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978-1-107-11511-8 - Beauty and Sublimity: A Cognitive Aesthetics of Literature and the Arts

Patrick Colm Hogan

Excerpt

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## Introduction

### Why beauty?

The topic of this book is beauty and sublimity – or, rather, the subjective experience of beauty and sublimity. The opening chapter draws a fundamental distinction between what we judge to be “beautiful in itself” – what I call “public beauty” – and what we experience as beautiful, more or less what Palmer and colleagues refer to as “feelings that would elicit verbal expressions such as, ‘Oh wow! That’s great! I love it!’” (189). This is roughly the difference between works of art that we acknowledge are aesthetic masterpieces and works of art that affect us aesthetically. In his memoir, *Youth*, J. M. Coetzee explains that he stood for fifteen minutes “before a Jackson Pollock, giving it a chance to penetrate him.” But it did no good: the painting “means nothing to him.” In contrast, spying Robert Motherwell’s *Homage to the Spanish Republic* 24 in the next room, “He is transfixed” (92). Given the resonances of Motherwell’s title, and the “Menacing” quality of the work, it is probably better to say that Coetzee experienced it as sublime rather than beautiful, but the same point holds. Both the Pollock and the Motherwell might be publically sublime, but only the Motherwell was personally sublime for Coetzee.<sup>1</sup>

The focus of this book is on describing and explaining experiential or “personal” beauty. In that description and explanation, it draws on two primary sources: first, empirical research in cognitive and affective

<sup>1</sup> In keeping with this distinction, I should, throughout the following pages, write either “public beauty” and “public sublimity” or “personal beauty” and “personal sublimity” (or “aesthetic response”). However, in order to avoid tedium, I will often use the simpler “beauty” when the context makes the precise topic clear.

In connection with this, I should also stress something that should be obvious – that aesthetic response is different from aesthetic theory as a discipline. It is standard to begin discussions of beauty with a history of the discipline of aesthetics, most often narrowly conceived in relation to the use of the term, “aesthetics.” As, for example, Costelloe notes, “To speak of the ‘birth’ of the discipline and its desiderata, however, is to say little or nothing about the pleasure (or pain) people have long taken in the states they experience” (“The Sublime” 2). The usual practice would be akin to trying to understand cancer not by looking at cancer, but by looking at the history of speculations coming from people who used the word “cancer.”

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science; second, works of art.<sup>2</sup> In this respect, it continues the project of my earlier book, *What Literature Teaches Us About Emotion*, maintaining that successful works of literature and art function much like highly elaborated thought experiments that can in principle contribute to our understanding of psychological and social processes. (The esteemed neuroscientist, Semir Zeki, recently made much the same point about “Neurobiology and the Humanities” in his article of that title.) For example, successful literary works often have a wealth of details integrated into highly effective depictions of complex, socially embedded emotions and interactions. Such details and complexities are usually missing from necessarily simplified empirical research. In this respect, literary works are a particularly appropriate resource for the study of emotion, including aesthetic feeling. Of course, literary works do not have the important experimental controls that characterize research in cognitive and affective science or social psychology. Thus we would not wish to rely simply on literary or related representations of, say, emotion. Rather, we should examine the ways in which works of art converge with the findings of empirical research – perhaps offering new interpretations of those findings, or extending the range of questions and hypotheses we might consider.

### Aesthetics and Politics

Before we get to any of this, however, we need to consider a prior issue – is there something politically wrong about aesthetics? The study of beauty has a long history in the humanities and it has recently been of considerable concern in neuroscience and related disciplines. However, in at least some Humanistic disciplines, it has fallen on bad times. For example, in literary study, it is rare today to find writers concerned with the aesthetic value of a literary work. They are far more likely to be interested in its political merit. Indeed, there seems to be some tendency to view the two forms of value as, if not mutually incompatible, at least in some degree

<sup>2</sup> Some readers have been uncertain about how to understand my characterization of this project as “cognitive.” There are at least three senses in which “cognitive” is used in psychology and cognitive science. One usage is opposed to *social*. My use of “cognitive” is not at all intended to exclude social psychology – quite the contrary. A second usage is opposed to “affective” and means, roughly, *information processing*. I sometimes use the term in that sense, as should be clear from context. There is, finally, a third, general sense, where “cognitive” refers to a mental architecture that is distinguished from those of such alternatives as psychoanalysis and behaviorism, or even folk psychology. In this sense, “cognitive” encompasses “affective,” rather than being differentiated from it. For example, cognitive architecture includes emotional memory. I often use “cognitive” in this broad sense, including in the title of the book. This too should be clear from context.

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of tension with one another. When I discuss beauty in public talks, I am sometimes faced with this as a worry. I have been fortunate in not yet confronting outright hostility to discussing aesthetics, but rather the more subdued concern that there is something politically problematic with paying attention to beauty.

The possible problem is compounded by the fact that my analysis does not lead to a critique of beauty – indeed, quite the contrary. The following chapters are concerned primarily with describing and explaining aesthetic response, a relatively neutral undertaking. Even so, it will no doubt be clear to readers by the end of this book that I like beauty quite a bit and feel that aesthetic enjoyment is a valuable, even crucial part of life. In keeping with this, I agree with Wendy Steiner that “the pleasures of art, however scandalous they have come to be seen, are valuable and worth protecting” (*Scandal* 80; Steiner contends that there is a certain “hysteria behind the current condemnation of aesthetic pleasure” [81]). Indeed, I would go so far as to say that a great deal of what makes a human life worthwhile – what gives rise to eudaimonia, the experience of “flourishing” (as John Cooper translates the term) – is the presence of beauty. One of the most wretched elements of Oceania in Orwell’s dystopia, *1984*, is its terrible lack of beauty. This is not, I think, accidental or some mere idiosyncrasy of Orwell’s. Of course, the lack of beauty is not the main problem with the society of Big Brother. But the misery of life there is inseparable from its ugliness.

This does not mean that having decent shelter and adequate food, or fundamental civil liberties, is unimportant. These are crucial and necessary. Food is more important than art. Even from an aesthetic point of view, there is nothing beautiful about people being famished, ragged, and homeless. However, adequate provisions are only the necessary conditions for existence. The beauties of nature, daily existence (e.g., ordinary architecture), art, and science are part of what make life more intensely valuable. I should note that I include science in this list because the understanding produced by science is not only functional in the satisfaction of needs or the facilitation of satisfying desires. It is also highly beautiful. As the Nobel laureate Murray Gell-Mann has remarked, the experience of beauty is fundamental to physics. Another Nobel laureate, S. Chandrasekhar, goes so far as to say that “in the arts as in the sciences, the quest is after the same elusive quality: beauty” (52).<sup>3</sup> The beauties

<sup>3</sup> Gell-Mann defines beauty by reference to mathematical simplicity. In terms of the analysis presented in Chapter 1, this is a form of pattern recognition. The same point holds for Chandrasekhar, who cites Werner Heisenberg’s definition of beauty as “the proper conformity of the parts to one another and to the whole” (Chandrasekhar 52; Chandrasekhar subsequently cites Francis Bacon to bring out the importance of “surprise”

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of nature, quotidian design, art, and science are inseparable from our cognitive and emotional makeup, the way our minds operate to process information and the ways we feel about experience and action. Again, that relation is just what this book sets out to examine.

On the other hand, it is clear that there are some political problems surrounding beauty. For example, Frederic Spotts has argued convincingly that Hitler's success was due at least in part to his manipulation of aesthetic response. Indeed, Spotts goes so far as to maintain that Hitler had "two supreme goals." The first was "racial genocide." The second was "the establishment of a state in which the arts were supreme" (30). Spotts's book provides at least a caution for writers in literary study who would like to see art as the salvation of a divided society, bringing empathy and pro-social action into an otherwise egocentric and cruel world.

In the end, however, Spotts's argument does not suggest anything about aesthetics per se (nor would Spotts claim that it does). It rather indicates two things. First, it points to the prestige value of cultural achievements. The pursuit of in-group (here, German nationalist) domination may involve physical force. But it cannot continually be a matter of force. It must establish itself in times of peace as well as war. Cultural superiority – prominently including the "high culture" of the arts – is crucial for that ongoing affirmation of in-group superiority.

But Hitler's aestheticism is not purely a matter of gathering national or personal "trophies" (as Spotts rightly characterizes Hitler's collection of paintings [219]). The second thing suggested by Spotts's analysis is that beauty and sublimity are emotionally powerful in themselves. Moreover, his work hints that the manipulation of aesthetic feelings may facilitate the manipulation of other emotions, such as group pride. Indeed, this is in keeping with most moral discussions of art. In the standard view, a work's ethical teachings are made both acceptable and effective by the pleasure it affords. As Philip Sidney put it, poetry serves "to teach and delight" and the delight operates "to move men to take that goodness in

as well [71], thus the non-habitual quality of the pattern, which will also be important in Chapter 1). It is, however, necessary to qualify some of the more enthusiastic comments from scientists. As May points out, "an ugly fact trumps a beautiful theory" (20). The key point is that the isolation of unexpected patterns produces aesthetic pleasure in science as well as the arts. It does not follow from this that a particular pattern is true simply because it is very aesthetically pleasing. Moreover, by this analysis, questions such as "Does the world embody beautiful ideas?" (Wilczek 43) are not the right sorts of questions. It is not that there is some objective property that constitutes beauty and that may or may not turn up in the world. Rather, our isolation of unexpected patterns gives us aesthetic pleasure. Thus the proper form of the question would be "Does the world embody unexpected patterns?" – though the answer to this question is perhaps too obvious to be interesting.

hand, which without delight they would fly as from a stranger” (138). The problem with Hitler, of course, was that the teaching was perverse; it was not goodness, but the contrary. The implication is simply that, like any other feelings, aesthetic sentiments may be oriented to good, bad, or indifferent ends.

Other political problems concern human beauty. For example, Deborah Rhode has presented compelling evidence that beautiful people have unfair advantages in our society – for example, in terms of earnings. “On the whole,” Rhode writes, “less attractive individuals are less likely to be hired and promoted, and they earn lower salaries despite the absence of any differences in cognitive ability” (27). Rhode is certainly correct that this is a serious problem. However, this is not a problem with beauty per se, not to mention the study of beauty. It is a problem with the use of irrelevant criteria in evaluation. Clearly, the “beauty bias” identified by Rhode does not show that beauty is not an important object of research. It does not even show that it is not a real value (nor does Rhode claim otherwise [see, for example, 2]). Indeed, people who may or may not be beautiful themselves make decisions that favor others who are beautiful precisely because beauty is pleasing, precisely because beauty is a value for us. The key point is that our values are not strictly partitioned and confined to relevant targets of evaluation. Thus we prefer beautiful people even when their relevant skills are inferior. This is a general problem with human bias, not a problem with beauty as such.

There is the further difficulty, directly relevant to the present study, that a great deal of what Rhode and others address under the label of “beauty” is not aesthetic response. It is sometimes a matter of conformity – wearing the sort of clothing one is supposed to wear, for example. It is often glamour – wearing clothing that is expensive and high prestige, or simply having an extensive wardrobe. One of Rhode’s examples concerns a taboo on wearing the same outfit to events that are a full year apart (xii). Surely, this is not a matter of beauty, but of glamour. When glamour and conformity are combined, we have fashion. As Jacobsen notes, fashion can lead to such extremes as the association of “(self-) mutilations” with “an ideal of beauty” (36). Indeed, Rhode stresses that “dress, grooming, and figure are crucial signals . . . of wealth” (8). There is no reason to believe that signals of wealth as such promote aesthetic pleasure. The fact that people commonly use aesthetic terminology for these signals and related prestige phenomena does not mean they have much – or anything – to do with actual aesthetic response.

Similar objections to beauty come from feminist writers, such as Sheila Jeffreys, who see “masculine aesthetics” (1) as highly distortive and

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ultimately cruel to women.<sup>4</sup> Jeffreys's analyses are important and consequential. Like some earlier writers (e.g., Susan Faludi), as well as later writers (including Rhode [see 35–42]), she shows that the beauty industry is harmful to women's bodies and minds. However, her arguments too do not undermine either the study of aesthetic response or the acceptance of beauty as a value. (I should note that, as far as I am aware, Jeffreys has never claimed the contrary.)

There are three points to make about Jeffreys's analyses, points that should clarify and extend the preceding observations regarding Rhode. First, to a great extent, the problems isolated by Jeffreys concern not beauty but sexual desire. The two are, of course, related. Specifically, there are emotion systems that enhance one another and others that inhibit one another. In the opening chapter I argue that aesthetic response is related to attachment feelings. The attachment system is neurochemically related to sexual feelings (see, for example, Fisher 103 on oxytocin and vasopressin). Moreover, sexual desire seems to be inhibited by disgust, while beauty tends to involve properties that inhibit disgust system activation. In consequence, we would expect a man's or woman's beauty to enhance an observer's sexual response to him or her.<sup>5</sup> This is perhaps the main reason why we tend to think of beauty as sexually arousing – and why we (perhaps less fully) think of what is sexually arousing as beautiful. But, despite this tendency, the two are not the same.<sup>6</sup> To a great extent, what Jeffreys identifies as male aesthetics is actually something more like male fetishism. It is unsurprising that, in sexual relations, men would often try to force their sexual preferences on their partners.

<sup>4</sup> Indeed, the point is more general than the reference to “masculine aesthetics” may suggest. For example, Yasmin Nair maintains that her cohort of “radical queers and trans people . . . are heavily invested in their own hierarchies of beauty” (40; see also Rhode 32).

<sup>5</sup> This would be one way of explaining why “a man's physical symmetry can predict the likelihood of his female lover having an orgasm” (Chatterjee *Aesthetic* 18). The removal of arousal-inhibiting asymmetries may enhance the likelihood of orgasm. Indeed, this is consistent with work cited by Chatterjee suggesting that “rather than approaching attractiveness, what we are really doing is avoiding features we find unattractive” (44).

<sup>6</sup> Unfortunately, the common tendency to confuse beauty and sexual attractiveness has consequences for research. For example, research indicates that women's “preferences” regarding what they “find attractive in a man . . . vary during their menstrual cycle” (Chatterjee *Aesthetic* 15). The point is potentially relevant to aesthetic response, particularly as it bears on changes in attachment sensitivity. However, its most obvious bearing is on sexual desire.

It is perhaps worth noting that sexual desire is not the only propensity that is confused with aesthetic response. Much research on “preference” is vague, or even apparently misdirected. For example, some research on natural beauty involves isolating places that people “would like to live in or visit” (Chatterjee *Aesthetic* 49). But aesthetic feeling is not the same as wanting to live or visit somewhere.

That is, of course, wrong. But it tells us little about beauty. The proper way to respond to it is through opposing deleterious sexual practices and supporting equality in sexual relations as elsewhere – very important objectives, but irrelevant to the study of beauty.

The second point to make about Jeffreys's analysis is that many of the harmful practices she rightly criticizes seem to bear less on aesthetic response and more on prestige standards of public beauty. It is difficult to say whether people (men or women) actually find extremely thin, blonde, button-nosed, teenaged women more beautiful (or, for that matter, more sexually attractive) than plump, dark-haired, Roman-nosed women in their mid- to late-thirties. What does seem clear is that a "trophy wife" – thus a wife satisfying prestige standards – is excessively slender, extremely young, and so on.<sup>7</sup> The idea of a trophy wife is nicely illustrated by a comment from one of the characters in J. M. Coetzee's *Summertime*: "Mark did not want [his wife] to sleep with other men. At the same time he wanted other men to see what kind of woman he had married, and to envy him for it" (27). In short, at least some of the "beauty" criteria deplored by Jeffreys are criteria for giving a woman high appearance prestige. They are not necessarily criteria that guide people's aesthetic response to her. Of course, it may be that many people happen to feel greater aesthetic pleasure in women who are excessively slender, and so on. Nonetheless, it seems clear that there is at least much more diversity in aesthetic taste (i.e., what people experience as beautiful) than there is in public prestige standards for beauty. In other words, if virtually everyone agrees that a trophy wife is exceedingly thin, far fewer people are likely to find exceeding thinness greatly beautiful. Indeed, if the analysis of the following chapters is correct, our aesthetic responses are in part a matter of averaging across cases. Thus we would expect to find that almost everyone's aesthetic response would not be strongest for the model-like thinness of the trophy wife. Rather, everyone's observation of ordinary women would make his or her aesthetic response at least somewhat more like the average woman, thus less extreme in slenderness. The same point probably applies to many racial preferences, such as skin

<sup>7</sup> Chatterjee notes that cultures differ in preference for slenderness versus plumpness. He explains that this is related to whether food is plentiful. If it is, then slender is preferred; if it is not, then plump is preferred. He gives an evolutionary explanation for the phenomenon (see *Aesthetic* 20). There may be an element of that. But prestige is fairly clearly a function of scarcity. Thus the data are at least as compatible with the view that changes in scarcity produce changes in prestige. Indeed, it is difficult to see how individual, aesthetic preferences could track the sorts of social trends noted by Chatterjee. Thus, at least *prima facie*, it seems more likely that changes in slender/plump preferences are a matter of shifting prestige standards.



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blanching and hair straightening.<sup>8</sup> These are commonly seen as a matter of aesthetic response, but they are probably at least in part a matter of prestige standards – in some cases, bound up with concrete employment or other benefits.

Perhaps the most surprising research finding on beauty and politics is that people tend to support social hierarchies more when they consider themselves to be attractive (see MacBride for a brief summary of the findings).<sup>9</sup> Belmi and Neale show that thinking of oneself as attractive fosters a belief that one is part of a higher social class or elite, which in turn fosters support for social hierarchies. It seems likely that this too is linked less with aesthetic feeling than with prestige standards and the partial derivation of prestige standards from class hierarchies. As Belmi and Neale write, “prescriptive standards of beauty often reflect features that signal wealth and upper social class membership,” and “most societies derive the standards of beauty from the features of the upper social class” (134).<sup>10</sup> This again suggests that the political problems with beauty are at least in most cases not a matter of aesthetic feeling, but of prestige standards.

On the other hand – and this brings us to the third point about Jeffreys – it probably is the case that there are some effects of the beauty industry that do bear on aesthetic response to human beauty. These include some of the deleterious practices discussed by Jeffreys. Specifically, if the analysis in Chapter 1 is correct, our response to human beauty should largely be a function of averaging across experiences. As just noted, this implies that observers’ aesthetic responses to women will favor women that are heavier than fashion models. However, the prominence of excessively thin women in mass media will also mean that observers’ responses will favor women who are perhaps much thinner than the actual average. The result of this is that the majority of women will appear aesthetically flawed in being “overweight,” not because they are medically overweight, but because they are heavier than the distorted average produced in one’s mind by the over-representation of pencil-thin models and actresses. This is likely to contribute to the distortion of women’s self-perception as well as their perception by others (both men and other women), thereby furthering body dysmorphia with its resulting pathologies. A parallel point holds for men and athletic musculature. (On body dysmorphia and mass media, see chapter 3 of Giles.)

Though body weight is widely discussed in the context of beauty standards, other issues involve the same general principle. As we will see

<sup>8</sup> I am grateful to Bhakti Shringarpure for reminding me of the relevance of these practices.

<sup>9</sup> I am grateful to Marilyn Wann for drawing my attention to this work.

<sup>10</sup> See Bourdieu’s *Distinction* on class and aesthetic judgments outside personal beauty.



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in Chapter 1, there are differences in male and female facial luminance patterns such that there is a larger difference between the luminance of women's eyes and cheeks, for example, than between men's eyes and cheeks (i.e., the difference between circum-ocular skin and the skin of one's cheeks is greater in women than in men). The same point holds for luminance differences between lips and facial skin. (There is some reason to believe that the difference is natural [see Russell 1104–1105]. However, the consequences for differential response to male and female faces follow even if the difference is created by the use of cosmetics.) One result of this is that we judge women's faces more beautiful to the extent that they enhance these contrasts beyond the actual average. Makeup and lipstick do just this. This is already problematic, given the effects of makeup and lipstick (see chapter 6 of Jeffreys). However, it has the further harmful consequence that the makeup distorts our sense of the average such that women without makeup may come to appear aesthetically flawed, due to "reduced" facial luminance contrasts.

Aesthetic response also bears on racial issues. Again, if averaging is a key factor in the production of aesthetic feeling, then the representations of beauty in mass media may have a disproportionate effect on aesthetic feeling. If an African American sees mostly blonde European women in mass media, then his or her aesthetic preference will be for considerably lighter skin and considerably straighter hair than if he or she saw only Africans. In a racist society, then, it is likely that aesthetic preferences will be distorted. It is important to recognize that aesthetic preferences are still almost certain to be much less biased than the prestige standards. For example, the prestige standard may not be influenced by African skin and hair, whereas an individual's aesthetic preference will almost certainly be affected by his or her experience of Africans. Indeed, it is important to note that the effects on aesthetic preference go in both directions. A white person living among a large black population – in South Africa or on a plantation in the pre-Civil War southern United States – is almost certain to have his or her aesthetic preference strongly affected by African features, such as skin color. Nonetheless, at least in a society dominated by mass media, racial hierarchies are likely to have biasing effects on actual aesthetic preferences, not just on prestige standards, and thus on personal as well as public beauty.

These are, of course, serious issues. However, they too are not problems with beauty as such. Class, race, and other biases in aesthetic response are, rather, problems with the representation – or misrepresentation – of women and men in mass media. Moreover, it is only through analyzing the operation of aesthetic response that we can come to understand the way dysmorphic and related effects develop. In

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short, far from indicating that beauty is not a fit topic for study, they indicate that it is important to study beauty in part due to its political consequences.

A further feminist objection to the study of beauty involves the identification of beauty with femininity. For example, Wendy Steiner notes that there is a “traditional model” in which the “artwork . . . is gendered ‘female’” (*Venus* xxi). In connection with this, Steiner sees art as often involving misogyny. But there are two crucial points here. First, the identification of beauty with femininity means that the *rejection* of beauty is linked with misogyny (xix), so rejecting beauty is hardly the solution to this problem. Of course, if we continue to identify beauty with femininity and place beauty on a pedestal, then we are still engaging in a patriarchal practice. The second, and more important point, then, is that the identification of beauty with femininity is itself a function of patriarchy. Beauty is involved with a wide range of targets – male as well as female, nonhuman as well as human, abstract as well as concrete. This is why Steiner is right to say it is an important “task” for us “to imagine beauty” in a way that is consistent with “empathy and equality” (xxv).

Indeed, in all these cases, the fundamental problem is that women are not being treated as ends in themselves, but as mere means to sexual pleasure, social prestige, or even aesthetic enjoyment. Contrary to common views, there is nothing wrong with treating someone as a means (e.g., in seeking a friend’s advice), as long as one consistently modulates that impulse by treating the person simultaneously as an end in himself or herself. The latter requires, for example, restricting one’s self-interested actions to those that respect the autonomy and well-being of the other person. In this way, even when beauty is genuinely involved, the fundamental issue is the ethical qualification of one’s actions, rather than beauty per se.

In short, apparent political problems with beauty do not for the most part concern aesthetic response as such. They bear, rather, on a series of practices and conditions that surround or, in some cases, substitute for such response. Even when there are political difficulties with aesthetic response per se, that should motivate a response to the political conditions affecting aesthetic response, not a rejection of any value to beauty or the understanding of beauty. Indeed, such difficulties give us further reason to study and comprehend beauty.

### Beauty and Art

Before continuing, however, we should briefly consider an objection to the study of beauty that derives not from politics, but from a surprising