

*Four*



## For the Beauty of the Earth

One day, rummaging through a dusty old attic in a small Austrian town, a collector comes across a faded manuscript containing many pages of music. It is written for the piano. Curious, he takes it to a dealer. The dealer phones a friend, who appears half an hour later. When he sees the music he becomes excited, then puzzled. This looks like the handwriting of Mozart himself, but it isn't a well-known piece. In fact, he's never heard it. More phone calls. More excitement. More consultations. It really does seem to be Mozart. And, though some parts seem distantly familiar, it doesn't correspond to anything already known in his works.

Before long, someone is sitting at a piano. The collector stands close by, not wanting to see his precious find damaged as the pianist turns the pages. But then comes a fresh surprise. The music is wonderful. It's just the sort of thing Mozart would have written. It's energetic and elegiac by turns; it's got subtle harmonic shifts, some splendid tunes, and a ringing finale. But it seems . . . incomplete. There are places where nothing much seems to be happening, where the piano is simply marking time. There are other places where the writing is faded and it isn't quite clear, but it *looks* as though the composer has indicated, not just one or two bars rest, but a much longer pause.

Gradually the truth dawns on the excited little group. What they are looking at is indeed by Mozart. It is indeed beautiful. But it's the piano part of a piece that involves another instrument, or perhaps other instruments. By itself it is frustratingly incomplete. A further search of the attic reveals nothing else that would provide a clue. The piano music is all there is, a signpost to something that was there once and might still turn up one day. There must have been a complete work of art which would now, without additional sheet music, be almost impossible to reconstruct; they don't know if the piano was to accompany an oboe or a bassoon, a violin or a cello, or perhaps a full string quartet or some other combination of instruments. If those other parts could be found, they would make complete sense of the incomplete beauty contained in the faded scribble of genius now before them.

(In case anyone should wonder, by the way, I wrote these paragraphs some months before a librarian in Philadelphia came upon a Beethoven manuscript which turned out to be the composer's own transcription, for two pianos, of the "Great Fugue" from one of his final string quartets. Life and art have an odd habit of dancing together in multiple mutual imitation.)

This is the position we are in when confronted by beauty. The world is full of beauty, but the beauty is incomplete. Our puzzlement about what beauty is, what it means, and what (if anything) it is there *for* is the inevitable result of looking at one part of a larger whole. Beauty, in other words, is another echo of a voice—a voice which (from the evidence before us) might be saying one of several different things, but which, were we to hear it in all its fullness, would make sense of what we presently see and hear and know and love and call "beautiful."

### The Transience of Beauty

Beauty, like justice, slips through our fingers. We photograph the sunset, but all we get is the memory of the moment, not the

moment itself. We buy the recording, but the symphony says something different when we listen to it at home. We climb the mountain, and though the view from the summit is indeed magnificent, it leaves us wanting more; even if we could build a house there and gaze all day at the scene, the itch wouldn't go away. Indeed, the beauty sometimes seems to be in the itching itself, the sense of longing, the kind of pleasure which is exquisite and yet leaves us unsatisfied.

Actually, that last phrase—exquisite, yet leaving us unsatisfied—is what Oscar Wilde said about a cigarette. And that shows something else about the way in which beauty presents us with a haunting paradox. Few today, faced with the statistics about lung cancer, would give such high aesthetic standing to a cigarette (even if, as so often with Wilde, the *bon mot* was designed to shock in the first place). But tastes and fashions change, in beauty as in many other things. They change so thoroughly that we are forced to ask whether beauty is after all simply in the eye of the beholder, or whether we can give any more satisfactory account of it which will leave us—like the frustrated but excited music collectors—in possession of one part at least of the complete whole.

I think of this puzzle whenever I see, from another time and place, a picture of a woman whose contemporaries obviously thought her extremely beautiful. Look at the paintings on Greek vases, or on the walls of Pompeii. Look at the Egyptian portraits of great, noble women whose beauty was obviously highly prized. Look, even, at some of the portraits from three or four hundred years ago, and see what people of their day said about them. Frankly, I wouldn't turn my head in the street to gaze at any of them. Helen of Troy may have had a face that, in her day, launched a thousand ships, but most of us now wouldn't rate her as worth a single rowboat.

The same is true of the beauty of nature. For the last two hundred years, and especially since Wordsworth and the Lakeland poets, most people have regarded the wild scenery of the English Lake

District as spectacularly beautiful, evocative, and powerful. Scene after scene has been painted times without number. Many Britons who have never been near the Lake District possess placemats displaying the Langdale Pikes, or the view of Skiddaw with the town of Keswick nestling at its foot—just as, in America, many possess prints of Ansel Adams displaying the glories of Yosemite. And yet in earlier days mountainous scenery wasn't seen as beautiful and evocative, but as fearsome, dark, and dangerous. How is it that fashions change so easily?

This is only partially explained by changes in perspective. We admire the grace and power of an Alpine avalanche in a faraway glacier, but our mood changes rapidly if we see a village lying helpless in its path. We stand mesmerized watching ocean waves roll in to shore, each one a miracle of smooth curves and crashing power; but enjoyment turns to horror before the nightmare of a tsunami.

A matter of perspective, then, and a matter of taste, in complex combination. And taste, in addition, changes not just from generation to generation but from person to person and subculture to subculture in the same period, the same town, the same house. The newlyweds discover that the picture he wants to hang above the fireplace appears to her nothing more than sentimental kitsch. The teacher for whom the geometric proof possesses an almost transcendent elegance discovers that, to the class, it is nothing but numbers, lines, and angles.

And how is it that beauty fades so quickly? The glorious sunset is soon over. The young person whose youthful bloom gains admiring glances prolongs his or her good looks for a time with care and a little help from makeup artists, but we know what's coming. Even if we mature in our appreciation of human beauty and learn to love the wise and kindly look in old eyes, and the thousand lines that speak of love and grief and joy and courage, the further we go down that road the closer we are once more to the paradox of the sunset.

## Beauty and Truth

“Beauty is truth, truth beauty,” wrote Keats; but the puzzles we have glimpsed should prevent us from making such an easy equation. The beauty we know and love is, at best, one part of truth, and not always the most important part. In fact, to identify beauty and truth, in the light of the previous paragraphs, would be to take a large step toward what we now think of as the postmodern dilemma: the collapse of “truth” altogether. If beauty and truth are one and the same, then truth is different for everyone, for every age, and indeed for the same person from year to year. If beauty were hidden in the beholder’s eye, then “truth” would be merely a way of talking about the inner feelings that went along with it. And that simply isn’t how we normally use the word “truth.”

What we must also rule out, along with any identification of beauty and truth, is the idea that beauty gives us direct access to God, to “the divine,” or to a transcendent realm of any sort. The fact that the music is clearly designed to go within a larger whole gives us no direct clue as to what that larger whole might be. If, without previous zoological knowledge, you came face-to-face with a male tiger in prime condition, you might be tempted to fall down and worship such a glorious example of form, color, grace, and power. Few examples of idolatry would be so swiftly self-refuting. Beauty is more complicated than that. The paradoxes we have noted tell heavily against the facile identification between God and the natural world to which some generations have been drawn. The beauty of the natural world is, at best, the echo of a voice, not the voice itself. And if we try to pin it down—literally, in the case of a butterfly-collector with a specimen—we find that the key thing itself, the elusive beauty which keeps us always looking further, is precisely what you lose when the pin goes in. Beauty is here, but it’s not here. It is this—this bird, this song, this sunset—but it is not this.

Any account of beauty, and especially one which suggests that beauty is a signpost pointing beyond itself, must take account, then,

of the two things about it which we have described. On the one hand, we must acknowledge that beauty, whether in the natural order or within human creation, is sometimes so powerful that it evokes our very deepest feelings of awe, wonder, gratitude, and reverence. Almost all humans sense this some of the time at least, even though they disagree wildly about which things evoke which feelings and why. On the other hand, we must acknowledge that these disagreements and puzzles are enough to press some, without an obvious desire to be cynical or destructive, to say that beauty is all in the mind, or the imagination, or the genes. Some will suggest that it's all a matter of evolutionary conditioning: you only like that particular scenery *because* your distant ancestors knew they could find food there. Others may hint at unconscious sexual feelings: Why do little boys like watching trains charge into tunnels? Still others might quite reasonably suggest that it's all about vicarious pleasure: we would like to be among the guests at the dinner party in the painting. It seems we have to hold the two together: beauty is *both* something that calls us out of ourselves *and* something which appeals to feelings deep within us.

At this point some philosophers, going back (as so much does) to Plato, have drawn the two sides together. They suggest that the natural world on the one hand, and the representations of the natural world offered by artists on the other, are reflections of a higher world, a world beyond space, time, and (especially) matter. This world, which Plato called the world of "the Forms" (or Ideas), is, according to the theory, the ultimate reality. Everything in the present world is a copy or shadow of something in that world. This means that everything in our world is indeed a pointer to something in a world beyond, a world which we can learn to contemplate and even to love for its own sake. If we don't make this transition, if we simply accept natural and man-made beauty on its own terms, we mustn't be surprised if it seems, on closer inspection, to collapse into our own subjective feelings. Beauty points away from the present world to a different one altogether.

This suggestion is attractive—at one level. It does indeed make sense of a good part of our experience. But for the three great monotheistic religions at least (or most mainstream versions of them) it gives away far too much. It's all very well to say that beauty in this present world is puzzling, transient, and sometimes apparently only skin deep, while underneath all is worms and rotteness. But if we push that just an inch further, we find ourselves saying that the present world of space, time, and matter is bad *in itself*. If it's a signpost, it's made of wood that's already rotting. If it is a voice, it is the voice of a desperately sick man telling us of the land of health to which he is unable to travel. And this is deeply untrue to the great traditions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. The great monotheistic faiths declare, in full view of the apparently contrary evidence, that the present world of space, time, and matter always was and still is the good creation of a good God.

It is also deeply untrue to the experience of humans in every culture and time known to us. Just at the point where we might be ready to give in and admit that it was all a delusion, all in the mind, all explicable in terms of our instincts and genetic makeup, we turn the corner, glimpse the distant hills, smell the new-mown hay, hear the song of a bird . . . and declare, like Dr. Johnson kicking the stone, that it is real, it is outside us, it isn't just imagination. Heaven and earth are full of glory, a glory which stubbornly refuses to be reduced to terms of the senses of the humans who perceive it.

### Beauty and God

But whose glory is it?

The Christian tradition has said, and indeed sung, that the glory belongs to God the creator. It is his voice we hear echoing off the crags, murmuring in the sunset. It is his power we feel in the crashing of the waves and the roar of the lion. It is his beauty we see reflected in a thousand faces and forms.

And when the cynic reminds us that people fall off crags, get lost after sunset, and are drowned by waves and eaten by lions; when the cynic cautions that faces get old and lined and forms get pudgy and sick—then we Christians do not declare that it was all a mistake. We do not avail ourselves of Plato's safety hatch and say that the *real* world is not a thing of space, time, and matter but another world into which we can escape. We say that the present world is the real one, and that it's in bad shape but expecting to be repaired. We tell, in other words, the story we told in the first chapter: the story of a good Creator longing to put the world back into the good order for which it was designed. We tell the story of a God who does the two things which, some of the time at least, we know we all want and need: a God who completes what he has begun, a God who comes to the rescue of those who seem lost and enslaved in the world the way it now is.

The idea of God coming to the rescue on the one hand, and of God completing creation and putting it to rights on the other, is highlighted in the book that bears the name of one of the greatest ancient Israelite prophets: Isaiah. In his eleventh chapter the prophet paints a picture of a world put to rights, of the wolf lying down with the lamb, and of the earth being filled with God's glory as the waters cover the sea. This haunting picture is all the more strange because, five chapters earlier, the prophet had told of seeing angels singing that the whole earth was full of God's glory. As a matter of logic, we want to press the writer: Is the earth *already* full of that glory, or is this something which will only happen in the future? As a matter of understanding beauty, we want to ask: Is the beauty we see at the moment complete, or is it incomplete, pointing to something in the future? And as a matter of far more urgent inquiry, we want to ask the writer, perhaps shaking him by the scruff of the neck: If the earth is full of God's glory, why is it also so full of pain and anguish and screaming and despair?

The prophet (or whoever edited his book into the form we now have) has answers for all these questions, but not the sort of answers



you can write on the back of a postcard. Nor can we explore them just yet. What we must notice at this stage is that, both in the Old Testament and in the New, the present suffering of the world—about which the biblical writers knew every bit as much as we do—never makes them falter in their claim that the created world really is the good creation of a good God. They live with the tension. And they don't do it by imagining that the present created order is a shabby, second-rate kind of thing, perhaps (as in some kinds of Platonism) made by a shabby, second-rate sort of god. They do it by telling a story of what the one creator God has been doing to rescue his beautiful world and to put it to rights. And the story they tell, which we shall explore further in due course, indicates that the present world really is a signpost to a larger beauty, a deeper truth. It really is the authentic manuscript of one part of a masterpiece. The question is, What is the whole masterpiece like, and how can we begin to hear the music in the way it was intended?

The point of the story is that the masterpiece already exists—in the mind of the composer. At the moment, neither the instruments nor the players are ready to perform it. But when they are, the manuscript we already have—the present world with all its beauty and all its puzzlement—will turn out to be truly part of it. The deficiencies in the one part we possess will be made good. The things that don't make sense at the moment will display a harmony and perfection we hadn't dreamed of. The points at which today the music seems almost perfect, lacking just one small thing, will be completed. That is the promise held out in the story. Just as, in one of the New Testament's greatest claims, the kingdoms of this world are to become the kingdom of God, so the beauty of this world will be enfolded in the beauty of God—and not just the beauty of God himself, but the beauty which, because God is the creator *par excellence*, he will create when the present world is rescued, healed, restored, and completed.

### The Glorious Complexity of Life

I gave a lecture not long ago in which I spoke, as I've now done, about justice, spirituality, relationship, and beauty. One of the first questioners afterward asked me why I hadn't given equal air time to truth. It's a fair question. In a sense the question of truth has haunted the whole discussion so far, and will continue to do so.

The questions, What is true? and How do we know? have been central to most major philosophies. And they force us back to deeper questions, the annoying ones which thinkers always insist on asking: What do you mean by "true," and, for that matter, what do you mean by "know"? What I have done so far in this book is to take four issues that might, for most humans in most cultures, raise questions and point to unrealized possibilities. These are things which might well function, across all types of human society, as signposts to something which matters a great deal but which we can't grasp in the way we grasp the distance from London to New York, or the right way to cook carrots. And it seems to me that all of them point to the possibility that this something, which matters so much, is a deeper and different sort of "truth" than those more mundane matters. What's more, if it's a different sort of truth, we might expect that to grasp it we might need a different sort of knowing. We shall come to that, too, in due course.

We live, in fact, in a highly complex world, within which we humans are probably the most complex things of all. I once heard a great contemporary scientist say that whether we are looking into a microscope at the smallest objects we can discern, or gazing through a telescope at the vast recesses of outer space, the most interesting thing in the world remains that which is two inches or so on the near side of the lens—in other words, the human brain, including mind, imagination, memory, will, personality, and the thousand other things which we think of as separate faculties but which all, in their different ways, interlock as functions of our complex personal identity. We should expect the world and our relation

to it to be at least as complex as we are. If there is a God, we should expect such a being to be at least as complex again.

I say this because people often grumble as soon as a discussion about the meaning of human life, or the possibility of God, moves away from quite simple ideas and becomes more complicated. Any world in which there are such things as music and sex, laughter and tears, mountains and mathematics, eagles and earthworms, statues and symphonies and snowflakes and sunsets—and in which we humans find ourselves in the middle of it all—is bound to be a world in which the quest for truth, for reality, for what we can be sure of, is infinitely more complicated than simple yes-and-no questions will allow. There is appropriate complexity along with appropriate simplicity. The more we learn, the more we discover that we humans are fantastically complicated creatures. Yet, on the other hand, human life is full of moments when we know that things are also very, very simple.

Think about it. The moment of birth; the moment of death; the joy of love; the discovery of vocation; the onset of life-threatening illness; the overwhelming pain and anger that sometimes sweep us off our feet. At such times the multiple complexities of our humanness gather themselves together and form one simple great exclamation mark, or (as it may be) one simple great question mark—a shout of joy or a cry of pain, a burst of laughter or a bursting into tears. Suddenly the rich harmony of our genetic package seems to sing in unison, and say, for good or ill, This is it.

We honor and celebrate our complexity and our simplicity by continually doing five things. We tell stories. We act out rituals. We create beauty. We work in communities. We think out beliefs. No doubt you might think of more, but that's enough for the moment. In and through all these things run the threads of love and pain, fear and faith, worship and doubt, the quest for justice, the thirst for spirituality, and the promise and problem of human relationship. And if there's any such thing as "truth," in some absolute sense, it must relate to, and make sense of, all this and more.

Stories, rituals, beauty, work, belief. I'm not talking just about the novelist, the playwright, the artist, the industrialist, the philosopher. They are the *specialists* in the different areas. I'm talking about *all* of us. And I'm not talking just about the special incidents—the story of your life-changing moment, the ritual of a family wedding, and so on. I'm talking about the ordinary moments. You come home from a day's work. You tell stories about what has happened. You listen to more stories on television or radio. You go through the simple but profound ritual of cooking a meal, laying the table, doing the thousand familiar things that say, This is who we are (or, if you're alone, This is who I am). This is where we are ourselves. You arrange a bunch of flowers or tidy a room. And from time to time you discuss the meaning of it all.

Take away any of these elements, as frequently happens—take away stories, rituals, beauty, work, or belief—and human life is diminished. In a million ways, small and great, our highly complex lives are made up of the interplay of these things. The multiple elements of life we noted a moment ago tie them all together in an ever-changing kaleidoscopic pattern.

That's the complex world to which the Christian story is addressed, the world of which it claims to make sense. Within that complexity, we should be careful how we use the word "truth."

Over the last generation in Western culture, truth has been like the rope in a tug-of-war contest. On the one hand, some want to reduce all truth to "facts," things which can be proved in the way you can prove that oil is lighter than water, or even that two and two make four. On the other hand, some believe that all truth is relative, and that all claims to truth are merely coded claims to power. Ordinary mortals, dimly aware of this tug-of-war, and its social, cultural, and political spin-offs, may well feel some uncertainty about what truth is, while still knowing that it matters.

The sort of thing we could and should mean by "truth" will vary according to what we're talking about. If I want to go into town, it matters whether the person who has told me to take the

number 53 bus is speaking the truth or not. But by no means all truth is of that kind, or testable in the same way. If there's any truth lying behind the quest for justice, it is that the world isn't meant to be morally chaotic; but what do we mean by "meant," and how would we know? If there's any truth in the thirst for spirituality, it could be simply that humans find satisfaction in exploring a "spiritual" dimension to their lives, or it could be that we are made for relationship with another Being who can only be known that way. And, talking of relationships, the "truth" of a relationship is in the relationship itself, in being "true to" one another, which is considerably more than (though presumably it includes) telling each other the truth about the number 53 bus. As for beauty, we cannot collapse "truth" into "beauty" without running the risk of deconstructing truth by pointing out, as we did earlier, the fragility and ambiguity of the beauty we know here and now.

What we mean by "know" is likewise in need of further investigation. To "know" the deeper kinds of truth we have been hinting at is much more like "knowing" a person—something which takes a long time, a lot of trust, and a good deal of trial and error—and less like "knowing" about the right bus to take into town. It's a kind of knowing in which the subject and the object are intertwined, so that you could never say that it was either purely subjective or purely objective.

One good word for this deeper and richer kind of knowing, the kind that goes with the deeper and richer kind of truth, is "love." But before we can get to that we must take a deep breath and plunge into the center of the story which, according to the Christian tradition, makes sense of our longing for justice, spirituality, relationship, and beauty, and indeed truth and love. We must begin to talk about God. Which is like saying that we must learn to stare at the sun.