Literature and the quest for beauty

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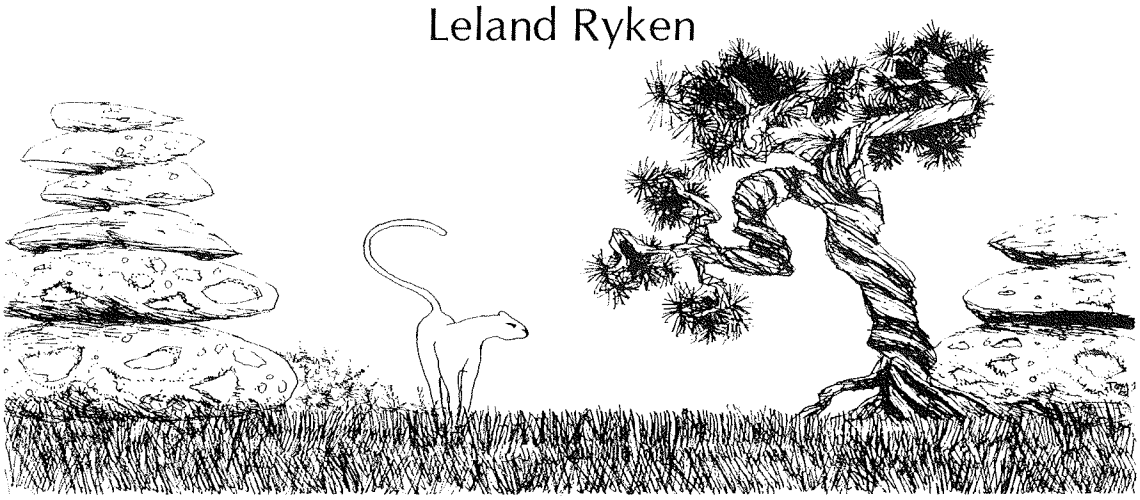

'A universe having no other function than to be beautiful would be a glorious thing indeed. Those for whom that notion means nothing should not carp at others for dreaming about it and enjoying, in the beauty of works of art, a glimpse of it.'[1]

A Neglected Dimension of Literary Study

Beauty is the dimension of literature which always receives short shrift in literary criticism. The people who talk about the pursuit of beauty are those interested in art rather than literature. This is not to say that literary critics have ignored literary form. Formalist literary criticism has long since established technique, and not simply ideas, as the domain of literary analysis. But what do these critics perceive as the function of literary technique? Not beauty, but vision, or meaning, or communication of content. The emphasis has been on form in the service of content. I do not question that literary form serves as a vehicle for presenting human experience and ideas and feelings. But I am equally convinced that one of the values of literature is its nurture of our sense of beauty. And by 'beauty' I mean the whole broad range of artistic excellence, not the specific style that a given age has agreed to call beautiful.

The importance and nature of artistic beauty in literature will become clear when we compare literature with the other arts, such as music and painting. The neglect of beauty by literary scholars is in large part a result of their indifference to aesthetics in general. But to ignore the correspondences between literature and the fine arts and to neglect the element of beauty and literature is to cut oneself off from the enjoyment of one of the important ingredients of literature and something that writers labour to build into their works.

What do aesthetic theorists mean by beauty, anyway? One well-known definition of beauty has put it like this:

> *Beauty is pleasure regarded as the quality of a thing. . . . This pleasure must not be in the consequence or the utility of the object or event, but in its immediate perception. . . . Beauty is . . . a positive value that is intrinsic; it is a pleasure.*[2]

Thus, if the object in question is a poem or story, its beauty is that part of it which pleases a reader by its sheer craftsmanship, quite apart

from what the reader might find useful in its ideas or social importance. Artistic pleasure can be differentiated from other types of pleasure by its source, namely, a work of literature or art or music. In the words of Ernst Cassirer, 'If art is enjoyment, it is not the enjoyment of things but enjoyment of forms.'[3] Artistic pleasure, in short, derives from artistic forms, and literary pleasure, to make it specific, derives from literary form.

To insist on beauty as a legitimate domain of literature, will, I fear, seem to some to surround literature with a threatening cloud of mystery. Most people are comfortable with ideas in abstract thought, and they therefore approach literature solely in terms of its ideas and paraphraseable content. How, they wonder, does one approach literature in terms of literary form and beauty and technique?

The fear is quite unwarranted. Many people who make statements about literature make a great mistake in assuming that the reason they read novels and poems or go to see plays is to gain insights and ideas. Now it is no doubt true that *after* we have read a novel or seen a play we tend to reflect upon it in terms of its intellectual content or view of life. But it is, in my view, quite preposterous to claim that the reason why we read novels or attend plays or watch television dramas *in the first place* is to be instructed or to increase our knowledge.

The overwhelming majority of people go to literature for entertainment and enjoyment. They regard literature as a leisure time pursuit, which is, after all, what it is. People do not read a short story for the same reason that they attend a church service, or watch a television drama for the same reason that they attend a lecture, or go to a play to achieve the same thing that prompts them to read an informational book. People who say they read imaginative literature for improvement or for its ideas are not content with a list of the ideas in the work of literature but insist on the pleasures of the poem or story or play itself.

There has been a lot of misunderstanding and some hypocrisy on this point, but these should not prevent us from understanding and valuing literature as an object of beauty and a source of pleasure. People who do really go to see a play with the same didactic expectations they bring to a sermon or lecture do a double injustice to themselves; as individuals they regard even their recreation as a form of work, and as literary critics they must plead guilty to C. S. Lewis's observation that much bad criticism results from trying 'to get a work-time result of something that never aimed at more than producing pleasure'.[4]

A Biblical Perspective on Beauty

Why should a person feel it important to cultivate his capacity for literary beauty? It is my conviction that a Christian world view and Christian aesthetic make the pursuit of beauty an obligation, not an option.

A Christian aesthetic must be based on more than human opinion, helpful and even indispensable as some of these opinions are. The person who believes that God's revelation as embodied in the Bible and in Christ tells the truth about reality can rest assured that it will tell the truth about art and literature too. There are two ways in which the Bible functions as the groundwork for a Christian philosophy of literature—through doctrine and example. A Christian aesthetic, then, rests partly on the answer to the question, 'What does the Bible say about the pursuit of beauty and pleasure?'.

The Bible teaches that beauty is an attribute or perfection of God and that he is the source of beauty, just as he is the source of truth. This conclusion seems to me inevitable, even though the word translated 'beauty' in English versions of the Bible encompasses a variety of Hebrew terms and includes the idea of spiritual as well as physical or artistic beauty. David 'asked of the Lord . . . to behold the beauty of the Lord' (Ps. 27:4), suggesting not only that beauty is an attribute of God but that beholding it is the desire of the believer. Similarly, the writer of Psalm 90:17 prayed 'Let the beauty of the Lord our God be upon us'.

In the prophecy of Ezekiel we read that God gave his people the gift of his beauty, which was perfect until the people in their sinfulness desecrated it (Ez. 16:14-17). Here we can infer that beauty is a quality or possession of God, that he bestows it as a gift, and that, as with all of God's gifts, people can either use beauty to God's glory or defile it by making it the object of religious devotion.

As an attribute of God, beauty is sometimes mentioned along with other divine qualities, suggesting that it is an inseparable part of God's nature and spiritual perfection. The command to 'Worship the Lord in the beauty of Holiness' occurs three times in the Old Testament (1 Chron. 16:29; Ps. 29:2; 96:9). Holiness and beauty are similarly joined in the statement that 'our holy and our beautiful house, where our fathers praise thee, is burned up with fire' (Is. 64:11). A similar joining of holiness and beauty occurs in God's command to Moses to 'make holy garments for Aaron your brother, for glory and for beauty' (Ex. 28:2).

Scripture also asserts that God created a beautiful universe and that the creation reflects his own nature. The creation account in Genesis tells us that 'the earth was without form'. The divine act of creation consisted of filling the earth with a host of beautiful forms—trees and mountains and flowers and animals and people. God's concern that people live in a world that is beautiful as well as functional is evident from the description of how in the Garden of Eden 'The Lord God made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food' (Gen. 2:9). The beauty of God's created universe, even in its fallen condition, is regarded by biblical writers as a picture of God's beauty and craftmanship. A biblical poet declared, 'The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork' (Ps. 19:1). That God, in his role as Creator, is a craftsman with an awesome regard for beauty is equally clear from the descriptions of the new heaven and the new earth (Rev. 21), just as all the biblical descriptions of heaven portray it as a place of transcending beauty.

The Bible gives reason to believe that God not only creates but also takes pleasure in contemplating the beauty of his creation. We read in Genesis 1 that after each of the days of creation 'God saw that it was good'. And after the act of creation was completed, 'God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good' (Gen. 1:31). We can infer that God experienced delight and satisfaction in contemplating the perfection and beauty of what he had made. Abraham Kuyper has commented, 'After the Creation, God saw that all things were good. Imagine that every human eye were closed and every human ear stopped up, even then the beautiful remains, and God sees it and hears it.'[5]

The lesson to be learned from the Bible's portrait of God as Creator is that God values beauty as well as utility. He did not create a purely functional world. From a utilitarian point of view God did not have to create a world filled with colours and symmetrical forms. He could have made everything a drab colour, or he could have created people colour-blind. Surely God could have made trees whose leaves did not turn to beautiful colours in the fall of the year, or a world in which all flowers are brown in colour or grass that is grey instead of green. The Bible presents God as making provision for the quality of human life, not simply its survival. He is pictured as desiring that people will lead an enjoyable earthly life, not merely a utilitarian existence. We might say that the biblical view of creation encourages us to believe that artistic beauty needs no justification for its existence, any more than a happy marriage does, or a bird, or a flower, or a mountain or a sunset. These things have meaning because God made them. Artistic beauty has meaning in itself because God thought it good to give beauty to people, quite apart from any consideration of practical usefulness. Abraham Kuyper has written that 'The beautiful . . . has an objective existence, being itself the expression of a divine perfection. . . . We know this from the creation around us. But how could all this beauty exist, except created by One who preconceived the beautiful in His own Being, and produced it from His own Divine perfection?'[6]

If the biblical doctrine of creation is the chief basis for the Christian theory of beauty, the related doctrine which calls for emphasis is that people are created in the image of God. When we first encounter this idea in Scripture (Gen 1:26-27), God has not yet been portrayed as the Redeemer or the God of providence or the covenant God or the God of moral truth. He has been portrayed only as Creator. In its immediate narrative context, therefore, the doctrine of the image of God in people emphasises that people are, like God, makers. This biblical doctrine of the image of God in people is the religious or theological reason why people write literature and paint pictures and compose music. They create because they have been endowed with God's image. This, in turn, deflects the ultimate praise for literary achievement from people to God, as Christian writers have acknowledged and as pagan poets have perhaps hinted when they invoked the muses to inspire them. The poet Chad Walsh has said that the writer 'can honestly see himself as a kind of earthly assistant to God (so can the carpenter), carrying on the delegated work of creation, making the fulness of creation fuller'.[7] To delight in the work of the human imagination is to value the image of God in people, and to write imaginative literature is to express that image.

A final repository of biblical teaching about artistic beauty is the various accounts of the Old Testament places of worship. These passages, too, portray God as the source of beauty. God is pictured as having a concern for more than functional practicality when we read that it was God himself 'who put such a thing as this into the heart of the king to beautify the house of the Lord' (Ezra 7:27). The Hebrew worshipper could declare regarding his God that 'strength and beauty are in his sanctuary' (Ps. 96:6), and if we were to have asked whether the beauty that he sensed at the temple were a quality of the God whom he worshipped there or of the temple surroundings, he would probably have replied that both were a part of his total experience.

The idea of God as a source of beauty and the dispenser of artistic talent is reinforced by the account of the rebuilding of the tabernacle. Commenting on this tabernacle, Moses stresses that it was God who had called Bezalel and 'filled him with the Spirit of God, with ability, with intelligence, with knowledge, and with all craftmanship, to devise artistic designs, to work in gold and silver and bronze, in cutting stones for setting, and in carving wood for work in every skilled craft' (Ex. 35:31-33). Moses makes an identical claim for the other artists who beautified the tabernacle. Then after pages describing the artistic beauty of the tabernacle, we read again that the making of this beautiful structure was nothing less than the outworking of God's creative imagination (Ex. 39:42-43).

All of these Old Testament passages encourage us to believe that beauty is divine in its origin. We can infer the same thing from the broader principle stated in the New Testament that 'every good endowment and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights' (Jas. 1:17). A little reflection will suggest, moreover, that if God is perfect in all his Being, as the biblical writers portray him, it must follow that God is the source of beauty rather than ugliness.

In view of this biblical emphasis it is unfortunate that an influential theorist in the Christian tradition should write that 'beauty is not a biblical notion or term' and that 'the Scripture speaks . . . very little or not at all of beauty'.[8] Even worse is the statement of a Christian scholar who speaks of 'the curse of beauty'.[9] Such viewpoints do not accurately reflect the Bible's comments, direct and indirect, about artistic beauty, and they represent the kind of thinking that has hampered the formation of a truly Christian aesthetic.

Even the example of the Bible, as distinct from its doctrinal ideas, affirms the value of beauty. God could have revealed himself and communicated his truth to people in a book devoid of literary beauty. Instead, we have the Bible, a book that a famous antagonist of biblical religion called 'unquestionably the most beautiful book in the world'.[10] If the message were all that mattered in the Bible, we would be left wondering whether the biblical poets did not have something better to do with their time than putting their utterance into the form of poetic parallelism and inventing apt metaphors. Biblical example leads us to conclude that in God's economy they did not have something better to do than be artistic to the glory of God.

A Biblical Perspective on Pleasure

The Bible endorses pleasure as thoroughly as it approves of beauty. Pleasure and its synonyms are, for example, one of the recurrent themes in the Psalms. The writer of Psalm 16 rejoices in the fact that 'the lines have fallen for me in pleasant places' (v. 6) and asserts that at 'God's right hand are pleasures for evermore' (v. 11). For another poet the 'harp with the psaltery' is 'pleasant' (Ps. 81:2). And another Psalm declares about God's people 'they feast on the abundance of thy house, and thou givest them drink from the river of thy delights' (Ps. 36:8).

One of the unifying themes of the book of Ecclesiastes is the contrast between the false, purely humanistic pursuit of pleasure and the legitimate, God-oriented quest for pleasure. One of the key assertions is this:

> *Behold, what I have seen to be good and fitting is to eat and drink and find enjoyment in all the toil with which one toils under the sun the few days of his life which God has given him, for this is his lot. Every man also to whom God has given wealth and possession and the power to enjoy them, and to*

accept his lot and find enjoyment in his toil —this is the gift of God (5: 18-19).

These sentiments are reiterated in a classic New Testament passage in which Paul comments on wealthy people. Paul advises Timothy 'charge them that are rich in this world, that they be not highminded, nor trust in uncertain riches, but in the living God, who giveth us richly all things to enjoy' (1 Tim. 6:17). This key verse establishes three important principles:

1 *God is the giver of all good things,*
2 *He gives people these things to enjoy,*
3 *The misuse of them consists not in enjoyment of them but in trusting them or making idols of them.*

The biblical doctrine of heaven also exalts pleasure. If heaven is the place where there is no more pain (Rev. 21:4), C. S. Lewis can correctly assert that 'All pleasure is in itself a good and pain in itself an evil; if not, then the whole Christian tradition about heaven and hell and the passion of our Lord seems to have no meaning'.

No-one could have lived a busier life than Jesus during the years of his public ministry. Yet he did not reduce life to continuous work or evangelism. He took time to enjoy the beauty of the lily and to meditate on the meaning of life. If we could arrange the gospel accounts of Jesus' habitual activities into a series of portraits, one of them would be a picture of Jesus attending a dinner or a party. We read about Jesus eating dinner with Matthew (Matt. 9:10), a Pharisee (Lk. 7:36), 'a ruler who belonged to the Pharisees' (Lk. 14:1), Zacchaeus (Lk. 19:1-10) and Mary, Martha and Lazarus (Jn. 12:1-2). He turned water into wine to keep a wedding party going (Jn. 2:1-10). By his example, Jesus consecrated pleasure and enjoyment and gave a basis for our agreeing with John Calvin that 'If we ponder to what end God created food, we shall find that He meant not only to provide for necessity but also for delight and good cheer.'[12]

A person's attitude toward pleasure is actually a comment on his or her enjoyment of God. To assume that God dislikes pleasure and enjoyment is to charge him with being sadistic toward his creatures. The Bible, of course, does not allow such a confusion. As Norman Geisler writes 'God is not a celestial Scrooge who hates to see his children enjoy themselves. Rather, he is the kind of Father who is ready to say, "Let us eat and make merry; for this my son was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found" (Lk. 15:24)'.[13]

All that I have said about the Bible's approval of beauty and pleasure needs, of course, to be qualified. It would be easy to adduce dozens of biblical passages that make it clear that beauty and pleasure can be used in evil and destructive ways. These qualities are created or given by God and are good in principle. Like any of God's gifts, they can be perverted to a bad end by fallen people. That is why one of Dostoyevsky's literary characters can say that beauty is the battle-field where God and devil fight for the human heart and why Aldous Huxley can write that 'As a matter of plain historical fact, the beauties of holiness have often been matched and indeed surpassed by the beauties of unholiness'.[14] What we are talking about, though, is the abuse of something, not its inherent nature.

The Enjoyment of Literature

What does the biblical affirmation of beauty and pleasure have to do with reading literature? Primarily it validates the enjoyment of the imaginative beauty of literary form as a Christian activity. Scripture tells us that people are created in the image of God. This means, among other things, that people possess the ability to make something beautiful and to delight in it. Given this biblical aesthetic, when we enjoy the beauty of a sonnet or the magnificent artistry of an epic or the fictional inventiveness of a novel, we are enjoying a quality of which God is the ultimate source and performing an act similar to God's enjoyment of the beauty of his own creation. To the question 'how do we read literature to the glory of God?' one good answer is, 'by enthusiastically enjoying the artistic beauty of the literature that we read, recognizing God as the ultimate source of the beauty which we enjoy'.

The way to show gratitude for a gift is to enjoy it. Any parent knows that the only real gratitude he or she desires from a child who has received a gift is simply the enthusiastic enjoyment of the gift. If artistic beauty is, as the Bible claims, a gift of God, we can scarcely demonstrate our gratitude for the gift any more adequately than by using it and enjoying it. The task of literature is here identical to that of the other arts, namely, to enrich the human capacity for appreciating that which is beautiful. And in this the arts, as part of God's creation, help to awaken a person's lively sensitivity to beauty in all of creation, including the realm of nature.

If the act of enjoying something beautiful seems either blameworthy or trivial, it is because we have fallen prey to an unbiblical attitude, whether it be derived from Platonism or asceticism or scientific utilitarianism or that version of the Puritan work-ethic which insists that only hard work is a legitimate use of time.

It is a fallacy to suppose that pleasure is wrong or that an activity must be directly useful, in an utilitarian sense, in order to be considered worthwhile. God has created people with the ability to enjoy, in a purely contemplative act, that which is beautiful, even as God does.

In view of the Bible's affirmation of pleasure and enjoyment I must confess my dismay at the published statements of aesthetic theorists, some of them Christians, who speak of artistic enjoyment in a derogatory manner. One prominent critic speaks slightingly of 'mere aesthetic pleasure'. Another talks about 'the trivial notion that art is intended simply for pleasure and entertainment'. And yet another states 'reading a work of fiction as an artistic accomplishment . . . is not relevant to ordinary human concerns'. In the whole body of literary theory, ancient and modern, I have seen few writers who do not denigrate the specifically entertaining function of literature. But this is surely wrong, based on the unwarranted assumption that beauty and enjoyment are somehow ignoble.

C. S. Lewis has argued convincingly that the ability simply to enjoy literature is precisely what separates the Christian from at least some non-Christians. He writes:

> *The Christian will take literature a little less seriously than the cultured Pagan: he will feel less uneasy with a purely hedonistic standard for at least many kinds of work. The unbeliever is always apt to make a kind of religion of his aesthetic experiences . . . but the Christian knows from the outset that the salvation of single soul is more important than the production of all the epics and tragedies in the world . . . he has no objection to comedies that merely amuse and tales that merely refresh . . . we can play, as we can eat, to the glory of God.*[15]

If, in a Christian view of things, everything that God has created is not self-contained but points towards him, Ralph Waldo Emerson was not quite correct when he wrote that 'Beauty is its own excuse for being.'[16] But surely Emerson came much closer to the truth than many literary theorists and many Christians.

[1] Etienne Gilson, *The Arts of the Beautiful.*
[2] George Santayana, *The Sense of Beauty* (1896; rpt. New York: Random House, 1955), pp. 51-52.
[3] Ernst Cassirer, *An Essay on Man* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1944), p. 204.
[4] C. S. Lewis, *Christian Reflections* (Eerdmans, 1967), p. 34.
[5] A. Kuyper, *Calvinism* (Eerdmans, 1953), p. 156.
[6] *ibid.*
[7] Chad Walsh, 'A Hope for Literature,' in *The Climate of Faith in Modern Literature*, ed. Nathan A. Scott, Jr. (New York: Seabury Press, 1964), p. 227.
[8] Denis de Rougemont, 'Religion and the Mission of the Artist,' in *The New Orpheus: Essays toward a Christian Poetic*, ed. Nathan A. Scott, Jr. (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1964), p. 64.
[9] Calvin Seerveld, *A Christian Critique of Art* (St Catherine's, Ontario: Association for Reformed Scientific Studies, 1963), pp. 31-35.
[10] H. L. Mencken, as quoted by D. G. Kehl, *Literary Style of the Old Bible and the New* (Indianapolis: Bobbs—Merrill, 1970), p. 7.
[11] C. S. Lewis, *op. cit*, p. 21.
[12] J. Calvin, *Institutio* III: 10:2.
[13] Norman Geisler, 'The Christian as Pleasure-Seeker', *Christianity Today*, 25 September 1975, p. 11.
[14] Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov* (New York: Modern Library, 1950), p. 127; Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World Revisited* (New York: Harper and Row, 1958), p. 52. Huxley goes on to observe that Hitler's rallies were 'masterpieces of ritual and theatrical art' and to quote an observer's statement that 'for grandiose beauty I have never seen any ballet to compare with the Nuremberg rally'.
[15] C. S. Lewis, *op. cit.*, p. 10.
[16] Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Rhodora*, line 12.

This piece has been adapted from *Triumphs of the Imagination* **by Leland Ryken, which is shortly to be published by IVP. Professor Ryken is Professor of English at Wheaton College Illinois.**