

Susan Sontag

An argument about beauty

1

Responding at last, in April of 2002, to the scandal created by the revelation of innumerable cover-ups of sexually predatory priests, Pope John Paul II told the American cardinals summoned to the Vatican, “A great work of art may be blemished, but its beauty remains; and this is a truth which any intellectually honest critic will recognize.”

Is it too odd that the Pope likens the Catholic Church to a great – that is, beautiful – work of art? Perhaps not, since the inane comparison allows him to turn abhorrent misdeeds into something like the scratches in the print of a silent film or craquelure covering the surface of an Old Master painting, blemishes that we reflexively screen out or see past. The Pope likes venerable ideas. And beauty, as a term signifying (like

Susan Sontag was elected a Fellow of the American Academy in 1993. Best known as a novelist and essayist – her books have been translated into thirty-two languages – she also composed stories and plays, wrote and directed movies, and worked as a theatre director in the United States and Europe. In 2000 she won the National Book Award for her novel “In America,” and in 2001 received the Jerusalem Prize for the body of her work. This piece appeared in the Fall 2002 issue of “Daedalus.” She died in 2004.

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health) an indisputable excellence, has been a perennial resource in the issuing of peremptory evaluations.

Permanence, however, is not one of beauty’s more obvious attributes; and the contemplation of beauty, when it is expert, may be wreathed in pathos, the drama on which Shakespeare elaborates in many of the Sonnets. Traditional celebrations of beauty in Japan, like the annual rite of cherry-blossom viewing, are keenly elegiac; the most stirring beauty is the most evanescent. To make beauty in some sense imperishable required a lot of conceptual tinkering and transposing, but the idea was simply too alluring, too potent, to be squandered on the praise of superior embodiments. The aim was to multiply the notion, to allow for kinds of beauty, beauty with adjectives, arranged on a scale of ascending value and incorruptibility, with the metaphorized uses (‘intellectual beauty,’ ‘spiritual beauty’) taking precedence over what ordinary language extols as beautiful – a gladness to the senses.

The less ‘uplifting’ beauty of face and body remains the most commonly visited site of the beautiful. But one would hardly expect the Pope to invoke *that* sense of beauty while constructing an exculpatory account of several generations’ worth of the clergy’s sexual molestation of children and protection of

the molesters. More to the point – his point – is the ‘higher’ beauty of art. However much art may seem to be a matter of surface and reception by the senses, it has generally been accorded an honorary citizenship in the domain of ‘inner’ (as opposed to ‘outer’) beauty. Beauty, it seems, is immutable, at least when incarnated – fixed – in the form of art, because it is in art that beauty as an idea, an eternal idea, is best embodied. Beauty (should you choose to use the word that way) is deep, not superficial; hidden, sometimes, rather than obvious; consoling, not troubling; indestructible, as in art, rather than ephemeral, as in nature. Beauty, the stipulatively uplifting kind, perdures.

2

The best theory of beauty is its history. Thinking about the history of beauty means focusing on its deployment in the hands of specific communities.

Communities dedicated by their leaders to stemming what is perceived as a noxious tide of innovative views have no interest in modifying the bulwark provided by the use of beauty as unexceptionable commendation and consolation. It is not surprising that John Paul II, and the preserve-and-serve institution for which he speaks, feels as comfortable with beauty as with the idea of the good.

It also seems inevitable that when, almost a century ago, the most prestigious communities concerned with the fine arts dedicated themselves to drastic projects of innovation, beauty would turn up on the front line of notions to be discredited. Beauty could not but appear a conservative standard to the makers and proclaimers of the new; Gertrude Stein said that to call a work of art beautiful means that it is dead. Beautiful has come

to mean ‘merely’ beautiful: there is no more vapid or philistine compliment.

Elsewhere, beauty still reigns, irrepressible. (How could it not?) When that notorious beauty-lover Oscar Wilde announced in *The Decay of Lying*, “Nobody of any real culture ever talks about the beauty of a sunset. Sunsets are quite old-fashioned,” sunsets reeled under the blow, then recovered. *Les beaux-arts*, when summoned to a similar call to be up-to-date, did not. The subtraction of beauty as a standard for art hardly signals a decline of the authority of beauty. Rather, it testifies to a decline in the belief that there is something called art.

3

Even when Beauty was an unquestioned criterion of value in the arts, it was defined laterally, by evoking some other quality that was supposed to be the essence or *sine qua non* of something that was beautiful. A definition of the beautiful was no more (or less) than a commendation of the beautiful. When, for example, Lessing equated beauty with harmony, he was offering another general idea of what is excellent or desirable.

In the absence of a definition in the strict sense, there was supposed to be an organ or capacity for registering beauty (that is, value) in the arts, called ‘taste,’ and a canon of works discerned by people of taste, seekers after more rarefied gratifications, adepts of connoisseurship. For in the arts – unlike life – beauty was not assumed to be necessarily apparent, evident, obvious.

The problem with taste was that, however much it resulted in periods of large agreement within communities of art lovers, it issued from private, immediate, and revocable responses to art. And the consensus, however firm, was never

more than local. To address this defect, Kant – a dedicated universalizer – proposed a distinctive faculty of ‘judgment’ with discernable principles of a general and abiding kind; the tastes legislated by this faculty of judgment, if properly reflected upon, should be the possession of all. But ‘judgment’ did not have its intended effect of shoring up ‘taste’ or making it, in a certain sense, more democratic. For one thing, taste-as-principled-judgment was hard to apply, since it had the most tenuous connection with the actual works of art deemed incontestably great or beautiful, unlike the pliable, empirical criterion of taste. And taste is now a far weaker, more assailable notion than it was in the late eighteenth century. *Whose taste?* Or, more insolently, *who sez?*

As the relativistic stance in cultural matters pressed harder on the old assessments, definitions of beauty – descriptions of its essence – became emptier. Beauty could no longer be something as positive as harmony. For Valéry, the nature of beauty is that it cannot be defined; beauty is precisely ‘the ineffable.’

The failure of the notion of beauty reflects the discrediting of the prestige of judgment itself, as something that could conceivably be impartial or objective, not always self-serving or self-referring. It also reflects the discrediting of binary discourses in the arts. Beauty defines itself as the antithesis of the ugly. Obviously, you can’t say something is beautiful if you’re not willing to say something is ugly. But there are more and more taboos about calling something, anything, ugly. (For an explanation, look first not at the rise of so-called political correctness, but at the evolving ideology of consumerism, then at the complicity between these two.) The point is to find what is beautiful in what has not hither-

to been regarded as beautiful (or: the beautiful in the ugly).

Similarly, there is more and more resistance to the idea of ‘good taste,’ that is, to the dichotomy good taste/bad taste, except for occasions that allow one to celebrate the defeat of snobbery and the triumph of what was once condescended to as bad taste. Today, good taste seems even more retrograde an idea than beauty. Austere, difficult ‘modernist’ art and literature have come to seem old-fashioned, a conspiracy of snobs. Innovation is relaxation now; today’s E-Z Art gives the green light to all. In the cultural climate favoring the more user-friendly art of recent years, the beautiful seems, if not obvious, then pretentious. Beauty continues to take a battering in what are called, absurdly, our culture wars.

4

That beauty applied to some things and not to others, that it was a principle of *discrimination*, was once its strength and appeal. Beauty belonged to the family of notions that establish rank, and accorded well with social order unapologetic about station, class, hierarchy, and the right to exclude.

What had been a virtue of the concept became its liability. Beauty, which once seemed vulnerable because it was too general, loose, porous, was revealed as – on the contrary – excluding too much. Discrimination, once a positive faculty (meaning refined judgment, high standards, fastidiousness), turned negative: it meant prejudice, bigotry, blindness to the virtues of what was not identical with oneself.

The strongest, most successful move against beauty was in the arts: beauty, and the caring about beauty, was restrictive; as the current idiom has it, elitist. Our appreciations, it was felt, could be

so much more inclusive if we said that something, instead of being beautiful, was ‘interesting.’

Of course, when people said a work of art was interesting, this did not mean that they necessarily liked it – much less that they thought it beautiful. It usually meant no more than they thought they ought to like it. Or that they liked it, sort of, even though it wasn’t beautiful.

Or they might describe something as interesting to avoid the banality of calling it beautiful. Photography was the art where ‘the interesting’ first triumphed, and early on: the new, photographic way of seeing proposed everything as a potential subject for the camera. The beautiful could not have yielded such a range of subjects; and soon came to seem uncool to boot as a judgment. Of a photograph of a sunset, a beautiful sunset, anyone with minimal standards of verbal sophistication might well prefer to say, “Yes, the photograph is interesting.”

5

What is interesting? Mostly, what has not previously been thought beautiful (or good). The sick are interesting, as Nietzsche points out. The wicked, too. To name something as interesting implies challenging old orders of praise; such judgments aspire to be found insolent or at least ingenious. Connoisseurs of the interesting – whose antonym is the boring – appreciate clash, not harmony. Liberalism is boring, declares Carl Schmitt in *The Concept of the Political*, written in 1932 (the following year he joined the Nazi Party). A politics conducted according to liberal principles lacks drama, flavor, conflict, while strong autocratic politics – and war – are interesting.

Long use of ‘the interesting’ as a criterion of value has, inevitably, weakened its transgressive bite. What is left of the

old insolence lies mainly in its disdain for the consequences of actions and of judgments. As for the truthfulness of the ascription – that does not even enter the story. One calls something interesting precisely so as not to have to commit to a judgment of beauty (or of goodness). The interesting is now mainly a consumerist concept, bent on enlarging its domain: the more things that become interesting, the more the marketplace grows. The boring – understood as an absence, an emptiness – implies its antidote: the promiscuous, empty affirmations of the interesting. It is a peculiarly inconclusive way of experiencing reality.

In order to enrich this deprived take on our experiences, one would have to acknowledge a full notion of boredom: depression, rage (suppressed despair). Then one could work toward a full notion of the interesting. But that quality of experience – of feeling – one would probably no longer even *want* to call interesting.

6

Beauty can illustrate an ideal; a perfection. Or, because of its identification with women (more accurately, with Woman), it can trigger the usual ambivalence that stems from the age-old denigration of the feminine. Much of the discrediting of beauty needs to be understood as a result of the gender inflection. Misogyny, too, might underlie the urge to metaphorize beauty, thereby promoting it out of the realm of the ‘merely’ feminine, the unserious, the specious. For if women are worshiped because they are beautiful, they are condescended to for their preoccupation with making or keeping themselves beautiful. Beauty is theatrical, it is for being looked at and admired; and the word is as likely to suggest the beauty industry (beauty magazines, beauty parlors, beauty prod-

ucts) – the theatre of feminine frivolity – as the beauties of art and of nature. How else to explain the association of beauty – i.e., women – with mindlessness? To be concerned with one’s own beauty is to risk the charge of narcissism and frivolity. Consider all the beauty synonyms, starting with the ‘lovely,’ the merely ‘pretty,’ which cry out for a virile transposition.

“Handsome is as handsome does.” (But not: “Beautiful is as beautiful does.”) Though it applies no less than does ‘beautiful’ to appearance, ‘handsome’ – free of associations with the feminine – seems a more sober, less gushing way of commending. Beauty is not ordinarily associated with gravitas. Thus one might prefer to call the vehicle for delivering searing images of war and atrocity a ‘handsome book,’ as I did in the preface to a recent compilation of photographs by Don McCullin, lest calling it a ‘beautiful book’ (which it was) would seem an affront to its appalling subject.

7

It’s usually assumed that beauty is, almost tautologically, an ‘aesthetic’ category, which puts it, according to many, on a collision course with the ethical. But beauty, even beauty in the amoral mode, is never naked. And the ascription of beauty is never unmixed with moral values. Far from the aesthetic and the ethical being poles apart, as Kierkegaard and Tolstoy insisted, the aesthetic is itself a quasi-moral project. Arguments about beauty since Plato are stocked with questions about the proper relation to the beautiful (the irresistibly, enthrallingly beautiful), which is thought to flow from the nature of beauty itself.

The perennial tendency to make of beauty itself a binary concept, to split

it up into ‘inner’ and ‘outer,’ ‘higher’ and ‘lower’ beauty, is the usual way that judgments of the beautiful are colonized by moral judgments. From a Nietzschean (or Wildean) point of view, this may be improper, but it seems to me unavoidable. And the wisdom that becomes available over a deep, lifelong engagement with the aesthetic cannot, I venture to say, be duplicated by any other kind of seriousness. Indeed, the various definitions of beauty come at least as close to a plausible characterization of virtue, and of a fuller humanity, as the attempts to define goodness as such.

8

Beauty is part of the history of idealizing, which is itself part of the history of consolation. But beauty may not always console. The beauty of face and figure torments, subjugates; that beauty is imperious. The beauty that is human, and the beauty that is made (art) – both raise the fantasy of possession. Our model of the disinterested comes from the beauty of nature – a nature that is distant, overarching, unpossessable.

From a letter written by a German soldier standing guard in the Russian winter in late December of 1942: “The most beautiful Christmas I had ever seen, made entirely of disinterested emotions and stripped of all tawdry trimmings. I was all alone beneath an enormous starred sky, and I can remember a tear running down my frozen cheek, a tear neither of pain nor of joy but of emotion created by intense experience. . . .”¹

Unlike beauty, often fragile and impermanent, the capacity to be overwhelmed by the beautiful is astonishingly sturdy

1 Quoted in Stephen G. Fritz, *Frontsoldaten: The German Soldier in World War II* (Lexington, Ky.: University Press of Kentucky, 1995), 130.

and survives amidst the harshest distractions. Even war, even the prospect of certain death, cannot expunge it.

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9

The beauty of art is better, 'higher,' according to Hegel, than the beauty of nature because it is made by human beings and is the work of the spirit. But the discerning of beauty in nature is also the result of traditions of consciousness, and of culture – in Hegel's language, of spirit.

The responses to beauty in art and to beauty in nature are interdependent. As Wilde pointed out, art does more than school us on how and what to appreciate in nature. (He was thinking of poetry and painting. Today the standards of beauty in nature are largely set by photography.) What is beautiful reminds us of nature as such – of what lies beyond the human and the made – and thereby stimulates and deepens our sense of the sheer spread and fullness of reality, inanimate as well as pulsing, that surrounds us all.

A happy by-product of this insight, if insight it is: beauty regains its solidity, its inevitability, as a judgment needed to make sense of a large portion of one's energies, affinities, and admirations; and the usurping notions appear ludicrous.

Imagine saying, "That sunset is interesting."