

THE PLACE OF BEAUTY IN LIFE

By Clara Codd

People have tried to define beauty. Wordsworth described it as “multiplicity of symmetrical parts uniting in a constituent whole.” Coleridge says something similar: “The old definition of beauty, in the Roman School, was ‘multiplicity in unity,’ and there is no doubt that such is the principle of beauty.”

But Plotinus says that this will not explain simple beauty, as that of the sunshine and the stars. He says: “It is the general opinion that a certain commensuration of parts of each other and the whole, with the addition of color, generates that beauty which is the object of sight, and that in the commensurate and the moderate alone the beauty of everything consists. . . . But from such a definition it follows the beautiful colors and the light of the sun, since they are simple, and do not receive their beauty from commensuration, must be excluded from the regions of beauty. . . . In like manner the most simple musical sounds will be foreign from beauty, though in a song wholly beautiful every note must be beautiful, as necessary to the being of the whole.”

The Greeks sought the essential unity. To them beauty lay not in the form, which was but an epiphany, but in the incommensurable idea, and finally in the all-pervading life. Says Plotinus again: “Beauty, for the most part, consists in objects of sight; but it is also received through the ears, by the skillful composition of words, and the consonant proportion of sounds; for in every species of harmony beauty is to be found. And if we rise from sense into the regions of the soul, we shall there perceive studies and offices, actions and habits, sciences and virtues, invested with a much larger proportion of beauty.

But whether there is above these a still higher beauty, will appear as we advance in its investigation.”

There are three stages in the perception of beauty: sensuous, idealistic, and spiritual. Each is reached by the understanding and transcending of the inferior stage. In the teachings of the priestess Diotima to Socrates, she says: “The true order of going, or being led by another, to the things of love, is to begin from the beauties of earth and mount upwards for the sake of that other beauty, using these as steps only, and from one going on to two, and from two to all fair forms, and from fair forms to



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fair practices, and from fair practices to fair notions, until from fair notions he arrives at the notion of absolute beauty, and at last knows what the essence of beauty is.”

The Eternal Beauty is the Eternal Life. Says the beloved Plotinus yet again: “Let us, therefore, ascend to the good itself, which every soul desires; and in which alone it can find perfect repose. . . . Those who penetrate into the holy retreat of these sacred mysteries . . . having dismissed everything foreign from the God, by themselves alone, behold the solitary principle of the universe, sincere, simple, and pure, from which all things depend, and to whose transcendent perfections the eyes of all intelligent natures are directed, as the proper cause of being, life and intelligence.”

“In itself perfectly pure, not confined by any corporeal bond, neither existing in the heavens, nor in the earth, not to be imaged by the most lovely form imagination can conceive; since these are all adventitious and mixed, and mere secondary beauties, proceeding from the Beautiful itself.”

The priestess Diotima said: “But what if man had eyes to see the true beauty—the Divine Beauty, I mean, pure and clear and unalloyed, not clogged with the pollutions of mortality and all the colours and vanities of human life—thither looking, and holding converse with the true beauty, simple and divine? Remember how in that communion only, beholding beauty with the eye of the mind, he will be enabled to bring forth, not images of beauty, but realities (for he has hold not of an image but of reality), and bringing forth and nourishing true virtue, to become the friend of God, and be immortal, if mortal man may.”

Beauty is an eternal Divine Principle, and it always evokes Love. The second Person of the Hindu Trimurti or Trinity, is Vishnu, the god of Love, and his “shakti” or wife is the goddess Lakshmi, the goddess of happiness and joy. And it too is a creative power. When God as Narcissus beheld his image mirrored in the waters of space, he fell in love with it and created the universe.

Diotima says that men love the beautiful that it may be theirs. And when she asked Socrates what is given by the possession of beauty he could not answer, so she changed the word “the beautiful” for “the good.” Then he knew that the possession of the Good gives happiness, and that men desire its everlasting possession, because they desire birth in beauty either of body or soul. Strength and grace in men, says Diotima, creates bodies, desiring immortality. But souls which are pregnant create as poets, artists, inventors. “Who,” she asks, “when he thinks of Homer and Hesiod and other great poets, would not rather have their children than ordinary ones?”

Desire is the cosmic urge to Unity. So Plotinus says: “Indeed, whatever is desirable is a kind of good, since to this desire tends.” Therefore there is a universal desire for happiness, for it is Beauty calling. There are some lovely words in King Solomon’s

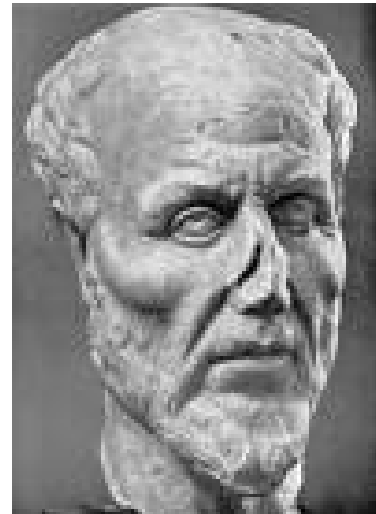
Song of Songs: "My beloved spake, and said unto me, 'Rise up, my love, my fair one, and come away. For, lo! the winter is past, the rain is over and gone. The flowers appear on the earth; the time of the singing of birds is come.' "

Angus was the god Eros of the Celts, and his dwelling place was the Tir-na-og, the land of the Ever-Young.

What is our way to this supreme Beauty? Thomas Taylor says: "But here it is requisite to observe that our ascent to this region of Beauty must be made by gradual advances, for, from our association with matter, it is impossible to pass directly, and without a medium, to such transcendent perfection; but we must proceed in a manner similar to those who pass from darkness to the brightest light, by advancing from places moderately lighted to such as are the most luminous of all." This reminds us of Plato's allegory of the men gazing at shadows on the wall of a cave, who, when they turned their faces to the light were at first blinded.

Plotinus says the same, that the pristine beauty of our eternal selves has become clouded and defiled by its contact with matter, and that in order to become able to perceive true beauty we must learn to divest ourselves by degrees of this impurity, since "it is necessary that the perceiver and the thing perceived should be similar to each other before true vision can exist . . . Everyone, therefore, must become divine, and of godlike beauty, before he can gaze upon a god and the beautiful itself."

Only the pure can see the Pure. He says that we see what we can respond to. "Thus, to the good man, virtue shining forth in youth is lovely because consonant to the true virtue which lies deep in the soul."



Bust of Plotinus

So the Way is an ascent in response. And this is the method in the words of Plotinus: "It is now time, leaving every object of sense behind, to contemplate, by a certain ascent, a beauty of a much higher order; a beauty not visible to the corporeal eye, but alone manifest to the brighter eye of the soul, independent of all corporeal aid."

The aspirant has already realized that all beautiful things are stages of the manifestation of beauty, and has tried to love and serve them. Diotima says that a man should begin in youth to visit and admire beauty. Then to love one fair form only and out of that to create fair thoughts. Then seeing that Beauty everywhere is one and the same he will become a lover of all beautiful forms. Then he will love the beauty of the

mind, and toward one who has it he will be content to love and tend him. Finally, instead of being like a servant in love with one person or institution, he will draw toward and contemplate the vast sea of beauty, creating many fair and noble thoughts in boundless love of wisdom; till at last the vision is revealed to him of a *single science* which is the science of beauty everywhere.

“Thine eyes shall behold the King in His Beauty and the land which is very far off.”

Plotinus says that whoever would behold this beauty must learn to withdraw his view from the fairest corporeal forms, and, convinced that these are nothing more than the images, vestiges, and shadows of beauty, (“the great; the sub-time, the beautiful; they are the shadows of God upon earth” —Joseph Mazzini) should eagerly soar to the fair original from which they are derived, as if they would say, “Let us depart from hence, and fly to our father’s delightful land.” He recommends a system of meditation, which consists in recalling the thoughts inwardly, and trying to perceive the Beautiful within ourselves. We must divest ourselves of all that is not beautiful until we perceive the true light and that alone, everywhere immeasurable and excellent. We now require no guide, for we must now fix steadfastly our mental views, for with the mind’s eye alone can such immense Beauty be perceived.

Plotinus warns us that if our mind’s eye is not thoroughly refined and is yet infested with any sordid concerns, it will be immediately darkened and incapable of *intuition*, for the perceiver and perceived should be similar to each other before true vision can exist. And then he will perceive that all things are beautiful because a portion of the Beautiful itself supervenes and irradiates them.

We can see because God has planted His image within us. As Proclus says: “The author of the Universe has planted in all beings impressions of His own perfect excellence . . . and by this mystical impression which corresponds to His nature they become united with their original, divesting themselves of their own essence, and hastening to become His impression alone.”

Here again Love is drawn by Beauty and Union is Bliss. “With what ardent love,” cries Plotinus, “with what strong desires will he who enjoys this transporting vision be inflamed whilst vehemently affecting to become one with this supreme beauty. . . . What must be the condition of that being, who beholds the Beautiful itself?” “A beauty if you once behold,” said Diotima, “all other beauty fades.”

We should cultivate the response to beauty in ourselves. Then we would never be cruel. I once knew a man who had no ear for music. He religiously took himself to concert after concert, and tried to “listen.” He became the finest appreciator of music I ever met. Beauty in our souls makes for grace and graciousness. To quote Plotinus

again: "Bodies themselves participate of beauty from the soul, which, as something divine, and a portion of the beautiful itself, renders whatever it supervenes and subdues, beautiful as far as its natural capacity will admit. . . . For such beauty, since it is supreme in dignity and excellence, cannot fail of rendering its votaries lovely and fair."

The evidence of beauty in the soul is love, joy, faith, long-suffering. By the banks of the Illysus, Socrates, after he had told young Phaedrus of the chariots of the soul, prayed: "Beloved Pan, and all ye deities that haunt this place, give me inward beauty of soul, and may the outward and the inward man be at one."

The love of Beauty is essentially religious. Dr. Alexis Carrell says: "The love of beauty leads to mysticism. Song easily becomes transformed into prayer." He says also: "Ministers have rationalized religion. They have destroyed its mystical basis. But they have not succeeded in attracting modern man." A great German divine says that the basis of true religion is a sense of the Holy, the sense of Wonder. That is the essence of the new religion which is dawning in the world; the Religion of Life Itself, holy, wonderful, lovely, inviolate. We too may see the King in His Beauty, but the eyes with which we shall see Him are not the eyes of earth, but the opened eyes of the spiritual intuition, as Plato expressed it, "Beholding the Beautiful with that eye with which alone it is possible to behold it."

Let me quote once more the beautiful priestess Diotima: "He who has been instructed so far in the things of love, and who has learned to see the beautiful in due order and succession, when he comes toward the end will suddenly perceive a nature of wondrous beauty (and this, Socrates, is the final cause of all our former toils),—a nature which in the first place is everlasting, not growing or decaying, or waxing or waning; secondly, not fair in one point of view and foul in another, or at one time, or in another relation, or in one place fair, at another time, or in another relation, foul, as if fair to some and foul to others, or in the likeness of a face or hands or any other part of the bodily frame, or in any form of speech or knowledge, or existing in any other being, as for example, in an animal, or in heaven, or in earth, or in any other place; but Beauty absolute, separate, simple and everlasting, which without diminution and without decrease, or any change, is imparted to the overgrowing and perishing beauties of all other things.

"He who, from these ascending under the influence of true love, begins to perceive that Beauty, is not far from the end."

When I was at Adyar, in India, I used to hear the fishermen singing always the same song. One day some one told me the free English translation of their song.

“O my Beautiful, come into my heart.
What is the song without the singer?
And what is the singer without thee?
O my Beautiful, come into my heart,
And set its music free.”

There are very few of my own words in this chapter. I have let my beloved ancient Greeks speak for me, for their words are far more beautiful.

This excerpt was taken from *Trust Yourself to Life* by Clara Codd and edited by the Department of Education.