

STRANGE BEAUTY

Dominated by an excessive love for my profession, I have surrendered myself to it completely... You who are fascinated by the fine arts, surrender yourselves to all the pleasures that this sublime passion can procure! No other pleasure is so pure. It is this passion that makes us love to study, that transforms our pain into pleasure and, with its divine flame, forces genius to yield up its oracles. In short, it is the passion that summons us to immortality

Boullée¹

A friend advised a young enthusiast: 'Nothing in your life can prepare you for the education you will receive as a student of architecture.' These words are true. I recall a story told to me by a student of architecture who, in his first year of study, always leaving the studio in the early hours of the morning, was ever moved by the strange beauty of the city at night; its moonlit, vital stillness. For him, that first year of study, and the entire world in which he moved was illumined by the vision of that strange beauty. Progressing in his studies, however, he was increasingly taught to mistrust that experience, and testing it in the fires of ideologies, pedagogies, and reason, manipulating it and using it, one day found that beauty had died for him. In this knowledge he grew gradually inconsolable. Turning to the world remaining around him, he saw in its flatness that he was alone with the memory of a better, vanished realm. Growing despondent, he despaired that he had ever known such a place at all.

I suspect that this is the experience of education for most students of the fine arts, those at least that come to it out of love, in that wondrous and wondering ecstasy that draws lovers of beauty to the beautiful. I have witnessed their fate: In the moment of their first brush with beauty, in that profound, blinding experience of recognition, the obsessions of a lifetime are cast, and, in their gradual death to that world, or perhaps its murder, they sink ever deepeningly into the death of a silent despair. Yet throughout all this, and even at its worst, they remain haunted by a memory of what they sense they had once truly known. Driven by this hauntedness they forever ask or repress the questions; What was that? Was it real?

Plato notes that the reality which they have known, ...is what every soul perceives and for the sake of which it does everything. The soul discerns that it is something, but is at a loss about it and is unable to get a sufficient grasp of just what it is, or to have a stable trust such as it has about the rest. And because this is so the soul loses any profit that might be had from the rest. 505e²

The soul, knowing as it knows, that something is there, is drawn to it, demanding answers it itself cannot provide. Reason and faith seeking truth in that uneasy experience of a completely other realm, threaten to undo the individual's grasp on the familiar realm before the eyes and hands. The shock of perceiving this fundamental and significant reality, writes Joseph Pieper, is the spark which transforms lives.

The act of philosophizing, genuine poetry, any aesthetic encounter in fact, as well as prayer, springs from some shock. And when such a shock is experienced, man senses the non-finality of his world of daily care; he transcends it, takes a step beyond it. pg 73³

In the sudden awareness of presence before a sublime realm of transcendent reality, whether through art, an event, or a person, the perceiver, shocked, finds himself momentarily whole, his very being regrounded and the deep yearnings of his soul, satisfied. The perceiver feels a profound sense that he is complete as never before, within a realm which is in some way a lost home.

Presence before this magisterial realm is the shock which, for those disposed to experience it as beauty, is the foundation of aesthetic experience. Within this realm the perceiver, finding himself whole, is aware as never before of that time when he was not whole. Love for that realm of wholeness and completion, and a sense of the incompleteness outside this domain, enkindles in the heart of the knower a desire for the satisfaction of his yearnings in the most complete way.

The lovers of beauty, especially attuned, experience beauty as the truly real. In the *Republic*, Plato, knowing this experience, distinguishes the pleasure of beautiful things from the pleasure of beauty itself manifest in and through those things. He notes:

"The lovers of hearing and the lovers of sights, on the one hand," I (Socrates) said, "surely delight in fair sounds and colours and shapes and all that craft makes from such things, but their thought is unable to see and delight in the nature of the fair itself."

"That," he (Gloucon) said, "is certainly so."

"Wouldn't on the other hand, those who are able to approach the fair itself and see it by itself be rare?"

"Indeed they would."

"Is the man who holds that there are fair things but doesn't hold that there is beauty itself and who, if someone leads him to the knowledge of it, isn't able to follow - is he, in your opinion, living in a dream or is he awake? Consider it. Doesn't dreaming, whether one is asleep or awake, consist in believing a likeness of something to be not a likeness, but rather the thing itself to which it is like?"

"I, at least," he said, "would say that a man who does that

dreams."

"And what about the man who, contrary to this, believes that there is something fair itself and is able to catch sight both of it and of what participates in it, and doesn't believe that what participates is it itself, nor that it itself is what participates - is he, in your opinion, living in a dream or is he awake?" 476b²

That the experience of beauty, so movingly profound, engenders the question, 'Is this real?' is the key to its consideration. It suggests that to be human is to be a unity of many parts, each part possessing its particular ability to perceive the truth of things as beauty, to the limit that such a part may truly experience such a reality. Furthermore, the vagueness of this awareness, far from being a problem, indicates that the intellect, requiring something more than itself, ponders beauty with the testimony provided by the human whole. According to Pieper, in the tradition of Plato and Aquinas, the part of that human whole which apprehends this reality is the spirit.

To the philosophers of the past - to Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, and Thomas Aquinas - the concepts of 'spirit' and 'world' (in the sense of the whole of reality) are not only interrelated; their correspondence is complete. These philosophers not only held that 'spirit' is relatedness to the totality of existing things, but also that all existing things are also related to spirit... Not only, they said, is it of the nature of the spirit for its frame of reference to be the totality of existing things; but it is also of the nature of existing things for them to lie within spirit's frame of reference... I do not refer to some vague, abstract 'spirituality', but to a personal spirit, to an immanent power of establishing relationships. Nor do I refer to God alone, but equally to the limited, created human spirit. ... the world of a spiritual being is the totality of existing things; and their correspondence is so complete that it is both essential to spirit (spirit is the power of embracing the totality of being) and equally it is essential to things themselves ('to be' means 'to be in relation to spirit')... pg 90³

In this tradition the spirit, beyond intellect, apprehending the beautiful thing, truly apprehends it both as a thing in its relatedness to the limited realm of things and as infinite in its relatedness to that highest realm which is beauty itself. Plato says in the Symposium:

...to proceed correctly or to be led by another, to erotics - beginning from these beautiful things here, always to proceed on up for the sake of that beauty, using these beautiful things here as steps: from one to two, and from two to all beautiful bodies; and from beautiful bodies to beautiful pursuits, and from pursuits to beautiful lessons; and from lessons to end at that lesson, which is the lesson of nothing else than beauty itself, and at last to know what is beauty itself. It is at this place in life, in beholding the beautiful itself, my dear Socrates, ... that it is worth living, if - for a human being - it is [worth living] at any place. pg. 273⁴

What is that highest realm which is beauty itself, and where is it to be found? The answer may be approached in a consideration of beauty's relationship to another and greater idea, the idea of the good itself. Plato notes;

... as the good is to the intelligible region with respect to intelligence and what is intellected, so the sun is in the visible region with respect to sight and what is seen. 508b²

...what provides the truth of the things known and gives the power to the one who knows, is the idea of the good. And, as the cause of the knowledge and truth, you can understand it to be a thing known; but as fair as these two are - knowledge and truth - if you believe that it is something different from them, and still fairer than they, your belief will be right. As for knowledge and truth, just as in the other region it is right to hold light and sight sunlike, but to believe them to be sun is not right; so, too, here, to hold these two to be like the good is right, but to believe that either of them is the good is not right. The condition which characterizes the good must receive still greater honor. 508e²

Just as the good itself is the source of light by which a soul sees the objects which the soul may perceive, so beauty itself may be likened to the sight of light itself, a luminosity, which, through seeing the seeable objects, the soul measures, and knows what it sees, that it sees, and that there is 'light'. Beauty is to the good, as light is to the sun.

Considered in this way, beauty, itself the light of the good itself, as the sight of the 'lightness' of light itself, is, in a way, the sight of the 'beingness' of being itself. In this understanding beauty may never be created nor destroyed, except by those having power over being itself. Beauty, as the sight of the good, may be perceived, recognized recalled, described but never created.

Beauty, however, is neither neat or simple. Socrates is asked in the Symposium;

...and what will he who gets the good things have?"

'This,' I (Socrates) said, 'I can answer more adequately: he will be happy.'

'That,' she (Diotima) said, 'is because the happy are happy by the acquisition of good things; and there is no further need to ask, 'For what consequence does he who wants to be happy wants to be so?' but the answer is thought to be a complete one...267⁴

Plato's description of happiness and the good, and its relationship to beauty and beautiful things, seems to propose a tension between the desire for the good and its satisfaction. Plato noted that only in the presence of the ideas is life worth living but also that only beautiful things make man happy. Is it for the ideas, not things which man yearns and without which he is incomplete? But, is it only things which can bring man happiness? If this were true man's existence would be tragic. Life would be profoundly worthless and unfulfilled, while estranged from that realm of ideas for which man yearns, where only is life valuable, but within which there is neither happiness nor completion, exiled from a realm of things, which Plato suggests, is the only source of man's happiness. What, then, is this relationship, exactly, between beauty itself and beautiful things, as it applies to man and his happiness; between the infinite forms and finite things, between body and soul? Quickly, the consideration of beauty becomes, as it ever was, the question of the

highest absolute reality and the place within it which belongs to man.

St. Thomas eases this tension through his understanding of the composite nature of man as a being in whose unity there is body and soul. Writes Pieper;

... a passage in St. Thomas points the argument with all desirable clarity. He puts to himself the following objection: The end of man is surely perfect similarity with God, and the soul separated from the body will be more like God than the soul joined to the body, since God is incorporeal. The soul in its final state of happiness will be separated from the body. That is the objection that Aquinas uses in order to introduce the thesis "the real man is the spiritual soul," attired, as it were, in all the finery of a theological argument. To that objection he applies as follows: The soul united to the body is more like God than the soul separated from the body because it possesses its own nature more perfectly." - an answer that is by no means easily digested for it implies not only that man is corporeal, but that in a certain sense, even the soul is corporeal. But if this is so man is essentially not pure spirit, not spirit only...⁹²³

In the understanding presented of Aquinas, man is most perfect and beautiful while fully himself; a composite unity of finite body and infinite spirit. In this understanding, the spirit, able to perceive the infinite and invisible realm as well as the physical, does so not only through the physical, but not truly without it. To the question of beauty as most perfectly possessed by man, the answer appears that it is not perfectly possessed as pure idea/form, but as revealed in the unity of the physical and ideal which the beautiful thing is. Beautiful things are the perfection and completion of beauty for man which spirit, perceiving both finite and infinite, requires both to be happiest and to know beauty best.

This is not a theory of art but a theory of art's authority; beauty, which dictates to art the conditions by which it must act if it is to act justly. The theory of beauty, the authority of architecture and arts, is above and beyond the arts themselves, in that timeless and unimpressable realm of *what is*. Beauty is beyond politics, pedagogy, ideology, and rationality. The political implications of its dictates are not its authority, but being other than they, the beautiful thing moves justified and authorized in obedience and likeness to beauty itself. The theory of beauty, considered as the consideration of being itself, may be intruded upon, attacked, or subverted, but in this understanding, only at the risk of attacking and assaulting all which it involves. The purvey of beauty is the realm of highest absolute authority; *that which is*.

The relegation of beauty to a position of instrumentality is one with its mutilation, destruction, and disintegration. In the service of instrumentality, beauty (otherwise the sight of being) is objectified as a constructed thing: 'the beautiful'. The slight of hand by which the being of beauty is replaced by 'the beautiful' is the means by which beauty becomes a manipulable, employable, constructible, deconstructible and useful item. To this end, the beautiful, once known as timeless, becomes a temporal thing whose essence depends upon its designation as beautiful. As the product of politics, ambition, philosophy and craft, the term 'beauty' becomes valid only when the product of

of right doctrines, while invalid when the product of wrong. The will to power over being itself wrests beauty from its own place and places it among the objects existing not by truth but by convention. What is the meaning of the beautiful, however, when beauty itself is meaningless? The beautiful becomes nothing more than the justification of a society, within its value system, (which is foundationless) of those things and experiences which are consistent with that system of desires, objectives, goals and aims.

The consequence of this doctrine upon those who traditionally live closest to beauty; artists, poets, those in love, is; that should any individual come across anything which he himself affirms with his very soul to be beautiful, he must do so in the knowledge that his affirmation is foundationless, that the thing is not beautiful in itself, and that he himself is deluded. If all beauty is beautiful to the perceiver only, who has assigned this quality, nothing is beautiful *itself*.

These assertions can never be wholly successful if aesthetic experience, truly felt, is the greatest affirmation by the soul, that what it has experienced is truly real. The result of the assault on beauty, to those who experience beauty, is the alienation of the soul from itself, the world and from being. It is the self-destruction of the individual who experiences the reality of this conflict. Today, should a student of architecture ever fall in love with his art, or, drawn in wonder to it, and struck with awe before the beauty it may provide, a lifetime of fear, anguish and therapy will result. A soul entering this realm, even if not at first, inevitably collides with these worlds today set in collision. The inescapable questions; 'What is truly real?', 'How must one live in this knowledge?' become unthinkable even as their inevitability is recognized.

The life of the aesthete is a theoretical life lived at greatest peril in schools today. However, in the fullest pursuit of that truest realm, which Plato called *theoria*, in the life of contemplation of and action according to the dictates of that realm of being, in the truly theoretical life, destruction is not necessarily fated. As Pieper notes;

The unique and original relation to being that Plato calls 'theoria' can only be realized in its pure state through the sense of wonder, in that purely receptive attitude to reality, undisturbed and unsullied by the interjection of will. 'Theoria' is only possible to the extent that man is not blind to the wonderful fact that things are. 100³

The truth remains the truth and architecture remains another matter ■

NOTES

1. Boullée, 'E.L. To Those Who Cultivate The Arts.' *Boullée and Visionary Architecture*. Helen Rosenau trans. Academy Editions, London, 1976.
2. Plato, *The Republic of Plato*. Alan Bloom translation, Basic Books, New York, 1968.
3. Pieper, J. *Leisure, The Basis of Culture*. Random House 1963.
4. Plato, 'The Symposium', Seth Benardete translation, *The Dialogues of Plato*. Bantam Books, Toronto, 1986.

On examine l'expérience esthétique de la beauté pour découvrir l'autorité qui est derrière sa puissance.