

THE ESSENCE OF BEAUTY

(from the Confessions of St. Augustine)

BOOK IV, CHAP. XII.

‘IF things corporeal give pleasure, praise God therefor; but render back to their maker thy love, lest in those very things which please thee, thou displeasest.’

Si placent corpora, deum ex illis lauda, et in artificum eorum retorque amorem, ne, in his quae tibi placent, tu displiceas.

How we are here reminded of the words of George Herbert in *The Pulley*, wherein, at the first making of Man, God pours out from ‘a glass of blessings’ all manner of gifts upon his creature, then stays his hand:

‘Perceiving that alone of all his treasure
Rest at the bottom lay.

‘For if I should,’ said he,
Bestow *this* jewel also on my creature,
He would adore my gifts instead of me;
And rest in Nature, not the God of Nature;
So both should losers be.’

‘If souls do please thee, in God let them be loved, seeing that themselves also are subject to change, but fixed in him they become steadfast; else would they pass by and cease to be.’

Si placent animae, in deo amentur, quia et ipsae mutabiles sunt, et in illo fixae stabiliuntur; alioquin irent et transirent.

Here St. Augustine goes on to dilate upon the attributes of God and the mission of Christ.

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And now once more he harks back to beauty, analysing its essence, but first, in respect of the divine attributes and mission, says in Chapter xiii :

‘ These things I knew not at that time, and I loved the lower forms of beauty and did sink into the abyss; and to my friends I would say “Do we love anything, save the beautiful? What, then, is the beautiful; and beauty—what is it? What is it that attracts us and brings us into harmony with these things that we love. For did they not possess a grace and a shapeliness they could in no wise draw us unto them.” And I looked more closely, and I saw that in those very bodies there was a something, as it were a wholeness (*quasi totum*), which for that reason was beautiful; and besides this another thing which was, therefore, comely because it shewed adaptation, as of one part of the body to the whole body, or of the shoe to the foot, and such like; and this aspect of things welled up into my mind from my inmost heart, and I wrote certain books upon “the beautiful and the well contrived” (*de pulchro et apto*), two or three, I fancy, “thou, O Lord, knowest, for it escapes me”—for I have them not, they are gone astray, how I know not.’

St. Augustine was twenty-six or twenty-seven years old at the time he wrote these books, as he tells us at the end of Chapter xv, and there is more than a half note of regret in his reference to their loss, which is rather touching, and which we may share for his sake as well as our own. For, though his sight might not then reach to the heavenly Artificer, it was the divine handiwork that he contemplated, the beauty of which so captured, so blinded him by its radiance, that it veiled the immanent Godhead. His steps were but stayed, he was in the approach.

And what of his analysis of beauty—surely, his spirit searched profoundly? For that wholeness, *quasi*

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totum, which he saw in things beautiful, was it not one aspect of beauty? Did it not signify that marvellous completeness, within and without, which meets the eye of the investigator at every step as he ranges through the ranks of material creations, whether he see them in gross or in minutest detail, size having no bearing in relation to artistry; witness that beautiful passage in book xi, chapter 22, of his *City of God* :

‘ For so great an artificer is God in great things that less he may not be in things small, which are not to be measured by their bulk, for that is of no account, but by the craftsmanship (mastery) of the maker.’

Deus autem ita est artifex magnus in magnis, ut minor non sit in parvis, quae parva non sua granditate, nam nulla est, sed artificis sapientia, metienda sunt.

This completeness, perfection, *quasi totum*, though St. Augustine might not then apprehend it, was one aspect of God. And if we need other words to render *quasi totum* might they not be this symmetry, this harmony in form and colour, this perfect balance, which Augustine beheld with the inner eye.

And his second vision of beauty, as embodying adaptation, what is this that he visualizes but purpose incorporate? The recognition of structure as a means to an end, a contrivance, device, in a word the recognition of plan. Beauty is now no longer statuesque, it lives, moves, has become dynamic, seeks an appointed goal.

St. Augustine was groping at the altar of the unknown God, but how much he already saw! Would that somewhere, someone might yet discover those lost books, *De pulchro et apto*. And a last wish, this time for St. Augustine himself; would that he might have had sight of a bee, in search of nectar, nuzzling into the throttle of the common sage, and in the act causing one limb of the pivoted anthers to revolve upon the filament, so as to dust the back of the bee with

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pollen. For which same bee *another* flower of sage was lying in wait with overhanging style and stigma all prepared to receive the pollen as the back of the intruder brushed past! What prevision and concerted provision! Surely it would have brought St. Augustine then and there to his knees?

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A POSER FOR PROPHETS.

THIS Goethe said, and that said Schopenhauer,
Who (so men say that through his pages plod)
Affirmed in ponderous tomes his grapes were sour.
This truth in many a glowing period
Macaulay taught us, Huxley that or Clodd,
And H. G. Wells proclaims in words of power
Some other; but for me a question odd
Insistently emerges: What says God?

Dean Inge informs us, fearless truth-avower
That Papists are as stupid as a clod,
Theology has waited till this hour
For gallant Barnes to rescue her from quod.
For our behoof Eugenia Kindertod
Bids Herod 'ware the babies that devour'
(With full approval of Lord Cumbersod).
And yet the question haunts me: What says God?

L'Envoi.

Prince, when discordant voices overpower
Your hearing, and with questions probe and prod,
If you would fain have peace for half an hour
Then raise your voice and ask them: What says God?

H. E. G. ROPE.