

**Beauty Trouble:
Identity and Difference in the Tradition of the Aesthetic¹**

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Some there are who say the fairest thing seen
on the black earth is an array of horsemen;
some, men marching; some would say ships; but I say
she whom one loves best

is the loveliest. (Sappho [c.610-c.580 BCE] fragment 3.
Lattimore tr.)

While I was thinking over what I would say about beauty I heard a radio report about a new kind of brain scanning machine that gives doctors a more detailed picture than the old brain scanning machines. The reporter said that with the new machine, Doctors can see "exactly what is going on in a patient's mind." Then he said that this machine could enable scientists to "finally establish what consciousness is." It occurred to me that the assumption that we can arrive at *exactly what's going on* and *finally establish* things has very much to do with beauty. That's what I want to talk about.

Well, what's it going to be? Consciousness *is* a *chemically-induced three-volt charge*? Beauty *is* a *three-volt charge to the pineal gland*? We laugh because it's terrifying. That's where terror comes from--an absurd, categorically fixed position. And beauty is implicated in this absurdity and in its unmasking. So that's my topic in a nutshell.

¹ This paper was delivered at The Naropa Institute on 7 April 1999 as part of Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi's World Wisdom Lecture Series, at the invitation of Sharron Szabo of the Religious Studies Department.

This is beauty trouble and it has two aspects and each aspect has an effect. I will call the first aspect *identity*, and say that its effect is death, and oppose it to *difference*, the effect of which is life. That's the nucleus of the problem I want to address. Identity = death; difference = life; and beauty is in between.² Beauty occupies both sides of this dialectic. It is the third term that mediates the opposition. It's the apex of the equilateral triangle which, says Bucky Fuller, is basic to the architecture of matter and which Plato says is the most beautiful form.³ It is the balance of processes between organism and environment which is life. It is the ritual sacrifice that restores balance and shows us that life goes on.⁴ This is what I want to say about beauty.

So we have three terms, *identity*, *difference*, and *beauty*, and to begin with I want to situate the first two in relation to some English words that share a common Greek root. *Ecology*, *economy* and *ecocide*. Ecology: *eco-*: from *oikos*, house, *-logy*: from *logos*--word, discourse, or reason--so ecology is the study of our home. Economics: *eco-* and *nemein* to manage, so economics is home management. When what we learn from the study of our house does not inform the management of our home, the result is *ecocide*, *eco-* and *cidium*, a slaying, so demolition. We are demolishing our house.

Now what do I mean by equating identity with death? Identity comes from the Latin *identitatem*, sameness. So to take an example from ecology: Environments change. Organisms that adapt to *difference* live, and organisms that

² "Identity equals death" is Adorno's formulation from his book *Negative Dialectics*. He opposes this with "non-identity" which he equates with freedom. I have adapted this basic opposition but am calling "non-identity" difference. The idea of beauty as a mediating term comes from Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*, in which he associates art with the critique of oppression, as outlined later in this paper.

³ See *Timeus* 54a-d

⁴ In his book *Erotism*, Georges Bataille argues that public rituals of human sacrifice take place in order to demonstrate to the people that the community outlasts the death of the individual.

replicate *sameness* don't. This also relates to biodiversity. Limiting difference is a death trip. This is what I mean when I say identity, or sameness = death.

Here's an example from economics.⁵ The dominant mode of economics in our world centers on commodities--moveable goods valuable by a common measure which is money. Commodities are objects that, for purposes of exchange, are rendered equivalent. For example, let's say that ten pounds of gold is equal to ten tons of coffee, which equals a brand new Ferrari, which equals a small house in an unfashionable neighborhood, and so on. So commodification emphasizes *sameness*.

This also applies to persons. Commodity economics requires the mass production of persons consistent with the mass production of products. Identity is the mold for this production process. Difference is downplayed, and obvious or irreducible difference may be despised. Critical theorist Theodor Adorno says we purchase superficially different identities by identifying with products, automobiles, clothes, music, which themselves are superficially varied replications of "the Same."

So the modern notion of identity in the sense of that which supposedly makes a person unique, is a mistake. We might say it is a 180-degree error: the opposite is the case. Identity *means* sameness. This is a *paradox*, from *para* beyond and *doxon* belief: a paradox is an absurdity. It is a kind of rule of thumb for analysis of power structures that if you locate the paradox, you've found the source of power. In George Orwell's novel *1984*, the government agency that fabricates a history of lies is called the Ministry of Truth, and the slogan of the ruling party is "freedom is slavery." Remember I said terror comes from an absurdity? This is one application of that.

⁵ See Marx: "The Commodity Fetish and Its Secret," in *Capital* section 4; also Lukács: "Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat" in *History and Class Consciousness*.

In the social realm, just as in the ecological realm general sameness is a dangerous maladaptation. The elimination of biodiversity and the elimination of social and cultural diversity are equally deadly, and of course the two processes go hand in hand, often quite insidiously. Even with the best intentions, the consumerist cooptation of say, Amazon Indian spirituality is the same impulse that machine guns Amazon Indians in order to steal their land. I got heart sick when I heard a radio DJ playing pygmy songs overdubbed with synthesizer music and saying "isn't it great that it's just *one big culture*?" No, it's not great, it's a disaster. The idea that the people of the rain forests are consumer merchandise is the same as the pulping of the rain forests, genocide and ecocide are the same trip.

The flip side of this is racism. When there is sufficient investment in the idea that all persons of a particular ethnicity are essentially the same, these people become objects of increasingly limiting definition, until they are defined out of existence.

This is why, for example, recent feminist scholarship has warned of the hazards of trying to invoke or definitively establish some sort of feminine essence. The idea of an essential "feminine identity" is itself the mechanism of oppression. This is why Monique Wittig says she is not a woman, why Luce Irigaray says that all systems of identity formation are patriarchal, and why Julia Kristeva says it is not possible for a woman to be. All systems that drive toward identity replicate conditions of oppression.⁶

The various manifestations of our mania for identification have been related by a number of theorists to the quest to identify universal laws through rational method that got its start among the philosopher scientists

⁶ See Judith Butler: *Gender Trouble*.

of ancient Greece, and which in the 18th-century, became a major trend. We call this period the Age of Reason and its project the Enlightenment. Adorno portrays the Enlightenment as a noble effort gone wrong. The goal was liberation through knowledge. All the darkness was to be illuminated, everyone was to be free, but, Adorno says, the rational method was valued above its consequences and the eventual outcome was the opposite of the initial intention, slavery and slaughter on an unprecedented scale.

Another way of saying this is that the eternal explanation, monumental truth, is a con game, a false god, an idol, what critical theorists call a fetish, and what Friedrich Nietzsche called prejudices baptized as "truth." The word "true" comes from the Gothic *trauan* meaning to believe, to trust, to be persuaded.

Nietzsche said that the idea that the universe is lawful is the invention of dolts who only wish to project their belief in themselves or to avoid taking responsibility for themselves, who "prefer even a handful of 'certainty' to a whole carload of beautiful possibilities." He says, "Some abysmal arrogance . . . inspires you with the insane hope that because you know how to terrorize yourselves . . . nature, too, lets herself be terrorized"⁷ Nietzsche says our prejudices and self-interest mislead us into mistaking our particular interpretation for the explanation.

Is universal law the ploy of a paranoid control freak? Some of the recent scholarship on Isaac Newton would support this.⁸ And come to think of it, examples abound! But I can't go into this at length here; let's just say that our obsession with law reflects the extent to which we are policed. We're a cop-happy culture. As Islamic studies scholar Hakim Bey has it:

⁷ See Nietzsche: *Beyond Good and Evil*, Part I: "On the Prejudices of Philosophers."

⁸ See Wallace Berman: *The Reenchantment of the World*.

Everything in nature is perfectly real including consciousness, there's absolutely nothing to worry about. Not only have the chains of the Law been broken, they never existed; demons never guarded the stars, the Empire never got started, Eros never grew a beard.
(Hakim Bey 1991:3)

So where do we go from here? And what has all this got to do with beauty? Nietzsche points the way.

Science, spurred on by its powerful illusion, speeds irresistibly toward its limits where its optimism, concealed in the essence of logic, suffers shipwreck. . . . For the periphery of the circle of science has an infinite number of points; and while there is no telling how this circle could ever be surveyed completely, noble and gifted men nevertheless reach, e'er half their time and inevitably, such boundary points on the periphery from which one gazes into what defies illumination. When they see to their horror how logic coils up at these boundaries and finally bites its own tail---suddenly the new form of insight breaks through--*tragic insight* which, merely to be endured, needs art as a protection and remedy.⁹

I said beauty has two opposing aspects, and beauty trouble is of two kinds. On the one hand, beauty is troublesome because it can be complicit in the imposition of *identity*--of absolute law, unquestionable values, oppressive universals--and on the other hand, beauty troubles such impulses through insisting on *difference*, Nietzsche's "carload of beautiful possibilities."

A recent article in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* (4 December 1998) says that in the academic world beauty has had some problems in the last few decades. The article describes an opposition between on the one hand, aesthetics, which is defined in this context as the study of beauty or the philosophy of art, and on the other hand cultural studies, a broad interdisciplinary field that draws upon arts criticism, philosophy, and the social sciences. Now as a student of cultural studies I have personally never had any difficulty embracing beauty. But

⁹ *The Birth of Tragedy*, Section 15.

there *is* trouble in the academy on this, the *Chronicle of Higher Education* is right.

The problem is like so: beginning in the late seventeenth hundreds, there was an increasing tendency to regard art as a thing above worldly circumstances, something that must be kept apart from material concerns. This view, which was popularized by a small circle of scholars at Oxford in the 1880s, finally became the conventional view, something taken for granted. Beauty is seen as an absolute value that transcends historical and cultural context.

For cultural studies, on the other hand, the question is not how art invokes the transcendental, or whether a particular artifact is or is not beautiful. The question is what are the historical circumstances that gave rise to the *idea* of transcendent beauty in the first place, and what are the implications for human relationship invoked by this.

What has happened is that the assumption that there is an isolatable experience called beauty has forced aestheticians into uncomfortably close company with those who insist on imposing other, related sorts of abstract universals. Allan Bloom, for example, has written, "The fact that there have been different opinions about good and bad in different times and places in no way proves that none is true or superior to others" (1987:39). The problem here is that the criteria of truth and superiority are also different according to time and place. Professor Bloom mistakes culturally-determined values for universal truth. Once and future Presidential candidate Patrick Buchanan puts the position more bluntly: "Multiculturalism is an across-the-board assault on our Anglo-Saxon heritage . . . Our culture *is* superior to others"¹⁰

¹⁰ See Stephen Scheinberg and Aurel Braun: *The Extreme Right: Freedom and Security at Risk*. Westview Press 1997.

This is a view that first came under attack in European philosophical literature in the 1780s when the German theologian Johann Gottfried von Herder wrote:

Men of all quarters of the globe, who have perished over the ages, you have not lived solely to manure the earth with your ashes, so that at the end of time your posterity should be made happy by European culture. The very thought of a superior European culture is a blatant insult to the majesty of Nature. (in Williams 1983:89)

Particularly interesting here is that Herder associates the triumph of European culture with injuring nature and with the end of time. Johann seems to have been a prophet.

In fifth century BCE Athens, where Professor Bloom gets his groceries, the idea that the Athenian citizen was a higher order of human was unlikely to be challenged. It's a small town mentality. Herder notwithstanding, a similar situation applied in nineteenth-century Europe, because science was the mouth of truth and evolution was all the rage. Everything had to be a science and everything had to be evolving. So you've got the science of child rearing and the science of swatting flies and the science of canning peaches and the scientific ladder of social evolution with savages on the bottom, barbarians in the middle, and civilized people on top. The middle-class Christian European male is the pinnacle of biological evolution and his values are the pinnacle of social evolution; and since values are among the least examined aspects of a world view, they've outlived the scientific racism paradigm. Prejudices often outlast their rationale.

How do you justify claims to superiority? By aggression: physical violence and/or claiming some special access to "the truth." Adorno says, "Only those thoughts are true which fail to understand themselves." The *simple* truth, the truth that is supposed to transcend its cultural and historical context is ignorance, and aggression is its material manifestation. The test for the presence of such

truth is to question it. Things can get real nasty real quick.

Back in the 1780s, Herder advised that we regard our culture as one among many, a new idea then and now, and when you actually get down to *comparing* cultures you come up with a lot of troubling questions. For example, if in a certain milieu, beauty requires that a girl have her feet bound so that they don't grow, or grow into what we would consider deformity, are the foot-binders mistaken about the nature of the beautiful? Are they not yet evolved to our level so they don't see *true* beauty? Why does their idea of beauty require that women be unable to walk? And could it be that our notions of the beautiful are also connected to oppressive agendas? The belief in universals avoids such questions *precisely because* universals are connected to such agendas.

If we examine these things from a historical perspective, we find a paradox, which is that truths and values that we are expected to accept without question because they're supposed to transcend worldly circumstances have had a huge impact on the world in which they pretend to have no interest. There's that paradox again, and it's a power node. The most disinterested values are connected with the most vested interests. This is why in the nineteenth century, at the same time that the notion of art apart from worldly concerns is coming to the fore in Europe, guess who develops a critique of metaphysics.

Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) was schooled in philology, which means he was by training a linguist. In 1887 he published a book called *On the Genealogy of Morals* in which he points out that the words in Indo-European languages that mean *good* and *bad* can be traced to historical root-words meaning things like *high born* and *low born*, *advantaged* and *deprived*, *master* and *slave*, and *light-skinned* and *dark-skinned*. Nietzsche's method was, as the book's title suggests, genealogy, the study of historical

descent. You hire a genealogist to find out about the history of your name. Nietzsche turned this method to investigating the origins of the taken-for-granted, in this case, conventional bourgeois morality. He did what many innovators in philosophy and science do. He asked a question that had never been asked before. Everybody had asked whether this or that was good or bad, and many people had asked what is the meaning of good and bad in an abstract sense, but nobody had asked what is the *history of the idea* of good and bad. Suddenly good and bad appear to have been tied up from the start with issues of social advantage. "The simple truth" doesn't seem so simple after that.

Marx called the truth that doesn't understand itself ideology. Ideology in this sense is the interests of a particular social group masquerading as eternal truth. Ideology can only operate if we are ignorant of history. It's like a confidence man. Suddenly, one day, there he is, one of those guys you feel you've always known. Where did he come from? It's impolite to ask. His past is not discussed, in fact it is continually erased, that's how he stays in business. A concept or value or category can only pose as transcendental by hiding the fact that it was invented by persons with particular interests. This is why knowledge of history is basic survival equipment. A society in which history is increasingly regarded as irrelevant is a society in which people are increasingly powerless.

Literature provides a good example of something that appears to embody eternal, transcendental values, but if we look at history we find that literature has meant different things at different times. Up until the eighteenth century, it meant what we now call literacy, both the ability to read and the quality of being well-read. It was said of a person who could read and write that he or she had literature, or that someone who had read a lot had literature.

Literary theorist Terry Eagleton says that in the eighteenth century literature came to mean "the whole body of valued writing in society: philosophy, history, essays, and letters as well as poems" and that the novel and the drama were of dubious status (1983:17). Literature at this time was quite frankly books that embodied the values of the ruling class. But with the need of the old aristocracy to form alliances with the increasingly powerful middle class, literature began to take on a kind of mystical importance. The thing now became cultivation of noble values and sentiments, so at this point literature means social and aesthetic treatises, sermons, and manuals on morals and etiquette.

Then, with the increasing dominance of industrial capitalism, the focus shifts to fiction and poetry. Eagleton cites several reasons for this. First, the middle class tends to value most those things which turn a profit, which results in a distancing of art from "real life." Secondly, the shift of the majority of people from farming and tradesmanship to wage slavery creates social upheaval on an unprecedented scale. In the face of widespread penury, massive unrest, and brutal political repression, the leisure classes increasingly favor escapist art and literature. The Romantic artist and his work begin to be seen as the last holdout of humane values in the face of barbarous exploitation and mass alienation, the last remaining connection with the good old days when people were closer to nature. So the artist is seen, in a sense, as the last unalienated laborer. A final factor completes art's move into a realm beyond worldly circumstances. Again I'll take the example of literature.

Up until the late Victorian age, every young man who was destined to be somebody had a private library and might read histories, plays, novels, philosophy, religious tracts, essays, and poetry, whatever kind of books were in vogue according to various social trends. And when he

reached a certain age he went to Oxford or Cambridge and studied Classics or Philology or History, but nobody studied Literature because it didn't exist as a field.

English literature as a field of study arose when it became necessary to educate the lower classes so that they would be capable of participating in modern industry and empire and like it. So at that point literature became mostly fiction and poetry. Essays, social treatises, histories, and philosophical works were not included. You can't educate the underclass in the same way as the upper classes; you can't have them reading philosophy and deciding that truth is negotiable. It is interesting to note here that Literature was considered a fitting major for women and the "second rate men" who would become teachers of the lower classes.

At this point art, which for centuries had more or less frankly served various social agendas, is utterly divorced from social reality. A work of art is a transcendent thing, and to speak of its relation to social phenomena is now blasphemy.¹¹

So this is one kind of beauty trouble, beauty as something apart from real conditions that's supposed to be somehow *more important* than the real and so is implicated in the whole raft of supposed transcendental truths that license oppressive relations.

Now I want to discuss the other kind of beauty trouble, which is beauty that troubles identity and ideological fixation by embodying difference. Aesthetics is conventionally thought of as the study of beauty, sometimes called the philosophy of art, and this sense has persisted. But there's a broader sense to it which will lead us to the synthesis I mentioned at the beginning.

¹¹ See Terry Eagleton: *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*. Oxford: Blackwell 1990.

The modern use of the Greek *aesthesis* got its start in the 1750s when Alexander Baumgarten titled his book on art *Aesthetica*. Thirty years later, Immanuel Kant shifted the focus from art to *perception* and made the term into *aesthetics*. *Aesthesis* is Greek for sense perception. So in Kant's usage *aesthetics* is close to the Greek sense and means *the science of sense perception*.

Now as I've been saying, new developments in philosophy or art or politics don't just pop up in isolation. Culture, society, World Spirit, history, Mind, whatever you want to call it, is a living system, and new developments in one part of an organism or system impact the whole system.

Philosophers and historians and cultural studies scholars have pointed out relationships between various aspects of social and political life taking place in the period during which Europe went from a patchwork of medieval fiefdoms to a collection of large modern nation states. One such line of inquiry says that the consolidation of large numbers of people under increasingly remote centralized governments meant that citizens would have to internalize the means of control. This is a different perspective on self-government than the one we usually get, and it can be illuminating. The idea is that when the authorities can no longer keep their eye on all of us, we have to be taught to keep an eye on ourselves and each other. We have to internalize the interests of the ruling class through values that have the appearance of being natural and untainted by political motives. This is accomplished through ideology and it's incredibly effective. For a long time for example, many North Americans internalized the notion that in the US there *is no ruling class*. This internalization of the interests of the ruling class through ideology, is, again, *identity*, it is built into who we think we are.

Kantian aesthetics, the science of perception, emerged around the time of the American and French Revolutions, the middle-management take-over that signaled the arrival in political reality of the modern concept of self-governance. So just when rule by overt repression is replaced by rule by ideology, we have a new science, the science of perception.

In Kant's *Critique of Judgment* (1790), the universe takes an inward turn where it becomes indistinguishable from mind. No longer is the cosmos a series of nesting spheres with God in the middle, and then the archangels, and then the six-winged seraphim covered with eyes, and then the lesser angels, and then man, and then the outer darkness; nor is the universe a machine that obeys universal laws, as the Deists had it; now the universe is the set of all possible perceptions and at its center is the human mind. Kant says the universe has the shape of the mind, otherwise we would not be able to perceive it.

His theory of the beautiful can be exemplified as follows: we think that a sunflower is beautiful because it does a fairly thorough job of approximating the shape of the mind. Let's say mind is bright, has complex symmetry, and is swirly in the middle, and so is the sunflower. So the beautiful is a kind of map of the mind and the universal authority is individual consciousness. Far out. Now, here's the trouble.

The new bourgeois capitalist order got a mixed deal by placing the new "autonomous individual" in the position of authority. It enabled a profitable exploitation of a universe of dead objects, but it also objectified persons, generating a paradox that resulted in, on the one hand alienation and on the other, genocide.

Beauty, viewed in the Kantian sense as that which mirrors or maps the complexity of consciousness, can be complicit in the imposition of abstract universals and manipulative ideologies. But it can also *trouble*

unquestioned categories, values, and ulterior interests. Beauty, troubles generalized truth and universal identity because *beauty embodies the particular*. It troubles sameness because it manifests difference.

The Russian linguist Roman Jakobson called this poetic estrangement. When we get a message that calls attention to itself as *message* apart from its descriptive content, everything, even ourselves, appears different, strange.¹² Jakobson was talking about poetry, but Adorno applied this idea to painting. He said that we do not paint a picture of a vase in order to create the illusion of a real vase, but rather to make the real vase appear strange. The primary effect of what Adorno calls "genuine art" is that it makes reality appear constructed, which it is.

In other words, having a powerful impression from an artwork, something that is *frankly* artificial, makes *everything* appear artificial and therefore subject to change.

Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, the founder of the Naropa Institute also used the term "genuine art." He said, "Genuine art--*dharma art*--is simply the activity of nonaggression."¹³ To me this means that when everything is revealed as constructed, we become responsible for it, and we become more compassionate, more careful. Adorno says genuine art shows us the world *as it could be*. Art hints at alternatives to a situation that we never even thought of as a situation. Our circumstances demand certain constraints that we take for granted. We don't even realize that we're in a constructed and constricted situation, and suddenly there's Matisse's *Celestial Jerusalem* and the world looks exquisite and tragic, like it's made out of colored paper, and we'd better take care of it.

¹² See Roman Jakobson: "Linguistics and Poetics" in *Language and Literature*; also Julia Kristeva: "Revolution in Poetic Language" in *The Portable Kristeva*.

¹³ Chögyam Trungpa. *Dharma Art*. Boston: Shambhala. 1996.

It's a matter of the universal versus the particular. Universals, completion, wholeness, fixed, immutable values are fetishism, the sin of idolatry that licenses abusive relations, the god of fire to whom we sacrifice our children, Molech. God told Moses:

And thou shalt not let any of thy seed pass through the fire to Molech. (Leviticus 18:21)

In his poem *Howl*, Allen Ginsberg made Moloch synonymous with the inhuman madness of modern civilization.

What sphinx of cement and aluminum bashed open their skulls
and ate up their brains and imagination? . . .
Moloch whose fate is a cloud of sexless hydrogen!
(Ginsberg *Howl* in 1984:131)

The aesthetic process, genuine art, beauty, defies idolatry, it simply reveals all claims to permanence and completeness to be the projections of the paranoid control freak Nietzsche alluded to. Genuine art supersedes human sacrifice, balancing two worlds without bloodshed. We could say that the golden calf itself becomes the sacrificial offering. In art, the idols die.

Adorno says "the whole is the false," and he refers art's *perpetual incompleteness* to its origins in ritual process. The cultic element, the open-ended revelatory process, the sense of multiple views or multiple worlds has never been extinguished. The work of art could never come into being without moments of apparent discreet wholeness, but the work continually undoes itself. Adorno likens this to Penelope's unraveling of her weaving each night.¹⁴ Odysseus has been away so long at the war that the local bullies want to take over his house and his wife and she's afraid to refuse them, so she says, "OK, you can take over when I finish my weaving," but she never finishes it

¹⁴ Adorno: *Aesthetic Theory*. London: Routledge. 1984.

because she weaves during the day and unravels the work at night. This is a metaphor for art's defiance of that illusion of stability and inevitability that allows the bullies to take over.

There is no permanence or discrete wholeness, and this applies also at the level of the individual. Nietzsche says, "There is no being behind the doing, the doing is all."¹⁵ The self is a selective remembering, a mistake, as psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan says, there is no "identity" except in "misrecognition" (1971:172). *Identity is always a case of mistaken identity*, and this is a fundamentally aggressive state, a kind of love-hate loop between self and other. You can find this view echoed quite simply and elegantly in Chogyam Trungpa's Dharma Art talks. Ego identification, *thisness* and *thatness* is the fundamental ignorance that sets up the loop of passion and aggression. What we need to do is to occupy two worlds at once. To be able to be at peace with ambiguity, gap, potential, all the beautiful possibilities. It's really important that we do so. It's a matter of survival at this point.

Poet Gregory Corso, who has been an occasional guest at the Kerouac School over the years, used to say something that is a key to this whole issue of aesthetics. What he said was, "Given a choice between two things, take both." Now it seems to me that the academic argument between aesthetics and cultural studies comes about because of a certain stiffness, a lack of humor, a lack of willingness to take both, an inability to embrace ambiguity. Beauty is tricky. The middle ground is always tricky. Humor is of course tricky, that's its agency.

The middle ground is the place of art and the place of myth. Anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, in his chapter called "The Structural Study of Myth," says "the purpose of myth is to . . . overcome a contradiction."¹⁶ He says one of

¹⁵ See *The Genealogy of Morals*, First Essay, Section 13.

¹⁶ See *Structural Anthropology*, p 229.

the ways myth does this is through characters who mediate paradox. All myth systems feature at least one character who in some way lives in two worlds. Sometimes its a coyote, or a raven, or a clown, or a blind man. The trickster characters, like raven and coyote are the obvious ones, the characters who can never be nailed down. You never know what they're going to do next. Ambivalence, ambiguity is their way of being. We can't reconcile life and death. But the trickster exists half in the death world and half in the life world. He or she mediates paradox by embodying it. The trickster is the third term that breaks the deadlock and restores movement. Another character who has this mediating function is the god or goddess who is both good and bad at the same time, like Aphrodite, who *is* beauty. Beauty *is both good and bad*. She is very naughty young lady. Look at the Iliad, beauty causes endless trouble for those rulers. Beauty disrupts the law. She can't be nailed down. Beauty is moving.

In Plato's *Symposium* Socrates relates that Diotoma, the wise old woman who taught him about love, had said,

When the hour of conception arrives, and the teeming nature is full, there is such a flutter and ecstasy about beauty whose approach is the alleviation of pain and travail. For love, Socrates, is not, as you imagine, the love of the beautiful alone. [It is] the love of generation and birth in beauty. . . . Because to the mortal creature, generation is a sort of eternity and immortality.
(1928:374)

Beauty incites regeneration through ecstasy-ex *stasis*-out of place, not static, moving. We are *moved* by beauty and so are human communities. Participating in ritual or what we call art has been seen by many theorists as the very engine of social regeneration and change. Sociologist Philip Ennis has written a book in which he examines the history of American popular music from the point of view of the struggle for control of the means of ecstasy. Those who wish to resist social change always intrude into the realm

of ecstasy, whether it be via censorship, criminalization, regulation, or dogma, because ecstatic realms defy domination and *embody* change.

Beauty is between worlds; it is double-edged. Terry Eagleton says the construction of notions of the beautiful is inseparable from the construction of the dominant ideological forms of modern class society, but that the aesthetic also provides a challenge to these dominant forms because, "the aesthetic is both the secret prototype of human subjectivity and a vision of human energies as radical ends in themselves which is the enemy of all dominative thought." The aesthetic not only inscribes the body with oppressive law, it also signifies a creative turn to the sensuous body, it represents [both] a "specious form of universalism" and "a liberatory concern with concrete particularity." (1990:9). As Allen Ginsberg wrote in his ecstatic poem *Wales Visitation*: "The great secret is no secret. . . . What did I notice? Particulars! The vision of the great One is myriad" (1982:482).

The true universal is particularity. At the level of human relations this means respect for difference, what Adorno calls non-identity, against the drive to fixity and sameness which is death. Julia Kristeva says:

The role of aesthetic practices needs to be augmented. . . . Each artistic experience can . . . highlight the diversity of our identifications and the relativity of our symbolic and biological existence. (*The Portable*:367)

The true universal is freedom. Eagleton says:

The universal . . . is not some realm of abstract duty set sternly against the particular, it is just every individual's equal right to have his or her difference respected. . . . In pursuit of this political goal, there are meanings and values embedded in the tradition of the aesthetic which are of vital importance, and there are others which are directed towards the defeating of that goal, and which must therefore be challenged and overcome. . . . If we do not live in such a way that the free self-realization of each is achieved in and through the free self-realization of all, then we are likely to destroy ourselves as a species (415;412).

We have to occupy at least two worlds at once. We must be lovers of beauty *and* cultural critics. These days the artist has to also be a philosopher. Art does not occur in a vacuum. We have to appreciate beauty and take responsibility for its social implications. But we must be able to embrace uncertainty, because generalized certainty kills. Maybe that's what wisdom is, uncertainty with a sense of humor. And it's OK to invoke the gods, especially the ones who are good and bad at the same time. So I'll close with another fragment from Sappho:

Throned in splendor, deathless, O Aphrodite
child of Zeus, charm-fashioner, I entreat you
not with griefs and bitternesses to break my

spirit, O goddess

(*Invocation to Aphrodite*, tr. Lattimore)

(steven taylor held this lecture on the occasion of the vienna poetry school's september academy in 1999)

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