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## Beauty for Ashes: Reflections on Aesthetic Experience and Suffering

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# Beauty for Ashes: Reflections on Aesthetic Experience and Suffering

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## Abstract

In this essay, I examine the relationship between aesthetic experience and suffering, and I specifically explore how and why the former can potentially serve to meliorate the severity of the latter. Of course, that art and beauty can provide a certain measure of comfort and healing to the afflicted is a universally acknowledged truth; however, the reasons why this should be so could be considered an equally universal mystery. “I feel we understand too little about the psychology of loss,” writes Arthur Danto, “to understand why the creation of beauty is so fitting a way of marking it.” By exploring how a number of thinkers (from philosophers to physicians to literary theorists) have viewed the relationship between aesthetic experience and suffering, I advance two theses: first, that aesthetic experience can, in fact, potentially serve to restore a measure of wholeness to an individual whose suffering has damaged or even destroyed the integrity of their personhood and second, that despite this potential benefit of aesthetic experience, the severity and uniqueness of individual suffering will always resist any endeavor to formalize attempts to treat its various manifestations.

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...People have an instinct to leave flowers in a place where something terrible has happened, by the roadside where there was an accident, in front of a building where someone was shot. It's not like bringing flowers to a grave where the body has been laid to rest. Those flowers are not the same. Someone dies a horrible death and suddenly the bouquets appear. It's a desperate instinct to leave a mark of innocence on a violent wound, to mark a place where that last twitching nerve of innocence was stilled. The very first—the very first—shop to open up in the ruins of the city, during the very first days following the German occupation, perched on top of the rubble, in the snow! – was a florist's shop. Even before the abandoned half-wrecked tram that contained the first café, selling soup and ersatz coffee – there was the florist. All the foreign journalists marveled at it – such a sense of life, such fortitude, such spirit – all the drivel those journalists spluttered. Blah, blah, blah! Etcetera, etcetera, etcetera! But no one said what was surely simple and obvious: you need flowers for a grave. You need flowers for a place of violent death. Flowers were the very first thing we needed. Before bread. And long before words

– Anne Michaels, *The Winter Vault*

...To console all those who mourn in Zion, to give unto them beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness; that

they might be called trees of righteousness, the plantings of the Lord, that his name might be glorified

– Isaiah 61:3

There is a balm in Gilead  
To make the wounded whole

– Traditional African-American Spiritual

That aesthetic experience, and especially the experience of beauty, is mysteriously related to suffering is something I feel we all understand instinctively. Why else would we send flowers to the sick and bereaved, listen to special music in times of despair, seek and cultivate beauty in nature as forms of spiritual sustenance and renewal, commemorate our lost ones with beautiful ceremonies and works of art, spontaneously leave flowers, candles, and precious mementos at the public sites of tragedy and loss or stand in solitude under the stars when our hearts are heavy? When we reflect on these and countless similar examples, the interconnectedness of aesthetic experience and suffering seems beyond dispute. And yet, though we all share, in the common fabric of experience, the affinity between suffering and beauty, few of us would be able to explain in depth why they are so intimately related, nor why we are so deeply moved by their constant conjunction in our lives. Although I have very little light to shed on this mystery, I do want to offer some tentative reflections on the way I feel aesthetic experience (and specifically the experience of beauty) relates spiritually to suffering and why I think that the testimony of our lived experience is oftentimes the surest way of measuring the nature and value of this relationship.

In an essay on beauty and morality, the philosopher Arthur Danto provides a provocative starting point: “I feel we understand too little about the psychology of loss,” he writes, “to understand why the creation of beauty is so fitting a way of marking it .... It is as though beauty

were a kind of catalyst, transforming raw grief into tranquil sadness, almost, one might say, by putting the loss into a certain philosophical perspective.”<sup>1</sup> As he continues to describe this perspective, Danto speculates that the reason we find the experience of beauty at times so consoling is that it helps us recognize the universality of suffering and our shared humanity. This is why special forms of beauty, in his words, “give the bereaved a certain strength in the recognition of his or her participation in the very meaning of what it is to be human.”<sup>2</sup>

Although, in the context of his main thesis, Danto’s reflections on the relationship between beauty and suffering remain speculative, they are nevertheless deeply illuminating, especially with respect to the redemptive power certain works of art possess (which is the specific subject of his essay). While I would agree, however, that to experience beauty in the midst of pain or despair does make us philosophical about the fact that we are all, as the Book of Job says, “born to suffering as the sparks fly upward,” I would nevertheless go beyond this and say that beauty is not merely philosophically significant but spiritually significant as well, for it plants (however unconsciously) a seed of hope in spirits otherwise bereft of hope, and it does this principally by providing us (however modestly) with something to love precisely when our powers to love and to affirm life have been radically diminished or damaged or even destroyed by suffering and affliction. The dynamics of this transformation (from despair to hope) can be clarified by reflecting more deeply on what Danto describes as “the psychology of loss” (that is, on the general ways suffering affects the human spirit), and by examining more closely the nature of beauty and our experience of it.

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<sup>1</sup> Arthur Danto, *Embodied Meanings: Critical Essays and Aesthetic Meditations*, (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1994), 364.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

While I cannot pretend to provide anything like a clinician's understanding of these dynamics, and while my analysis is certainly not designed either to reflect the enormous complexity and variability of human suffering or to minimize the importance of medicine in diagnosing its causes and meliorating its symptoms, I would nevertheless suggest (as a starting point) that one of the essential characteristics of suffering is its capacity to threaten, injure, or destroy an individual's sense of wholeness. In his penetrating study *The Nature of Suffering and the Goals of Medicine*, Eric J. Cassell captures this insight in his own definition of suffering: "Most generally," he writes, "suffering can be defined as the state of severe distress associated with events that threaten the intactness of [a] person."<sup>3</sup> For Cassell, who *is* deeply concerned about the clinical dimensions of suffering, the key concept to understand in this regard is the concept of the person, which involves not merely the body or the mind or the spirit but the dynamic unity of all three. In actuality, Cassell outlines twelve interdependent dimensions of personhood, the loss of or damage to any one of which can generate suffering. As he puts it, "all the aspects of personhood – the lived past, the family's lived past, culture and society, roles, the instrumental dimension, associations and relationships, the body, the unconscious mind, the political being, the secret life, the perceived future, and the transcendent-being dimension – are susceptible to damage or loss."<sup>4</sup>

For purposes of my thesis, Cassell's analysis is extremely helpful; yet, the most pertinent insight emerges in a section of his study entitled "The Melioration of Suffering." After discussing a number of ways personhood can be restored after it has been shattered by suffering, Cassell focuses his attention on the specific concept of transcendence. Because of its relevance to

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<sup>3</sup> Eric J. Cassell, *The Nature of Suffering and the Goals of Medicine*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 33.

<sup>4</sup> Cassell, *Nature of Suffering*, 43.

what I will have to say about the experience of beauty, I quote this passage in full:

“Transcendence,” he writes,

is probably the most powerful way in which one is restored to wholeness after an injury to personhood. When experienced, transcendence locates the person in a far larger landscape. The sufferer is not isolated by pain but is brought closer to a transpersonal source of meaning and to the human community that shares that meaning. Such an experience need not involve religion in any formal sense; however, in its transpersonal dimension it is deeply spiritual.<sup>5</sup>

It is important to underscore one of the chief symptoms of suffering suggested by this passage, and that is the feeling of isolation that oftentimes envelopes the one who suffers. Like a wounded animal secluding itself to lick its wounds, wounded humans, too, have a natural tendency to withdraw from the world, to feel isolated and alienated from all those who do not or cannot share their suffering. When individuals experience severe trauma, for instance, as in cases of abuse or torture or atrocity, their experiences are oftentimes referred to as “unspeakable” which reflects the fact that radical suffering can initially destroy even language itself, our most important means of maintaining connection with the world. Cassell suggests, however, that to restore connections with others and with the world, to *re-integrate* the person *dis-integrated* by suffering, some form of transcendence is necessary. What I now wish to suggest, in light of Cassell’s thesis, is that our experience of beauty provides one (potentially very profound) means of effecting just such a transcendence.

To understand more fully how the experience of beauty can help an individual transcend the sense of isolation created by suffering and begin the process of restoring the integrity of the

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<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

self, it is important first of all to emphasize the power of beauty to draw us out of ourselves. This is what Schopenhauer almost two centuries ago (influenced as much by Buddhism and the Upanishads as by Kant) meant when he wrote that beauty “almost always succeeds in snatching us...from subjectivity, from the thralldom of the will...” so that “the storm of passions, the pressure of desire and fear, and all the miseries of willing are then at once calmed and appeased in a marvelous way.”<sup>6</sup> A century later in France, Simone Weil would evoke the same theme noting that beauty requires us “to give up our imaginary position as the center ..., to empty ourselves of our false divinity, to give up being the center of the world in imagination, to discern that all points in the world are equally centers and that the true center is outside the world...”<sup>7</sup>

Citing just this passage from Weil’s writing in her work entitled *On Beauty and Being Just*, the contemporary philosopher Elaine Scarry introduces her own version of this insight (which is worth quoting in full): “At the moment we see something beautiful,” she writes,

we undergo a radical decentering.... When we come upon beautiful things...they act like small tears in the surface of the world that pull us through to some vaster space...so that...we find we are standing in a different relation to the world than we were a moment before. It is not that we cease to stand at the center of the world, for we never stood there. It is that we cease to stand even at the center of our own world. We willingly cede our ground to the [beautiful] thing that stands before us.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, Vol. 1, trans. E.F.J. Payne, (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1969), 196-97.

<sup>7</sup> Simone Weil, “Love of the Order of the World,” in *Waiting for God*, trans. Emma Craufurd, (New York: Harper and Row, 1951), 159.

<sup>8</sup> Elaine Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just*, (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1999), 111-12.

Here, therefore, is how the experience of beauty can effect the type of transcendence discussed by Cassell, how beauty can help restore a wounded person to wholeness by locating him or her “in a far larger landscape.”

Crispin Sartwell evokes this same theme, though from a considerably different perspective, in his study of multicultural visions of beauty called *Six Names of Beauty*.<sup>9</sup> Addressing the question of why it seems natural to send flowers to a funeral or to people who are experiencing loss and grief, Sartwell’s insights are worth quoting in full:

Beauty always bears within it the poignancy of loss, and the cut flower is not only an occasion of visual pleasure, but a symbol of what passes.

The loss that lingers in every beautiful thing intensifies desire. Indeed, if we did not age, if things did not disintegrate, the experience of beauty would be impossible. Without loss, desire could be fulfilled at will; things would exist for us as perfect resources, always potentially available for our use. That we can lose things, that in fact we are always in the process of losing everything we have, underlies the longing with which we inhabit the world. And in that longing resides the possibility of beauty. The flowers and the music at a funeral are meant to make grief more poignant, to bring everyone into full participation with the grief, by including in it the touch of beauty....<sup>10</sup>

Returning to this theme later in his book, Sartwell continues his reflections on beauty’s relationship to suffering and loss:

When someone you love dies, you are in danger of having the life within you attenuated. The mourners at a funeral may lose their own will toward life; they are in danger of forgetting or renouncing desire. The flowers are there to show you what you have lost,

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<sup>9</sup> Crispin Sartwell, *Six Names of Beauty* (London: Routledge, 2004).

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.



what we are all always in the process of losing, but they are also there, and in some way this is the same thing, to remind you that life isn't only loss. The flowers remind us to reawaken into desire. The funeral, in its ceremonial beauty and dignity, enables our suffering and also intends to return us to life. It plays on our longing for desire itself, reminds us that we must start desiring again or relinquish the world.<sup>11</sup>

I wish to gather these tentative reflections to a close by touching briefly on the significance I feel they bear to our sense of the sacred. Most everyone would agree that suffering, in whatever form it takes, diminishes our sense of the value and meaningfulness of life, just as it threatens our capacity to love. The longing for redemption from suffering, for wholeness and health, for harmony and vitality, both individually and collectively, is truly a sacred longing, but because we can never escape suffering, we are faced with at least three distinct possibilities: we can either withdraw from the world in disgust, rejecting it as a wicked hoax; we can fill our lives with pleasurable distractions so as perhaps to postpone our confrontations with suffering for as long as possible; or we can discover ways to affirm the sacred value of life and this world despite the inevitability of suffering. Although I readily admit that it is near to impossible to see beyond the walls of suffering, what I have tried to suggest here is that beauty can sometimes open a small crack in these walls so that broader vistas and landscapes become visible as sources of healing and wholeness.

In the final analysis, I believe that our experiences of beauty are ultimately experiences of love, and this is why they are healing experiences. Love, of course, can be damaged or perverted in as many ways as beauty itself can be damaged or perverted. And though neither love nor beauty can spare us from suffering, I feel they nevertheless possess the potential to restore our

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<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

broken spirits to wholeness, however modestly or provisionally, by drawing us ever closer to the source of the sacred. Perhaps there is no more profound evocation of this vision than the one Rainer Maria Rilke summoned in his *Duino Elegies*, a series of ten poems which provided a sustained exploration of the relationship between suffering and the healing experience of beauty. At the end of *The First Elegy*, the poet refers to the death of Linos who in Greek mythology was a child of one of the Muses and an extraordinary musician (akin to Orpheus) and who was killed in his youth by Apollo out of a fit of jealousy. In a state of profound loss and mourning, the poet nevertheless finds a measure of healing in the “vibration” (or music) which filled the “Void” left by the youth’s death:

Is the tale to no purpose, that once in mourning for Linos  
the first daring music pierced through  
that rigid bleakness: that only in the startled space which suddenly  
an almost godlike youth abandoned, the Void  
came into that vibration which now transports us and comforts and helps.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> R. M. Rilke, *The Duino Elegies*, trans. Stephen Garmey and Jay Wilson, (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), 38.