world must be acknowledged as, at least potentially, valid. Sometimes, therefore, we are simply unable—from lack of experience or imaginative maturity—to understand or engage with some great works; but instead of blaming the work for its elitism, obfuscation, or some such perceived wrong, we should hold out and see if, at some later stage—after life has its way with us, after we have become exposed, willingly or not, to such things belonging to the realm of art and experience as eluded us the first time around—the work will suddenly be not only intelligible to us, but even meaningful, even a source of revelation and regeneration.

This is not to say something so crude as that the greatest works of art are also the most intractable and inaccessible, but rather that the greatest art may sometimes make the greatest claims upon us, ask the most of us in return for its qualities, its meanings, its realities—while at the same time it may also, importantly, be the most *generous* (for we mustn’t forget that vital ingredient of gratuity); thus we find that many of the greatest works

of Christian art are such as strike us, already at first glance, sometimes even despite our own dimness or reluctance, with their astonishing and indisputable beauty. Indeed, the beauty of Christian art may provide a non-Christian person with the first impulses towards conversion. This is no small aspect of beauty's role and importance.

Tolstoy's next suggestion is more fruitful, raising as it does the issue of a more than aesthetic discernment, befitting the artwork's more than artistic demands. Certainly, when we speak of Christian art, we must not forget the Christian aspect of the object and the experience; nor, however, must we forget the artistic aspect. Tolstoy is right, to a degree, in his point that what renders a good religious work inaccessible to some is not a lack of refinement or specialist education, but rather a shortage of religious consciousness and what we might call, perhaps naively or presumptively, a simple human responsiveness to genuine truths about life. "I know people, for example," he says, "who consider themselves most refined, and who say that they do not understand the poetry of love for one's neighbour and of self-denial, or the poetry of chastity."¹⁰ This is an important observation; however, we must make certain amendments to its implications and applications. As we cannot accept Tolstoy's identification of art with the communication of feeling, but must instead stress the importance of the artwork's qualities as art, and as art of a particular kind, we must also maintain that, however virtuous or sincere our character, even a formally or stylistically straightforward poem or painting might elude us if we do not possess the requisite sensitivity to the artform in question. We can certainly imagine someone saying, in response to Tolstoy, that they "know people, for example, who are considered paragons of neighbourliness and charity, but who fail entirely to get to the end of *Brideshead Revisited* or who turn away in utter perplexity at the sight of David Jones' *Vexilla Regis*." We should not presume, as Tolstoy does, that the good man "can see everything perfectly well."¹¹ Instead we can state as a kind of axiom, that to experience good art we do not have to be "good people," but we have to be *good at* experiencing art. As it happens, good art itself is the best educator in this respect, and providing we do not shy away from its gifts and demands, we may grow in receptiveness and responsiveness to what it has to show us.

It is vital to recognise that beauty is not automatically disclosed—that what we see as beautiful, and what we see of beauty, is not all the beauty

10. Ibid., 82.

11. Ibid., 83.

there is, and is not all there is to beauty. This emphasises the metaphysical depths of beauty's demands, and the depths within ourselves (the depth of change in ourselves) in which our discernment must be grounded. Importantly, there is more to beauty, and more beauty to be had, because there is also *more to us*—and beauty asks this more *of us*, if it is to give of itself more fully. Our attitudes, our responses and responsiveness to beauty must be embodied, must become part of our character. This is something that is acquired through the cultivation of desire.

We understand perfectly well, I presume, the idea—as developed by Robert Adams, for example—that in loving the Good we do and should grow in goodness. Analogously, this is how to understand my claim that in loving Beauty, we should grow more beautiful ourselves. This is not, however, a matter of simply transposing the ethical model into an aesthetic mode; it is also to recognise that we are, in dealing with beautiful things, dealing with something that is visibly manifested. Conformity to this manifestation—to something that is *seen*—entails, I think, not only that a change is wrought in our ways of *seeing*, but that this change can also be *seen* to have been wrought in us. Thus we acquire the likeness of that beauty which inspires and instructs us. Pavel Florensky, in this respect, claims that the saints are not “good persons” but *beautiful* ones, where to be beautiful means to be spirit-bearing and radiant with the light of God.

We may speak of “spiritual” as contrasted with “physical” beauty, by way of clarifying that Christian art enjoins us to grow, not simply in sexual or aesthetic attractiveness, but in a quality rooted in our personality. However, on my model this dichotomy is false, for I believe that there is only one kind of beauty, and that while this beauty is certainly not a matter of appearances alone, it *is* manifested to sight and vision. Beauty is sensory and perceivable, as well as truly of the spirit: it is both inner and outer. Though beauty is by no means synonymous with an attractive appearance, it is true that a beautiful person is *seen* as beautiful; it may also be true that to see this beauty takes a great deal of discernment, for it is no easy thing to perceive the true nature or quality of a person. But a beautiful person is *manifestly* so; for those who have eyes to see, the beauty of such a person will shine through, however dirty or deformed their physical features might be.

One way to recognise a beautiful person is by that person's own responsiveness to beauty; for it is a real openness to beauty's gifts and beauty's claims which renders a person beautiful. The concurrent claim is that someone who is deficient in such openness—or, what's worse, someone who is

defiantly opposed to it—will become a person devoid of beauty and, at the same time, will become insensitive to it. There are many ways for a person to render himself blind to both appearances and essentials, and so to render himself dull and opaque. The calling of Christian art is for us to reverse this tendency, to be converted, to realise the opposite possibility of being partakers of beauty's reality and radiance.

Scruton's contribution, of a moral responsibility towards the beautiful, must thus be amplified, within the context of a Christian aesthetic, to mean a wholesale reorientation of our vision as well as our volition towards the infinite beauty of God.

"Thus," writes Hart, "to come to see the world as beauty is the moral education of desire, the redemption of vision; it is in the cultivation of delight that charity is born, and in the cultivation of charity that delight becomes possible. In learning to see the world as beauty, one learns the measure of a love that receives all things . . . as beautiful in their own splendour; and in learning the measure of charity, which lets what is be in its otherness, one's vision of the world . . . is deepened toward that infinity of beauty that comprises it."¹² Importantly, on my adoption of this view, the beautiful work of art remains a concrete source of experience, of vision and desire: for each particular work of art provides a unique manifestation of that same beauty.

One such work, Dante's *Divine Comedy* may be seen to bear out—in the substance of its poetry as well as in the philosophy we may extrapolate from it (and which informed it)—the model of discernment and desire that I am proposing.

Dante, all too aware of the great demands placed on him in the telling of his journey through Hell, Purgatory and Paradise, is fully aware also of the powers required by the reader who wishes to follow him; he even cautions the unprepared to turn back: "do not / attempt to sail the seas I sail; you may, / by losing sight of me, be left astray."¹³ He who wishes to understand Dante's work, and who hopes to take it to heart, must be open to the kind of experiences the poet-voyager himself undergoes: the horrors of the diabolical descent, no less than the hopes of heavenly ascent. Even on a directly textual level, with all its allusions and references to classical and contemporaneous sources, Dante's poem asks a fair deal of

12. Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite*, 256.

13. Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy: Inferno, Purgatorio, Paradiso*, trans. Allen Mandelbaum, Everyman's Library (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1995), 384 [Par. 2.4–6].

the erudition of its reader. No less vital, to render the poem intelligible, is a share of that spiritual ardour which fuels both the journey and its telling. The readers that Dante invites to follow him are “those few who [have] turned [their] minds in time / unto the bread of angels”: that is, those lovers of wisdom and beauty who are motivated by the “thirst which is innate and everlasting— / thirst for the godly realm.”¹⁴ The startling claim here—that the ideal reader should come equipped not only with prerequisite learning and literacy, but also with a particular kind and quality of *love*—chimes very well with our model of Christian art.

Further to this, Dante first encounters eternal beauty as embodied and personified in Beatrice. It is she who inspires his love of beauty, and it is she who demands of him that his love, in turn, should become embodied in a life made pure through repentance and directed heavenwards. Beatrice—by heavenly grace and with the assistance of Virgil—is the cultivator of Dante’s desire. Moreover, Beatrice herself is as beautiful as she is because of the great strength of her own vision of that Beauty which is God’s, and of which she thereby partakes; if, she explains to Dante, she appears so radiant to him that “I overcome your vision’s force . . . I am so because of my perfected vision—as I grasp the good, so I approach the good in act.”¹⁵ This confirms the point, I believe, that to see the beautiful is to become beautiful. We must be full of light, the Gospel tells us, to see and receive the light.

We find the same core idea, variously articulated, in a host of Christian philosophers, Hans Urs von Balthasar among them. I have already argued below how the notion of the “disinterested” is inappropriate for the Christian understanding of, and response to, beauty. Balthasar reinforces this, claiming that “Christian contemplation is the opposite of distanced consideration of an image: as Paul says, it is in the metamorphosis of the beholder into the image he beholds (2 Cor 3.18).” This entails, among other things, the acknowledgement of the real qualities of what is beheld: “it is possible only by giving up one’s own standards and being assimilated to the dimensions of the image.”¹⁶ Beyond this, more importantly, it entails our committed conformity to this reality. Thus beauty itself asks of us that, in order that we may see it more fully, we become like it. The appropriate response to the beautiful is, therefore, to grow, through love, ever more receptive and nearer to it. Love and vision, in this way, mutually nurture and inspire each other.

14. Ibid., 384 [*Par.* 2.10–11, 2.19–20].

15. Ibid., 398 [*Par.* 5.3–6].

16. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord*, Vol. I, *Seeing the Form*, trans. Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1982), 485.

This understanding should be absolutely central to both the production and reception of Christian art. It is my belief that just such an attitude is enshrined—always implicit, on occasion pronounced—in the tradition which leads from icon-painting through the frescoes of Fra Angelico and the poetry of Dante, right up to the music of Arvo Pärt and the words of R. S. Thomas. It follows also that the *artist* needs to cultivate his responsiveness to beauty as well as a real skill in his craft. The Christian artist, we may add, pursues his craft within the greater cultivation of a Christian life. Thus the artist, like the lover of beauty, must conform fully to the end he hopes to realise. “The artist,” argues Maritain, “must be in love with *what he is doing*, so that his virtue becomes in truth, in St. Augustine’s phrase, *ordo amoris*.”¹⁷ Indeed, it is through the love and beauty manifested in Christian works of art—from Rublev to Tavener—that we recognise them as Christian, as belonging to that tradition.

At this point, it is worth briefly rehearsing the claims made above, before embarking on the next stage of the argument. It is our understanding that beauty, while offering delight, also demands of us a culturally and spiritually literate discernment, and that a full and proper response to beauty’s gifts and claims is consequent upon our cultivation of desire and our growth, through love, into beauty’s likeness.

The implication, throughout all this, is that beauty is truly of God. Thus Hart, following Balthasar, adopts an aesthetically charged vocabulary to speak of our conversion and conformity to Christ.

In this way one’s grammar is converted, one enters ever more into divine rhetoric and divine music: one is conformed to Christ by assuming, and being assumed by, the language of God’s revelation.¹⁸

This is a process in which art joins forces with liturgy, ritual and sacrament to re-fashion the entire person according to that which he beholds. Conversion, on this model, is validly conceived as an aesthetic practice, the cultivation both of discernment and desire.

As I see it, this also has a further implication for Christian art. For if the beauty encountered in works of art is of such a kind as to encourage not just the direction of our desire but also the growth of our entire personhood towards the likeness of God, then, it seems sensible to suggest,

17. Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism*, 48.

18. Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite*, 315.

this beauty really cannot have its true origin in the works of man. This is indeed my next argument: though beauty makes its appearance—though it is manifestly present—in made-made objects, it does so and is so as a gift of God.

III. THE GIFT NOT MADE BY HANDS

The understanding of beauty as gift has underpinned the account given in this paper; if the first section, on delight and gratitude, dealt with the phenomenological aspects of this claim, the present section will seek to articulate its ontological foundation. We may take as the guiding theme or principle of this section the understanding, voiced here by Hart, that “The Christian use of the word ‘beauty’ refers most properly to a relationship of donation and transfiguration, a handing over and return of the riches of being.”¹⁹

Two crucial points will here be argued. Firstly, that beauty, as manifested in the Christian work of art, is not made by the artist and, concurrently, that things (works, objects, persons) are beautiful that are in the image of God. Secondly, a more strictly theological point will also be made, which will support the model of bestowal; namely, that Beauty is best identified with the Spirit, and not, as is common in Scholastic thought, with the Son.

As we shall see, I will come to differ in important respects from the Scholastic account of Maritain and Aquinas; but they may be invoked, initially, to give credence to my assertion that the beauty of an artwork does not have its source in that artwork, nor in the hands of its artist, but belongs to—is by the gracious gift of—the fount of all beauty, who is God. I agree with Maritain that “the production of beauty belongs to God alone”²⁰; man’s task, meanwhile, as artist and maker, is the formal perfection of the particular work at hand—to which beauty may, God permitting, be added.

Thus the Christian artist works in the hope and vision of beauty; but beauty is not of his provenance. It comes by another dispensation. Nor, importantly, is there anything necessary about beauty’s manifestation; it is not a particular shape the artwork can fit, nor does it appear, time and time again, at the same conditioned signal. No, its appearance and realisation will remain mysterious, unique, and *gratuitous*. In this, Maritain,

19. *Ibid.*, 18.

20. Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism*, 35.

following Aquinas, is less emphatic and consistent than I would wish; for the Scholastic account suggests something very fixed and law-like about the conditions that govern beauty's bestowal. On this count, my model and my language must differ crucially from theirs.

Here, then, is the Scholastic centre of Maritain's idea of beauty, about which I have some reservations:

If beauty delights the mind, it is because beauty is essentially a certain excellence or perfection in the proportion of things to the mind. Hence the three conditions assigned to it by St. Thomas: integrity, because the mind likes being; proportion, because the mind likes order and likes unity; lastly and above all brightness or clarity, because the mind likes light and intelligibility.²¹

My own understanding differs firstly, and markedly, in seeing as conditions of beauty's *manifestation*—that is, common but neither necessary nor categorical conditions—what Maritain affirms as essential aspects of beauty's *nature*. Integrity, proportion and clarity are three important and pervasive excellences in artworks, but they are not necessary for beauty's appearance and they *are not* beauty. The reality of beauty is not reducible to, or divisible into, these terms. Beauty, for all its fondness for these properties, is something quite other.

Most importantly, this otherness of beauty is to be found in its *gratuity*, which—unlike these other qualities—may appropriately be identified as an aspect of beauty's nature. In the final analysis, such formal excellences as clarity and proportion are incidental—neither integral, nor even instrumental—to beauty and beauty's appearance. Not all things that achieve these properties, or that satisfy these criteria, are beautiful—nor do all beautiful things fulfil these criteria, or possess these properties. It is, however, essential to beauty that it is a gift. The gratuity of beauty is vital—because we like gifts; we like the startling, the spontaneous and the free, for all these are signs of *life*; and we like the fact that beauty is not predictable, not reducible to the three conditions of Aquinas. We like the fact that it testifies to another order, manifests a reality higher still than the proportions, integrities and clarities of the philosophers' universe; we like the fact that it manifests *personality*.

It is a danger of the Scholastic definition, I believe, that by neglecting beauty's gratuity it also misrepresents its divinity. To continue: we like

21. Ibid., 24.

beauty because we recognise, not only that it is other than us, but also that we are privileged to receive and partake of it, and so we recognise that it speaks to and reveals the best in us; we like the fact that it confirms that we too are of more than a natural or necessary order, that we share in beauty's otherness, and so that we are, ultimately, in a vital sense *like* beauty. It is this experience which is expressed in delight and gratitude, for these are proper responses to the surprising and generous. It is also this kind of experience which makes us recognise in beauty and its bestowal the image in which we are made, the likeness to which we are called.

It is my understanding that for something to be beautiful means for that thing to be in the likeness of God. To develop this model, I propose that while beauty is a gift and a giving, it is also a kind of given or "givenness." Importantly, I do not intend for beauty to be something given and added to art *after* the artwork's completion. There is no such temporal division involved. For though beauty is, in significant ways, conditional upon the artwork's accomplishment, it is also, crucially, *always already there*. For it is under the influence and inspiration of beauty that we, as makers, awaken to our task. It is in response to its original gifts that we want to produce something worthy of being a beautiful gift in return. Beauty provides the fundamental motivation and inspiration behind the Christian artistic effort, which is an effort at Godlikeness.

Let my metaphor be this: a glass figurine is created, in conditions of sunlight or lamplight, and created with great care so as to hold and reflect that light in a particularly striking and all-suffusing way. The figurine is fashioned by the artist, who manipulates his medium of glass to achieve a particular form, while the light which suffuses that form is not itself created with it, but rather resides there as a gift. The figurine partakes of the light, manifests that light in a particular way, unique to this artwork. The light is really and objectively present there in the figurine, and it is the same as that of the lamp or the sun.

It is my meaning—in saying that beauty is a gift, and that to possess beauty is to be in the likeness of God—that beauty is *uncreated*. That is, artworks, nature, persons may be created *and* beautiful—indeed, they may be created beautiful—but their beauty is not created; it is not a "created beauty" of which they partake and which they manifest. The beautiful thing or person is created, but its *likeness* to God is not; which is tantamount to saying that, insofar as something is in the image of God, a share of that thing is uncreated, and that thing has a share in the uncreated.

Now, in arguing that the beautiful object is beautiful in the image and likeness of God, and that beauty is manifested in such an object by the gift of God, we must attempt to articulate—albeit in a cursory, concise manner—how it is that beauty should be properly attributed to God. It is hoped that my take on this theological problem is consistent with my model, as developed so far, of beauty as gratuity, and consistent with the experience of this beauty in Christian works of art.

Here, while acknowledging their contributions, I must contend again with the particulars of Maritain's and Aquinas' positions. We are in agreement in generally ascribing beauty to God, in naming God beautiful and the fount of all beauty. It is in the details that my model diverges from the Scholastic account: namely, in the question of precisely how beauty belongs to God.

Firstly, I would lay a different, and perhaps a greater, emphasis on beauty's Trinitarian character. God is Beauty, and beauty belongs to God, eminently and above all as Trinity; *not* because of the "integrity," "proportion" or "harmony" of the triune God, so much as for the *mutuality* of the three Persons, their dynamic *perichoresis* of love, delight and radiant glory. This is to invoke the language of Hart, Bulgakov and others (of a predominantly Orthodox tradition) over the customary terminology of Latin and Anglo-Saxon thought.²²

Beauty, on this view, does not strictly "subsist" or "inhere" in any "part" of God, nor does it belong to the "totality" of God, but is rather that abundant outpouring of glory which, though internal to God, also reveals and communicates God to the world. Thus Hart claims that "beauty . . . is being itself, the moment of being's disclosure, the eloquence by which everything, properly and charitably regarded, says infinitely more than itself."²³ As Beauty, then, and in Beauty's bestowal, we may say that God is always "more" than Himself. It is in Beauty that God gives Himself—*not* as a *formal* manifestation, but as something over and above form.

I am not in agreement, therefore, with Aquinas' way, endorsed by Maritain, of allocating beauty to the second person of the Trinity. "In the Trinity," Aquinas holds, and Maritain with him, "the title Beauty is specially appropriated to the Son."²⁴ This is a reasonable position, as the Son is said

22. Edward Farley notes that John Navone, similarly, holds "that God (especially as triune) is the instance of primary beauty, and that this beauty is not merely proportion. What it is, however, is 'Gods eternal delight', which itself is the delightfulness of all creation." Edward Farley, *Faith and Beauty: A Theological Aesthetic* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001), 76–77.

23. Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite*, 146.

24. Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism*, 32.

to be the visible image and the form of the invisible God. Still, this identification of beauty with the formal aspect of God is to the detriment of the element of gratuity and, I believe, to a properly Trinitarian understanding of beauty.

I would prefer to refrain from such specific attributions altogether, but if it comes to assigning beauty to one of the three persons, I would follow Sergius Bulgakov in giving that name to the Holy Spirit. This, to my mind, ensures a dynamically Trinitarian model of beauty; it also helps to safeguard, and to make sense of, beauty's nature as *gift*.

When Maritain claims that God "is beauty itself, because he imparts beauty to all created beings, according to the peculiar nature of each,"²⁵ this to me evokes the Spirit's gracious descent on each person at Pentecost. Indeed, the Spirit is the Person in God who is most fittingly credited with transmitting God's glory to that which is not of God—to creation, to human beings. In the Creed, it is the Spirit we address as the Giver of life. Thus, that "eternal Beauty" which, in Balthasar's words, "always pours itself out in a superabundant irradiation that is beyond every demand and expectation,"²⁶ is best identified, I believe, with the Spirit.

Importantly, this is to speak of God in such a way as to allow the action of the Spirit to properly complement the action of the Son. For the account of artistic creation given above, using the metaphor of the glass figurine, is also applicable to the creation of God. We may want to say, with the scholastics, that God's creation has integrity, proportion and clarity; but I must emphasise that beauty is again something added to this. By this I do not mean, of course, that beauty has its origin outside God, but that the *beauty* of creation, relative to its *form* has its source in another person of the Trinity. In short, to the perfect creation carried out by the Father through the Son, the Spirit bestows the extra quality of beauty. In the words of St. Irenaeus, "the Father makes beautiful by means of the Spirit what he creates by means of the Son."²⁷ Thus we have something as astonishing as an added gratuity to an act already infinitely free and generous—making more glorious still what is already stamped with the genius and grandeur of God.

This is absolutely not to suggest a temporal sequence between the action of the Son and the action of the Spirit, any more than it is to suggest a division between two "autonomous" agents; it is simply to elucidate the

25. *Ibid.*, 31.

26. Balthasar, *Seeing the Form*, 417.

27. Aidan Nichols, *Redeeming Beauty: Soundings in Sacral Aesthetics* (Aldershot; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2007), 74.

manifold simultaneity of God's creation, for which *formation* does not exhaust the description, and for which *beautification* is a valid—indeed, a crucial—complementary term.

Christ is, foremost, the *form* of the Father; definite, delineated, making the invisible visible, making God materially and physically present. As Basil the Great articulates it: “the Person of the Son becomes as it were the form and face of the knowledge of the Father, and the person of the Father is known in the form of the Son.”²⁸ Thus Christian experience and theology, directed towards Christ and through him towards God, is foremost a matter, as Balthasar shows, of “seeing the form” of God and God's glory. Yet, I would argue that no one can see Christ—as no one can address or confess Christ—but in the Holy Spirit; for the special form of Christ is only discernible *as* Christ (and not, for example, as an “historical Jesus”) in the light and beauty of the Spirit. The apprehension of the form of Christ is indivisible from, impossible without, the apprehension of that Beauty in which the form abides. Thus the full and dynamic manifestation of the Christ-form and its Beauty is truly a Trinitarian event.

For Aquinas, “The Son is beauty as the Father's perfect Image, proportioned to him, resplendent with expressivity as his word.”²⁹ Yet here is an account which leaves out the Spirit: say rather, the Son is *beautiful* as the Father's perfect image and visible form, resplendent with the beauty bestowed by the Spirit—for this is a Trinitarian account. The idea of “proportion” here marks a difference between my model and the scholastic understanding of beauty; I have already argued that proportion is neither essential to beauty's nature, nor a necessary criterion of its manifestation. The qualities of mutual delight, mutual freedom and love are abundant in the Trinity; these are not just “proportionate” to the Trinity's form or nature, they are *disproportionate*, gratuitously overflowing—and it is the Spirit we hold responsible for this excess. Thus I think it more appropriate to speak of beauty in terms of *glory*, not harmony or proportion. My model finds support in Bulgakov, for whom glory is identified particularly with the Holy Spirit, while “kingdom” and “power” are identified, respectively, with the Father and Son. For Bulgakov, “beauty is a palpable manifestation of the Holy Spirit.”³⁰

To conclude this tentative Trinitarian defence of my model of beauty, then, I may join Bulgakov in naming the Holy Spirit “the hypostasis of

28. Basilios, *Epistulae* 38.8.26–27. Quoted in Nichols, *Redeeming Beauty*, 21.

29. Nichols, *Redeeming Beauty*, 11.

Beauty,”³¹ in the hope that this is supportive of and consistent with the experience of beauty as granted by Christian art. That is, I ground my account of beauty as a gift of God by suggesting that beauty is already a gift even *in* God, in the relations of the Trinity.

Now I wish to conclude this paper by invoking another work of Christian art. In Gerard Manley Hopkins’ *Pied Beauty* we have, I believe, both a poetic-philosophical defence of the model of beauty I have championed and, more importantly, an exemplary instance of a delightful, beautiful work of Christian art.

Hopkins, himself influenced by scholastic thought, does justice to the best strands of that theological thinking on beauty, for he illustrates truly Maritain’s realisation that “this very brilliance of form, the essence of beauty, shines on matter”—I would say, is *manifested* in matter—“in an infinite variety of ways” and that “Beauty therefore does not consist in conformity to a certain ideal and unchanging type.”³² Yet the achievement of Hopkins, and the vision his poem enables, should incline us further, I believe, to my own model: for it is certainly the *gratuity* of beauty which is here given due, and duly exultant, recognition. For here, I believe, beauty is evoked, not as a matter of proportion and harmony, but as an ineffable quality, charitably given to all manner of idiosyncratic particulars—“all things counter and strange”—on account of the unique and uniquely significant form of each. Each in its own form, and its own inimitable way, manifests the glory and bounteous beauty of God, and so each “dappled thing” can be seen within His likeness, and His likeness can be seen in each.

For the marvel of it all, so elegantly captured by Hopkins’ dazzling poetics, is that this beauty of particular and peculiar things, not only has its source in the beauty of God, but is the *same* as that infinite, inexhaustible beauty; so that all the beauty we encounter in this changeable world, “He fathers-forth whose beauty is past change.” Fittingly, then, we are enjoined to “Praise him.”

In conclusion, the poem itself is an exquisite giving of praise. Born of delight and gratitude, it is a perfectly appropriate response to Beauty’s gratuity; it shows us how to direct our vision and our desire to and through the

30. Sergei Nikolaevich Bulgakov, “The Icon and Its Veneration (A Dogmatic Essay),” in *Icons, and The name of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012), 105.

31. Nichols, *Redeeming Beauty*, 76.

32. Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism*, 28–29.

particulars of creation, and how to participate, creatively and charitably, in the Trinitarian glory which graces this world.

GLORY be to God for dappled things—
For skies of couple-colour as a brindled cow;
For rose-moles all in stipple upon trout that swim;
Fresh-firecoal chestnut-falls; finches' wings;
Landscape plotted and pieced—fold, fallow, and plough;
And áll trádés, their gear and tackle and trim.

All things counter, original, spare, strange;
Whatever is fickle, freckled (who knows how?)
With swift, slow; sweet, sour; adazzle, dim;
He fathers-forth whose beauty is past change:
Praise him.

(Gerard Manley Hopkins, "Pied Beauty")³³

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33. *Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins now first published*, ed. Robert Bridges (London: Humphrey Milford, 1918), 30.