

Beauty and the Pact of Aliveness

By Elaine Scarry

It is a great honor and pleasure to be present for these induction and award ceremonies, and it's a special delight and surprise to be introduced by Ann Beattie.

I want to speak this afternoon about the way in which beauty presses us to a greater concern for justice. Both beauty and justice have in English a shared synonym—the word “fairness.” We speak in the aesthetic realm of fair vistas, fair skies, fair faces, but we also speak in the realm of justice, of fair playing fields and fair arrangements. It might be surprising to be reminded that the word “fair” in “fair play” and “fair practices” comes etymologically from the aesthetic word “fairness,” meaning “loveliness of countenance,” or “perfection of fit.” Both “beauty” and “justice” have “injury” as their opposite term. In the case of justice, this is literally the case. The second syllable of “injury” is the same root as “injustice.” And injury, I believe, is the most accurate opposite to beauty.

When we speak about beauty, whether a poem by John Keats, a novel by Emily Brontë, a painting by Matisse, a lover's face, a mathematical proof, or the structure of the atom, we are speaking, often, about three different sites, and in each of them, the connection between beauty and justice can be glimpsed.

Often when we speak about beauty, we are speaking about the beautiful thing itself—the face of Dante's Beatrice, or a Greek vase, or the Hudson River at dawn. And we account for its beauty in terms of formal features such as symmetry, clarity, color, vivacity, or unity. In the second site of beauty, we are speaking not about the object, but the perceptual event that happens when one of us comes into the presence of the object, such as the moment when Socrates gives his famous account of coming into the presence of a beautiful, young boy. His knees begin to buckle, he breaks into a sweat, and his shoulder blades begin to sprout feathers since he's remembering his home in the immortal world. The third site of beauty again takes place inside the perceiver, but this time, it is not what happens to the perceiver in the first split second of coming upon beauty, but in the minutes, hours, and even days afterwards, and what happens in the aftermath is an act of creation.

So now, let me back up to each of these three, and make audible the call to justice that is embedded in each. So the first site, the beautiful object itself—a vase, a flower, a child's face, a painting, a poem. Formal attributes such as symmetry, or vivacity, anticipate parallel, but much more difficult to attain attributes in the realm of justice. The symmetry of the beautiful face or beautiful equation anticipates John Rawls's definition of justice as fairness, in which fairness requires, “a symmetry in all our relations with one another.” Today, Rawls's theory of justice is one of the most widely known accounts of justice, but it would be difficult to find any account of justice in any century that does not stress symmetry, whether it is Plato talking about the necessity of a symmetry between crimes and punishments, or whether we listen to many centuries of discussion about the necessity of having compensation that is symmetrical to the work that was

done, or whether we take something unusual, such as Hume's account of the necessity for a symmetry between expectations and their fulfillment.

Let me now go to the second site of beauty, where it's not the object itself, but the cognitive event that happens when one suddenly comes into the presence of the object. Of the hundreds of accounts of this moment over many centuries, two of the most striking are given by two mid-twentieth century women philosophers, Iris Murdoch and Simone Weil, who speak of the "un-selfing" or radical decentering that comes about in the presence of beauty. Iris Murdoch gives the example of being in a state of self-preoccupation, worrying about her work or worrying about her status not being fully appreciated and then suddenly seeing a bird lift off in flight. At that moment, all one's self-absorption falls away, and one undergoes an un-selfing. The French philosopher and mystic, Simone Weil, referred to this same phenomenon as a radical decentering because we're suddenly swept to the sidelines. I refer to this state as a state of "opiated adjacency," and here's why I like this very awkward term. There are many things in life that give us an acute state of pleasure, that opiate us, and there are many things in life that make us feel marginal or lateral or on the sidelines. But what is deeply and abidingly extraordinary about beautiful things is that they do those two things at once. They put us in a state of bliss at the very moment that they make us feel marginal or secondary, happy to be a supporting rather than a central character.

None of us are the center of the world, but each of us can get into the mistake of believing that we are the center of our *own* world. Beauty relieves us of this. It not only puts us on the sidelines, but makes us acutely happy to be there on the sidelines. Becoming capable of experiencing bliss in one's own lateralness may not be itself a state of justice, but it certainly prepares us for doing such work in the world. Murdoch arrives at her account of beauty by asking 'what is it that helps us to be good?' Not what lets us talk about being good, but what lets us actually become good. And she concludes that of all things, the leading one is that which people every day refer to as beauty.

Now I turn to the third site of beauty, where one is again speaking of the perceiver, but this time the perceiver in the enduring moments after coming into the presence of the beautiful. Accounts given over many centuries report the link between the exposure to the beautiful and the desire to create. Diotima told Socrates who told Plato who tells us that the beauty of the face of the person you love gives rise to the desire to bring children into the world. But Diotima says that beautiful persons and things not only prompt the creation of children, but the creation of poems, plays, legal treatises, and works of philosophy. Twentieth-century philosophers agree with Diotima, Socrates, and Plato. What is it, Wittgenstein asks, that happens when we stand in the presence of a beautiful building or a boy or a flower? He answers, when the eye sees something beautiful, the hand wants to draw it.

Instead of the word "creation," it is in my judgment sometimes useful to use the much more prosaic word "replication," because that second word reminds us how widespread the impulse is. There may be very great outcomes: a new child, a new piece of architecture, a breakthrough in mathematical thinking, something we would all recognize as a great act of creation. But the same impulse is evident if one sees something beautiful and wants to take a photograph of it or tell a friend about it or simply stand there and perpetuate the moment of seeing it for twenty seconds

longer, keeping it within your perceptual horizon. These everyday outcomes are also acts of creation. They are counter-factual. They bring into being something that wasn't there before. Now, how is this third site, the incitement to creation, yoked to justice? It's yoked in two ways. First, beauty may be either natural or artifactual. It may occur in a field of wildflowers, or instead in an act of artistry like Monet's painting of that field of wildflowers. Justice, in contrast, is always artifactual. It always requires acts of human intervention and creation. Anything therefore which puts us in touch with our own powers of creation is itself a contribution to the ongoing aspiration for justice. The philosopher, David Hume, is among those who have emphasized this point. He said that natural virtues need to have some benign outcome in order to be good. Whereas the artificial or artifactual virtues need have no immediately visible outcome, since the mere exercise of our capacity for the artifactual is a good outcome.

The second way in which beauty, by at once awakening us to our capacity for the artifactual, contributes to justice is simply that it is tied to the desire to bring more and more into the world so that there is eventually enough. That impulse toward plenitude has many names. It may be understood as it was in earlier centuries by the name infinity, or caritas, or as it is today in the language of fair distribution.

So this third site is important because it incites us to the exercise of the artifactual, which is related to the realm of justice, and second because it is bound up with a pressure towards distribution, the making of more and more, so that there will eventually be enough. I have no objection to the fact that advertisers use beautiful persons and scenes to sell things, but it leads to a deeply mistaken idea. It seems to say, when you see something beautiful, buy it. But centuries of philosophers and poets and mathematicians tell us something very different—when you see something beautiful, begin to repair the injuries of the world. The beautiful things we encounter in the classroom every day, or in the museum, or on the city streets, call upon us to act on behalf of justice.

Poets, philosophers, and art theorists have over millennia seen beauty as a life pact. In the sixth book of the *Odyssey*, Homer describes the moment when Odysseus is saved from the man-killing ocean, and sees the young child, Nausicaa, and sees in her newness, newborn-ness. Augustine in *De Musica* described beauty as “a life-saving plank in the midst of the ocean.” The face of Beatrice inspired Dante to write *The Divine Comedy*, but it also incited an earlier work, *The New Life, La Vita Nuova*. Rilke in “Archaic Torso of Apollo,” says beauty confronts us with the imperative, “You must change your life.” Kant, in the third *Critique of Judgment*, repeatedly asks us to accept the bond between “beauty” and “aliveness,” as the Kantian philosopher Rudolf Makkreel makes clear. The astrophysicist, Mario Livio, points out the presence of symmetry in something very much bound up with new life, the “male-defining Y chromosome.” He writes that “when its genome sequencing was completed in 2003 . . . researchers . . . discovered that about six million of the Y chromosome's fifty million DNA letters form palindromic sequences which read the same forward and backward,” a way of ensuring survival by protecting against errors in transmission. And there are countless other examples such as the anthropologist Francesco Pellizzi, who asked one group of Native Americans what the word was for beauty in their language. The answer, “aliveness.”

Is this association of beauty and aliveness wishful thinking? Or is it literally the case? The formulation may seem melodramatic in telling of man-killing oceans and planks in the midst of the ocean. But I think there are two very literal claims embedded in the association. First, it repairs the ground and restores trust. It puts ground under your feet. Second, beauty demands a higher level of perceptual acuity, a vivacity of perception. It raises the bar for what counts as seeing. Sometimes my students worry that beautiful persons and things will steal their attention away from the rest of the world. So I asked them to conduct the following experiment: The next time you are walking down the street, and are suddenly stopped in your tracks by a beautiful face or flower, ask yourself, were you walking along generously contemplating the world and its problems, or were you in a daze until the face or flower suddenly woke you up and brought you to full attention?

Now, so far, it sounds as though this life pact is one-directional. Beautiful things -- poems, paintings, photographs, buildings, faces, and math equations -- heighten our own aliveness, but in what sense does the reciprocal act occur? The answer is this: It elicits from us a desire to protect and take care of a thing if it is already alive, such as a garden, or a stream, or a forest, or a species of bird; and it gets us to confer the privileges of life-likeness onto the thing if it is an artifact. If a painting is stolen from the Gardner Museum in Boston or the National Gallery in Berlin, we -- and I mean we, the people across the whole earth -- have a concern for its surface and well-being as though it were alive. To become the steward or guardian or protector of it is the work carried out by museum curators, librarians, and teachers, but this act of stewardship is also carried out by the public at large.

So this reciprocal conferring of aliveness is, then, a kind of life pact. It is no accident that those who have worked tirelessly on behalf of the earth and all its species, like the environmentalist Rachel Carson or John Muir, or those fiercely opposing nuclear weapons, like Jonathan Schell or Bertrand Russell, have often attributed their work to the beauty of earth. Quoting the British naturalist Richard Jeffries, Rachel Carson wrote: "the hours when the mind is absorbed by beauty are the only hours when we truly live." And Bertrand Russell once imagined the god Osiris preparing to destroy the human species out of disgust over our invention and perpetuation of nuclear weapons. He then imagined defending the human species. His ground for doing so was the work of artists creating beauty. Consider the poets, he said in his address to Osiris. "Consider the poets, the composers, the painters, the men [and women] whose inward vision has been shown to the world in works of mystic splendor. . . . These are the things which lie within human power, and which given time, future ages may achieve. For such reason, Lord Osiris we beseech thee to grant us a respite, and a chance to emerge from ancient folly into a world of light and love and loveliness."

Thank you.