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—D. A. Miller

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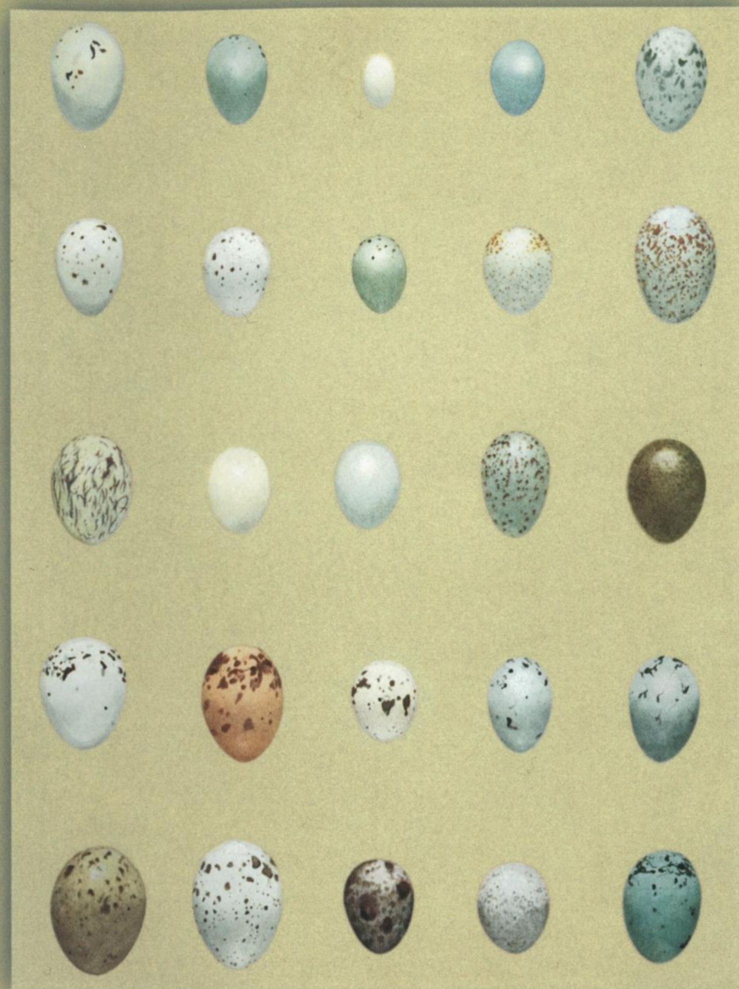
SCARRY

On Beauty

AND BEING JUST

PRINCETON

ELAINE SCARRY



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permitting it to inhabit only the ground of the real. Then the political critique—along with a closely related moral critique and a critique from realism—come forward to assert that beauty (forever discomforting mortals with its idealized conceptions) has no place on the ground of the real. Permitted to inhabit neither the realm of the ideal nor the realm of the real, to be neither aspiration nor companion, beauty comes to us like a fugitive bird unable to fly, unable to land.

Beauty Assists Us in Our Attention to Justice

The positive case that can be made on behalf of beauty has already begun to emerge into view and will stand forth more clearly if we place before ourselves the question of the relation between the beholder and the object beheld. The question can best be posed if we, for a moment, imagine that we are speaking not about the person who comes upon beauty accidentally, or the person who—after valiantly resisting beauty for all the reasons one should be warned against it—at last succumbs, but instead about a person who actively seeks it out.

What is it that such a person seeks? What precisely does one hope to bring about in oneself when one opens oneself to, or even actively pursues, beauty?

When the same question is asked about other enduring objects of aspiration—goodness, truth, justice—the answer seems straightforward. If one pursues goodness, one hopes in doing so to make oneself good. If one pursues justice, one surely hopes to be able one day to count oneself among the just. If one pursues truth, one wishes to make oneself knowledgeable. There is, in other words, a continuity between the thing pursued and the pursuer's own attributes. Although in each case there has been an enhancement of the self, the undertaking and the outcome are in a very deep sense unself-interested since in each case the benefits to others are folded into the nature of my being good, bearing knowledge, or acting fairly. In this sense it may have been misleading to phrase the question in terms of a person's hopes for herself. It would be more accurate to say that one cannot further the aims of justice without (whether one means to or not) placing oneself in the company of the just. What this phrasing and the earlier phrasing have in common, the key matter, is the continuity between the external object and the person who is dedicated to it.

But this continuity does not seem to hold in the case of beauty. It does not appear to be the case that one who pursues beauty becomes beautiful. It may even be accurate to suppose that most people who pursue beauty have no interest in becoming

themselves beautiful. It would be hard to make the same description of someone pursuing the other objects of aspiration: could one pursue truth if one had no interest in becoming knowledgeable? This would seem like quite a feat. How exactly would one go about that? Would there be a way to approach goodness while keeping oneself free of becoming good? Again, a path for doing so does not immediately suggest itself. And the same difficulties await us if we try to come up with a way of furthering the goals of justice while remaining ourselves outside its reach.

Now there are at least three ways in which one might wish to say that the same kind of continuity between beauty and its beholder exists. The beholder, in response to seeing beauty, often seeks to bring new beauty into the world and may be successful in this endeavor. But those dedicated to goodness or truth or justice were also seeking to carry out acts that further the position of these things in the world; the particular alteration of self they underwent (the thing for which we are seeking a parallel) is something additional to the fact that they supplemented the world. A second answer is to say that beholders of beautiful things themselves become beautiful in their interior lives: if the contents of consciousness are full of the calls of birds, mental pictures of the way dancers move, fragments of jazz pieces for piano

and flute, remembered glimpses of ravishing faces, a sentence of incredible tact and delicacy spoken by a friend, then we have been made intensely beautiful. Still, this cannot be a wholly satisfying reply since though the beautiful object may, like the beholder, have internal beauty, it also has external features; this externality has long been held to be crucial to what beauty is, and even to its particular way of turning us toward justice. But there is a third answer that seems more convincing.

One key source of continuity between beholder and beheld became strikingly evident when we earlier saw the way each affirms the aliveness of the other. First we saw in the opening part that beauty is for the beholder lifesaving or life-restoring—a visionary fragment of sturdy ground: the palm tree on the sand of Delos, the floating plank that Augustine holds onto, the branch Noah sees flying through the sky. Then, when we moved from the first to the second part, it became clear that this act of conferring life had a reciprocal counterpart. The thing perceived, the beautiful object, has conferred on it by the beholder a surfeit of aliveness: even if it is inanimate, it comes to be accorded a fragility and consequent level of protection normally reserved for the animate; if inanimate, like a poem, it may, by being memorized or read aloud to others, thereby be lent the aliveness of the person's own consciousness. If

what is beheld is instead a person, he or she may sponsor—literally—the coming into the world of a newborn, so that the person now stands companioned by additional life; the more general manifestation of this same phenomenon is visible in the way one's daily unmindfulness of the aliveness of others is temporarily interrupted in the presence of a beautiful person, alerting us to the requirements placed on us by the aliveness of all persons, and the same may take place in the presence of a beautiful bird, mammal, fish, plant. What has been raised is not the level of aliveness, which is already absolute, but one's own access to the already existing level of aliveness, bringing about, if not a perfect match, at least a less inadequate match between the actual aliveness of others and the level with which we daily credit them. Beauty seems to place requirements on us for attending to the aliveness or (in the case of objects) quasi-aliveness of our world, and for entering into its protection.

Beauty is, then, a compact, or contract between the beautiful being (a person or thing) and the perceiver. As the beautiful being confers on the perceiver the gift of life, so the perceiver confers on the beautiful being the gift of life. Each "welcomes" the other: each—to return to the word's original meaning—"comes in accordance with [the] other's will."[8] Why this reciprocal pact should assist us in turning

toward problems of justice will be looked at in conjunction with the second positive attribute of beauty, the pressure toward distribution that we came upon in attending to the problem of lateral disregard, the way in which the requirements involuntarily placed on us by something extraordinary have as a counterpart the shift toward the voluntary extension of these same perceptions. The compatibility between this distributive feature and a turn toward justice will not be hard to discover, since the language of "distribution" (unlike the language of "aliveness") is already an abiding part of the way we every day think and speak about justice.

The notion of a pact here again comes into play. A single word,"fairness," is used both in referring to loveliness of countenance and in referring to the ethical requirement for "being fair," "playing fair" and "fair distribution." One might suppose that "fairness" as an ethical principle had come not from the adjective for comely beauty but instead from the wholly distinct noun for the yearly agricultural fair, the "periodical gathering of buyers and sellers." But it instead—as scholars of etymology have shown—travels from a cluster of roots in European languages (Old English, Old Norse, Gothic), as well as cognates in both Eastern European and Sanskrit, that all originally express the aesthetic use of "fair" to mean "beautiful" or "fit"—fit both in the sense of

"pleasing to the eye" and in the sense of "firmly placed," as when something matches or exists in accord with another thing's shape or size. "Fair" is connected to the verbs "vegen" (Dutch) and "fegen" (German) meaning "to adorn," "to decorate," and "to sweep." (One recalls Tolstoy, during his decade of deepest commitment to social justice, beginning each day by sweeping his room; as one may think, as well, of the small brooms in Japanese gardens, whose use is sacred, reserved to the priests.) But "fegen" is in turn connected to the verb "fay," the transitive and intransitive verb meaning "to join," "to fit," "to unite," "to pact."[9] "Pact" in turn—the making of a covenant or treaty or agreement—is from the same root as "pax, pacis," the word for peace.

Although the two attributes of beauty can each be described in isolation from the other, they together constitute a two-part cognitive event that affirms the equality of aliveness. This begins within the confined circumference of beholder and beheld who exchange a reciprocal salute to the continuation of one another's existence; this two-member salute becomes, by the pressures against lateral disregard, dispersed out so that what is achieved is an inclusive affirmation of the ongoingness of existence, and of one's own responsibility for the continuity of existence. Our status as the bearer of rights, our equality of aliveness, does not rely on the existence of beautiful

meadows or skies or persons or poems to bring it about; nor, once there are laws and codified rights in place, should beautiful meadows and skies be needed to keep it in view, but—as will be unfolded below—matters that are with difficulty kept legible in one sphere can be assisted by their counterpart in the other.

How this takes place will be clarified if we look first at the connection between beauty as "fairness" and justice as "fairness," using the widely accepted definition by John Rawls of fairness as a "symmetry of everyone's relations to each other." The discussion will then turn to the idea of "aliveness," a word that, though it enters our discussions of justice less openly and less often than words such as "fairness" and "equality," is what is centrally at stake in, and served by, both spheres.

Fairness as "A Symmetry of Everyone's Relation to One Another"

One day I ran into a friend, and when he asked me what I was doing, I said I was trying to explain how beauty leads us to justice. (It happens that this friend is a philosopher and an economist who has spent many years inquiring into the relation between famine and forms of procedural justice such as freedom of the press. He also tracked demographic figures in

to my attention this poem as well as "The Beginning of the End," the poem by Gerard Manley Hopkins I several times quote.

5. I am using Robert Fagles's translation of *The Odyssey*, introd. Bernard Knox (New York: Penguin, 1996), Bk. 6, 168–72, 175–86. Most lines cited are from Book 6; occasionally a phrase from Book 5 or 7 enters.

6. Augustine, *De Musica*, trans. W. F. Jackson Knight, in *Philosophies of Art and Beauty*, ed. Albert Hofstadter and Richard Kuhns (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), 196.

7. As Nausicaa greets Odysseus on the beach, so a short time later Athena greets him when he arrives at the city: "As he was about to enter the welcome city, the bright-eyed goddess herself came up to greet him there." The idea of beauty as a greeting reappears in many classical, medieval, and Renaissance writings—in the description of beauty's "clear discernibility" in Plato, in the attention to the attribute of *claritas* in Aquinas, in the account of beauty as "a call" in both Albertus Magnus and Ficino. In Dante's *Vita nuova* the idea of beauty as a greeting becomes not just a theme or argument but a principle of structure, for the work is organized as a succession of greetings. "It was precisely the ninth hour of that day (three o'clock in the afternoon), when her sweet greeting reached me," reports Dante of Beatrice; and his first sonnet begins: "To every loving heart and captive soul . . . greetings I bring." A greeting, either given or withheld, is the central action and issue throughout. The idea continues across the centuries. When James Joyce's Lynch announces that he is devoted to beauty, Stephen Dedalus responds by lifting his cap in greeting.

8. The English words "energetic" and "melting" occur in various translations of the Sixteenth Letter of Schiller's *On the Aesthetic Education of Man in a Series of Letters*, such as that by Reginald Snell (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1954) and again that by Elizabeth M. Wilkinson and L. A. Willoughby (Oxford: Clarendon, 1967).

9. Shakespeare's sonnets (and a small number of other beautiful things) openly promise that they will be forever beautiful; but most beautiful things make no such claim. They only seem to make such a claim because the very moment they enter our minds, there simultaneously enters our minds a wish that this thing should forever be what it is now. So associated are the two events that the object itself seems to have made the announcement that it will always be what it is now.

10. Physicist Thomas Appelquist, for example, has told me that in particle physics the beauty of a theory is taken to be predictive of its truth; experimental astrophysicist Paul Horowitz, on the other hand, counsels new physicists not to assume that if they come up with a "pretty" theory, it must be true. Exponents of both positions can no doubt be found within each of the two sciences.

Part Two: On Beauty and Being Fair

1. Indeed, at the very moment when beauty was being banished from universities for distracting from social justice, scholars trying to make problems of social justice visible were sometimes accused of "reenacting" the cruelty by making suffering available to the reader's gaze.

2. Ps. 90:17 (King James Version).

3. So odd does such a prohibition sound that it may appear I am inventing the idea for the sake of the argument; yet over the last fifteen years, many students, even the brightest and most good-hearted among them, have (as a result of the general prohibition on beauty) spoken in their papers about the way a poet or novelist reifies a garden or a flower or a beautiful bird by his or her lavish regard.

4. I do not know whether it is possible for a worshiper to have mental pictures of Jesus or Artemis or Krishna or Buddha or

Sarasvati, while withholding from mental view their beauty, but for the duration of the one sentence above, I will assume for the sake of argument that this is possible.

5. It might be objected that even the gardener, in trying to heighten the beauty of a particular bed, might tear out a plant, therefore harming its life; for the gardener, like Keats's poet, carries out "innumerable compositions and decompositions" to arrive at "the snail-horn perception of Beauty." But at most this means that gardeners should be prohibited from tearing out any already existing plant, which should stay where it is or be transplanted to a safe location (a rule some gardeners follow).

But what about the case where the gardener, seeking to make the garden more beautiful, *does* roughly dispose of the plant? Should we conclude that beauty imperils, rather than intensifies, the life contract? One way of answering the question is to ask whether the human protection accorded plants is higher or lower in the garden than in the world outside the garden. When we make this comparison we see that although the gardener has only imperfectly protected the plants, he has given them far more protection than they ordinarily receive. Another approach is to compare the flower garden, where the plants are grown for their beauty, with a vegetable garden, where the plants are grown for the gardener's table. The gardener in the flower garden places himself or herself in voluntary servitude to the flowers; the gardener in the vegetable garden has subordinated the life of the plant to the dinner table. I am not here objecting to the human need to eat; I am simply making the obvious point that in general "beauty" is associated with a life compact or contract, where the perceiver abstains from harming, or even actively enters into the protection of, this fragment of the world.

6. Immanuel Kant, *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime,* trans. John T. Goldthwait, (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1960). The terms listed here occur on 46–49 (passim), 60, 78, 93, 97.

7. The sublime is sometimes credited with having multiplied the kinds of objects that could thereafter be perceived as "aesthetic." But most of the objects in both categories had formerly occupied a territory held under the inclusive rubric of beauty. Plato's or Aquinas's or Dante's conception of beauty had not been limited to the "good-hearted and cheerful." More important, the slightly scornful ring of "the good-hearted and cheerful" in that previous sentence only becomes possible once those adjectives have been severed from their aesthetic siblings, as the laughing angels on the edifice of Rheims Cathedral make clear.

8. Ernest Klein, *A Comprehensive Etymological Dictionary of the English Language* (Amsterdam: Elsevier Publishing, 1971), s.v. "welcome."

9. The conclusions reached about the etymology of "fair" in C. T. Onions's *Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology* (Oxford: Oxford Clarendon, 1966), Klein's *Comprehensive Etymological Dictionary,* and Eric Partridge's *Origins: A Short Etymological Dictionary of Modern English* (New York: Macmillan, 1966) are all in accord with one another, though it is only Klein who directly links the word "fair" to the word for "pact" by focusing on the verb "fay."

10. Because this event happened in childhood, the exact book Amartya Sen was reading has receded from view. Aristotelian philosopher Alan Code suggests several possibilities. In the discussion of distributive justice in *Nicomachean Ethics,* Book 5, chapter 3, Aristotle writes that equality has two terms but justice has four terms; a particular translation of, or commentary upon, this passage may have introduced the figure of the cube, especially since Aristotle observes, "This kind of proportion is termed by mathematicians geometrical proportion" (trans. H. Rackham, in Loeb edition, *Aristotle,* vol. 19 [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1934]).

Benjamin Jowett in his introductions to both Book 6 and Book 9 of Plato's *Republic* alludes to the contemporary belief that justice was a cube, and Plato's own statements in section 546a–547a, discussing cubes, perfect numbers, and the nuptial number of "divine beginnings," may be consistent with such a belief.

11. Throughout the 1990s, articles appeared in key science journals such as *Nature* claiming (1) that "symmetry" is by birds, butterflies, and other creatures chosen in mating over every other feature (such as size, color), possibly because it is taken as a visible manifestation of overall sturdiness of the genetic material; (2) that infants in different cultures stare longer at faces that are highly symmetrical, and also prefer classical music whose passages are symmetrically arranged over the same classical pieces whose musical phrases have been randomly reordered; and (3) that adults choose faces with symmetrical features (nose and mouth precisely equidistant between eyes), and seem to make identical choices across such distant cultures as Scotland and Japan. The research in all three areas is controversial and may well be overturned or qualified over the next decade. But even if the extreme claims of this research are retracted, symmetry will without doubt remain an important element in assessments of beauty.

12. This is again the W. F. Jackson Knight translation of *De Musica*, 186, 190, 191, 194, 201. Augustine perceives "equality" not just in a formal feature such as symmetry but in color: a patch of blue (or green or red or yellow) continually iterates itself across the surface it occupies.

13. The importance of a doctrinal location is visible in the debates about conscientous objection. See, for example, the special issue of *Rutgers Law Review* 21, no. 7 (Fall 1966) on "Civil Disobedience and the Law."

14. Bruce Russett, *Grasping the Democratic Peace: Principles for a Post-Cold War World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 59.

15. J. S. Morrison and J. F. Coates, *The Athenian Trireme: The History and Reconstruction of an Ancient Greek Warship* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986). See also Lionel Casson, *Ships and Seamanship in the Ancient World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971).

16. "Concerning the Poet," in *Where Silence Reigns: Selected Prose by Rainer Maria Rilke*, trans. G. Craig Houston, foreword by Denise Levertov (New York: New Directions, 1978), 65–66.

17. Mary Ryan, "The American Parade: Representations of the Nineteenth-Century Social Order," in *The New Cultural History*, ed. Lynn Hunt (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1989), 131–53.

18. Rowing as a vehicle of democracy in the United States is argued by Helen A. Cooper in *Thomas Eakins: The Rowing Pictures* (New Haven: Yale University Press and Yale Art Gallery, 1996), 24–25, 36, 44.

19. Eakins expresses his vision of the painter as rower in a March 6, 1868, letter to his father cited in ibid., 32.

20. Cassius, *Considerations on the Society or Order of Cincinnati, Lately Instituted by the Major-Generals, Brigadiers, and Other Officers of the American Army, Proving that it Creates, A Race of Hereditary Patricians, or Nobility, and Interspersed with Remarks on its Consequences to the Freedom and Happiness in the Republick*, reprinted in *Anglo-American Antimilitary Tracts 1697–1830*, ed. R. Kohn (New York: Arno Press, 1979). The beautiful fabric or canopy of military equality is spoken of by secretary of war General Knox in his 1786 proposal to Congress for a militia, quoted in the 1863 tract by J. Willard, *Plan for the General Arrangement of the Militia of the United States* (Boston: J. Wilson & Sons), 29; and again by William Sumner in 1826, *A Paper on the Militia Presented to the Hon. James Barbour, Secretary of War* (Washington: B. Homans, 1833), 9. See also Ransom Gillet's address to the House of Representatives, *Congressional Globe*, 24th Cong., 1st sess., 1836, 235, 237.

21. Weil, "Love of the Order of the World," in *Waiting for God,* 159.

22. Ibid., 163.

23. Ibid., 180.

24. Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good over Other Concepts: The Leslie Stephen Lecture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967), 2.

25. Ibid., 10.

26. Andreas Eshete, conversation with author, January 1998.

27. John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971), 83–87. Other references throughout Part Two to John Rawls's ideas about fairness can be found on 12, 115.

28. Richard Wollheim, "On Drawing an Object," in *On Art and Mind* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1974), 3–30.

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