The Beautiful and the Ugly are One Thing, the Sublime Another: A Reflection on Culture

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Keats compounds an error when he writes, initially, that "a thing of beauty is a joy for ever" (the opening line of *Endymion*), and, later, "Beauty is truth, truth beauty—that is all / Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know" (the last line of *Ode on a Grecian Urn*). He reveals here the limitations of his particular version of romanticism, but let me begin with some obvious objections to his poetic epigrams.

First, beauty is ethnocentric, it is in the eye of the cultured beholder. For example, what we would consider obesity, and/or the gross exaggeration of secondary sexual features, is considered beautiful and *desirable* among certain peoples of East Africa. Arab or East Indian music characteristically grates on the Western ear—West African drumming can hardly be followed in its subtle variation of rhythms—but these sounds are beautiful and *expressive* in their native haunts.

There is no limit to such comparisons—shifting fashions outmode each other consistently in the urban West—what is beautiful today may be an embarrassment tomorrow. But apart from this cultural inhibition of universalistic definitions of beauty, one notices also, and more importantly, that the division between beauty and ugliness is not only a matter between cultures—or between periods in the same society—but it is also a question of aesthetic principle. Suppressing the cultural issue—i.e., the specificity of cultures—for a moment, one is struck not by the distinction between the beautiful and the ugly, but by their fundamental similarity; in a certain sense, their identity. If beauty can be defined as the pleasing harmony of parts—so that what is beautiful has the character of a mechanical, a superficial integrity—then what is ugly can be defined as a disharmonious totality: a nose too large for its face; protruding teeth; a chin too small by a whisker; a character notably deficient in certain respects, exaggeratedly effective in others; a painting that veers too close to the skin of the subject; an affair that loses the reciprocity of its passion, and so on. At the same time, disharmonies in one period may be the harmonies of another, so even here, one must be exceedingly careful about drawing too sharply the fine line between the beautiful and the ugly.

The fineness of that distinction is evident in another way, namely, with reference to the ambiguous image of the trickster, found everywhere in the primitive world, and *mutatis mutandis,* in civilization also. The trickster may appear as the supreme creator, and at the same time as a being of extraordinary physical and spiritual ugliness. In the Janus-faced trickster, the beautiful and the ugly spring from the same body.

Further, Keats's effort to unite beauty and joy is forced—they are no more related to each other than are ugliness and joy, or, ultimately, happiness and joy. For beauty, I think, conduces to happiness, and ugliness to sorrow in the secular, if romantic, consciousness of the West. Recall the fairy tale wherein a frog kissed by a princess turns back into the apocalyptically beautiful consort, whose superiority is manifest in his appearance—or other variations on the Sleeping Beauty theme. On the other hand, the degradation of what is conceived as ugly in our society knows no bounds.

Thus Keats's notion that beauty and joy are one provides us with another perspective on the spiritual problematic of his poetry, while revealing an aspect of the dangers of a romanticism that stops short of the transcendental. It is a danger that most Western poets confront—as they become aware that the romantic consciousness, which in one definition can be understood as empathy with the inwardness of the other, is then faced with a dilemma. Either it achieves a transcendental awareness that protects the independence of the other whom one is understanding, or it collapses into mere sentimentality, the incorporation of the other. I should note that the effort to ingest the other, or to be ingested by the other, represents two distinct phases in the history of the modern consciousness, the latter being the "natural" mode for "contemporary individualism." It is not merely the experience of this transcendental imperative that is absent in Keats's epigram; this absence is also the negation expressed in the desecration of *La Belle Dame Sans Merci*—the romantic consciousness turning back on itself and cannibalizing its own body. It is safe to assume that had La Belle Dame not only proven to be yielding, but truly gracious, and, above all, constant, Keats would have attained to the happiness of their reciprocal harmonies. But such happiness should not be conceived as joy. And sooner rather than later, the lady's unattainability would have reasserted itself as a necessity of his secular romantic sensibility.

Keats's definition and pursuit of what he calls truth is, I think, reducible to the aesthetics of what he calls beauty; moreover, this assimilation of truth to beauty, or, more properly, to the equation of beauty to truth as all we "need to know on earth" epitomizes the view that I am opposing as mediated by Keats. On one level I suppose we can call Keats's conceptions Platonic, even Platonic compulsions, though the poet's specificity would surely have rubbed Plato the wrong way.

So Keats's concluding epigram in *Ode on a Grecian Urn* further confounds the issue. A thing of beauty, he claims, is not only a "joy" forever; it is also the essence of truth. Truth and beauty and joy are presumably aspects of a unified experience—the ultimate in human gratification—indeed, of human knowledge. It is fair to say that Keats's poetry implies far more than his philosophy, but I take

the metaphysically limited Keats, rather than the potentially infinite Keats, as an example of the way in which the question of the sublime can be evaded or obscured.

For the mere deepening of gratification from the "joyful" experience of beauty as truth does not achieve the sublime. The experience of the sublime is both transcendental and quintessentially cultural at the same time. Language itself is the transcendence of the biological, it is the medium of culture, and culture is a rope-bridge thrown across a biological chasm. As the objective realizations of the human essence, that is, as the existentializing of our human possibilities, culture(s) is the arena for the construction of meanings: it represents a struggle that is constant and renewed in each generation, and evident in the lives of individuals as they strive to become cultured human beings.

This is not the same as what is called enculturation (or socialization), because these disciplinary catchwords remain reductive in their implications; they do not comprehend the struggle against a dominating or exploitative socialization process in a particular society. For the struggle for culture is, by definition, against all those forces that reduce people to productive and reproductive social mechanisms. Ultimately, all forms of structuralism and mechanical materialism define human activities as universally conceived functions that lose their cultural-historical specificity. For example, the fact that people must eat in order to survive is a universal function, of course, but no one just eats—one eats in different modes, different cuisines, and so on. So it is with shelter and clothing, sexual activity, and all other biological necessities. But in exploitative societies, these needs can be reduced to a productive-reproductive routine, as cultural symbols shrink into behavioral signs, culture no longer serving as the ground for the expression of the meanings that transcend mere functionality. For culture is itself a transcendence, making available a commonality of language that can be combined and recombined into the most illuminating constructions of human *telos*. Perhaps it is necessary to state that the realm of the technical itself can only reach its human realization within the cultural process to which I refer.

There are no certainties here, only struggle and contingency, pain and realization. Gratification, satisfaction, or happiness are not at issue. But, we encounter *joy*. This is the joy that one finds in Lear, as he hurls his words into the terrible void that engulfs him. The joy is in the words, in his matured sensibility, in his challenge to nature and human defeat. The joy is in the challenge, and in the formulation of his meanings. Or observe the final shuffling off of guilt by Oedipus at Colonnus, as Sophocles etherealizes him in a beam of light. Or, the conclusion of the Winnebago medicine rite, when the initiate finally achieves his emancipation from society, after bearing all the abuse that society may heap upon him. Or, for that matter, the ordinary rituals of maturing and variegated experience known in every primitive society, whereby growth is attended by pain, where a new name may be earned, and where the past is arduously incorporated into the present, preparing the individual for the next ritual round as he moves higher in the spiritual hiearchy of his society. That is where the joy is. And finally, it is this joy,

not Keats's beauty or truth, which defines the sublime, beyond the confines of the merely aesthetic, breaking all the formal rules of aesthetics, beyond the range of the romantic imagination. For we are not talking of imagination here, but of experience and its meanings, whether in the culture of dreams, the culture of the hunt, or in the ceremonies of rebirth. And finally, I am talking of the sacred space, the sacred silence that lies beyond language, but remains grounded in language.