THE YOGA OF BEAUTY [1]

By Laurence J. Bendit

The classical Greek philosophers used to speak of a trinity of the Good, the True and the Beautiful, giving all three a similar value in the life of a human being. In the modern Theosophical movement, we have paid a great deal of attention to the first two of these, though very much to the neglect of the third. Theosophical students have been encouraged to discover what is true and to lead highly moral lives but seldom has any kind of philosophical background as to the nature of Beauty has been put forward. The result shows in the homes, Lodge rooms and even in the Headquarters of Theosophists. There is usually very little sense that the occupants have considered the artistic worth of pictures, ornaments, or furniture, let alone the total combined effect of the objects that furnish a hall or room.

One of the difficulties is that even a genuinely beautiful work of art may touch one person and not another. For example, most Westerners (being accustomed to Western music) find it difficult to relate to Indian music, while that same music may deeply touch a person from India. A picture by Picasso may reveal something to one person and appear as a distortion of life to another. (I refer here, of course, to the real and serious seeker after beauty, not to the *poseur* or the one who is impressed by novelty, materialism, or fashion.)

Nevertheless, to learn to discriminate what is beautiful from what is not, is quite as important as it is to discover the True and the Good. Although the immediate effects of knowing the latter may be more obvious in one's daily actions, an experience of beauty is just as effective, in that it changes the outlook of the one who undergoes it and so results in "better" and "truer" activity. It is with the problem of discrimination that this essay is primarily concerned, not with any single object or class of art.

EXPERIENCE OF THE BEAUTIFUL

The first thing to realize is that what is pretty or pleasant is not necessarily beautiful, whereas beauty can be found in the most unexpected places, even in a face which is "ugly" or in a picture of a sordid scene. It does not, of course, follow that prettiness and beauty cannot exist together, or that a story or a poem on squalid matters thereby qualifies as a work of art. What makes a thing beautiful is a certain quality, which is difficult to define except indirectly and by its effect on the beholder.

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[1] Slightly edited for modern sensibilities—David Bruce, Department of Education.

Experience of the beautiful is not anything intellectual. It reaches one through the feeling aspect of the mind. It is not subject to rational analysis except in a very superficial way, yet it is something that is known with certainty and in depth; it changes and transforms the consciousness so that the individual can never be quite the same again. Edward Carpenter—a now somewhat forgotten philosopher—says in a book of essays, *Angels' Wings*, that if a person listens to a symphony and does not come out better adapted to his fellows, he has not *heard* that music. In other words, it depends very much at what level of the feeling-spectrum a thing is experienced whether that experience can be said to be one of beauty or of something else.

The experience is in some ways comparable to love. Love may be simply an emotional matter—one of a *quid pro quo*. Somebody is kind to us and we love that person because of what he or she has given us. But real love is entirely impersonal and universal only when it belongs to the highest aspect of feeling—that which we call *Buddhi* [2] as against *Kāma* [3] or, in the language of the middle-Theosophical period, *astral.*

In the same way, we may feel happy about an object or picture because of memories, associations, and other emotional factors without realizing that this is utterly different from the *Buddhic* impact, which is that of real beauty. A photograph of a person may evoke a pleasant feeling, but such a photograph is seldom a work of art. Nevertheless, we quite naturally display it in our home where it can be seen**.** Another object may be attractive because it is made of valuable material such as gold, or it may be unusual or quaint and, therefore, interesting. But none of these necessarily brings beauty into our home. On the other hand, there may be great natural beauty in a mere pebble or in a simple piece of wood.

The fact is that we have not learned to discriminate between the various levels of emotional appeal. The intellectual aspect of life has been the main focus of education, with the result that we are far more differentiated on one side of the brain than we are on the other. Yet to appreciate beauty, the same degree of critical understanding and awareness is required as for any intellectual pursuit. Moreover, intellect and feeling are often mingled when we come to study an artistic subject, so that the intellectual or philosophical meaning of the subject becomes entangled with the artistic, instead of representing two discrete aspects of that subject.

[2] A Sanskrit term denoting that faculty associated with spiritual consciousness.
[3] A Sanskrit term denoting the desire-nature, in this context, desire tinged by personal likes and dislikes.

WAGNER AND SHAKESPEARE

To exemplify this proposition, let us take two matters which are often of interest to Theosophical students: Wagner's operas and Shakespeare's plays, both of which are rightly taken to represent art of a high order—*i.e.*, as expressions of beauty. In both of these we have a deep philosophical, psychological, or "occult" background embodied in a magnificent form of music or language. If one were able to separate the two factors, each would stand in its own right. The myths in Wagner stand alone, while the music (assuming it to touch the hearer as an individual) needs nothing more to supplement it. In the same way, Shakespeare's stories go deep into the nature of man, while the poetic form in which they are put is something capable of being separated from the story itself.

This may seem plain enough when one considers it. But a legend or a philosophy—or, for that matter, a scientific experiment or a mathematical equation—may itself embody beauty without the artistic vessel which "incarnates" it; so that the boundary between the beauty of the philosophy itself and of an artistic vehicle is often undefinable. In the same way, and within the framework of personal feeling, we have an indefinable line between emotional or sentimental appreciation such as our love for a child, and any assessment of that child in terms of true beauty, whether of character or body.

So the problem is highly confused. There is, nevertheless, a way of considering it, which may help to guide our study. It starts, not on the periphery where objects and ideas exist, but at the center.

This center is the world of Spirit, of abstract or archetypal principles, where we are faced with the same difficulties as those which lay before the authors of the Athanasian Creed. This is probably the most succinct statement ever made about the nature of the divine Trinity, insisting that the three Persons are never anything but one God, that there are not three but a single Supreme Being, even if He can be thought of in different aspects. The trinity of the Good, the True and the Beautiful can be equated with those three Persons of God.

Beauty IS—a spiritual quality in every way equal to, and as much to be sought by the one who inclines that way, as either or both of the others. It does not in itself EXIST except when framed in the material form of a work of art, including that of the supreme artist, physical Nature. It is then to some extent hidden, conditioned, limited by that form; but it lies there, waiting to be found, just as Truth lies in and behind scriptural writings, to be discovered by the one who, in the Christ's words, "hath ears to hear." When it is found and experienced, it lifts the mind of the individual out of the level of personal likes and dislikes into that of enlightened spiritual consciousness. Something happens at the personal level—his psyche is changed, a new ray of understanding

comes—and, in short, he has had the same experience as the devotee, the mystic, or any other spiritual seeker, irrespective of the way chosen to seek God.

A YOGA IN ITSELF

In other words, the search for Beauty is a yoga in itself. It is akin to the path of the mystic or the *bhakta* in that it follows the feeling aspect of mind; and it is not to be found through the methods of the *jñani* or the occultist—*i.e.*, through intellectual processes.

The beautiful object is to the artist what a philosophical concept, a scientific fact, or the idea of a divine Being is to the others. The result of experiencing it leads him to the same point, to vision of the same God, Tao, Atman or Brahman. And once a person has reached that point, the various sub-divisions, whether of the Good, the True, and the Beautiful, or as between occultist, mystic and artist, cease to have significance because all of them become One.

This is the background against which the practice of the experience of beauty needs to be seen. It will help further understanding if we now try and explain some terms.

First, what makes a work of art? Leaving aside pure natural beauty, a work of art is one that embodies successfully the spiritual principle of Beauty. To do this, the artist needs technique and skill—the earthly quality which enables him to "incarnate" and express something which belongs to the other end of the one world, that which we call Spirit. That—and that alone—creates a work of art, and the greatest of these are those which open the gate most widely into the spiritual world.

The form of the work of art—whether it is music, poetry, painting or drama—is of minor importance in this context. So is the subject depicted. A squalid scene, a poem about "The Waste Lands," or a rotten tree-stump painted with inner vision can make a much greater work of art than many highly idealized scenes of the Grail or sentimental verses with a religious theme, and so on. "Ugly" things like a crucifixion, the martyrdom of saints, war, rape and battle—as in Homer or in the great plays of Greece or Shakespeare—endure because of their timeless, archetypal, Taoistic, spiritual values, whereas "pretty" scenes or pleasant comedies soon lose their charm and become boring except perhaps as historical documents; that is, their value is other than artistic.

LINKING SPIRITUAL WITH PHYSICAL

When an artist has succeeded, the spiritual is linked with the physical in a living manner, effectively bypassing the personal level where irrelevant psychological material accumulates. This material may be highly significant in itself—coming from our previous experiences, likes and dislikes—but it can only become an obstacle to immediate aesthetic experience. Thus if we have painful associations with a particular

place, those memories may obstruct our ability to appreciate the spiritual vision conveyed by an artist's painting of that same landscape. The repetition of certain great pieces of music, such as some of Beethoven's compositions, may blunt the sharp edge of our appreciation because those compositions have become too familiar; they have become part of a mental habit, something old and fixed.

It need scarcely be said that there are degrees of depth or greatness in works of art. Many a minor product may embody something worthwhile alongside mediocre material, thus making it a poorer alloy than the great works of art. In discussing aesthetic experience, British artist Roger Fry stated that the great works are those that are able to withstand repeated exposure, each time showing some new depth or giving some new insight. By contrast, a superficial work may give the shock of vision once or twice only, and then lose its grip on the beholder.

Fry tells how when he was a small child, he was struck—once only—by the *beauty* of the discovery that two and two make four, but to look on a picture by Giotto or Leonardo was a constant source of renewed ecstasy. Much clearly depends on the subjective state of the beholder's mind. For mood, preoccupation, and a hundred other things affect him—just as they affect his ability to pray or to meditate or to read a serious book. One may be able to appreciate Bartok's music when one is in a certain mood and not too tired, whereas at another time the unfamiliar harmonies simply grate and jar.

The same applies to such a matter as cultural background. Apart from the thrill of novelty—though rapidly wearing out in the West—there are many people who never learn to respond to Indian art. Many Indians probably find Western music difficult and incomprehensible.

So, all in all, the person whose yoga is the search for the Beautiful has to start from the background of his conditioning: racial, cultural and purely personal. But as he progresses and develops, his field widens and he will find himself responding to an increasingly wide range of experiences, just as the true mystic sees "God" in more and more places as his inner consciousness changes.

It is no use trying to ignore this individual conditioning towards art, any more than it can be ignored in other fields. It is there and the purpose of all forms of yoga is to outgrow it. It is indeed this which determines whether he is going to find his true yoga in terms of learning, devotion, action, art, or a mixture in which all of these become integrated into a form of Raja Yoga—using this term in a generic sense as a discipline seeking alternate values.

CREATIVE ARTISTS

The majority of people are not directly able to create in the artistic field. Therefore, we may find it useful to classify "artists " into two main categories: the creative minority and the perceptive, which include many aesthetically sensitive people.

The creator symbolizes the teacher or the guru. He perceives and expresses in some physical form what he has perceived at a higher level. If successful, that form is able to communicate with the "pupil" and evoke something of the same quality that the creator has brought through: not of necessity (and indeed, perhaps never) the same vision, but that which partakes of the archetypal, spiritual quality which alone makes a thing a work of art. Nature, the greatest artist of all, is able to do this constantly, not being beset by human problems, needs, and desires. The human artist, however, has to live: to have money, a home and the necessities of life, however simple. So his problem is complicated by "unnatural" demands, and it is there that he often goes astray. For there is that in him which demands expression, and he often confuses an instinctive *Kāmic* urge for a spiritual one and so produces (commercialism apart) things which derive from no spiritual source, but only from his own desire nature. True, he may be highly original if his technique is adequate—or non-existent, as in much modern painting. And he confuses the critic, who does not discriminate between what is simply splurge from the *kāmic* unconscious and that which represents a totally new, spiritual insight.

Moreover, many true creative artists have squalid personalities and lead anything but what we ordinarily look upon as desirable lives. The reason for this can be lopsided development of character, so that one side of it touches the higher reaches of being, whereas the other side, by an attempt to arrive at psychological balance, dwells at a level well below that of the theoretical norm of the society he lives in. In this he belongs to the type which is technically known as schizoid, while some of the great—van Gogh for instance—are actually so split as to be schizophrenic. Such a person may be a genius in his artistic field, but he is not (to quote a definition I once heard) a great man, for the great man is an all-round person such as we see in Leonardo—or an Einstein, he being both a scientific genius and a fine musician. On the other hand, if the creative artist fulfils his role, he acts as does the guru in India. He does not of necessity have to teach music or painting or whatever it may be, to his "pupil," but he conveys to others the same thing as does the true religious or spiritual teacher in whatever land he may be. He does not "teach" in the conventional sense; he calls out what is already in the *chela* and helps him to become aware of it.

The untidy lives led by so many creative artists arise from the "divine afflatus" of their calling. They become so much imbued with the urge to express their inner vision that such matters as cleanliness, order in the home, and even common honesty seem irrelevant when compared with the greater thing. Moreover, rebellion against

convention is part of their attempt to get free from the miasma of the middle levels of human life, those so often spoken of by H. P. Blavatsky as full of snares and delusions, the realm of mind (including both thinking and feeling). This stands between the spiritual level and the dense physical and may result in the acts of artists becoming "sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought"—and emotion—and so sully the purity of expression which they seek.

Every true artist, like every true mystic or yogi, is concerned with transcending the personal mind and bringing the spiritual vision down to earth. He cannot do this without dealing properly and constructively with his personal psyche, but he often does not know how to do so. So, as Stuart Holroyd has pointed out in his book *Emergence from Chaos*, they often try ways which result only in failure. In this book he quotes among others Dylan Thomas, whose reputation was that of a drunkard and a rake, together with W. B. Yeats who took refuge in somewhat dubious form of Theosophical mysticism, and shows how they both failed to achieve what they sought, even though one might call their attempts polar opposites. By contrast, Holroyd thinks that success can be achieved through a kind of surrender or "letting go," which is akin to both the traditional Christian ideal and to that of Taoism and Zen. The difficulty is to find a form of discipline which does not bind, and one which is not a mere yielding to primitive instincts or antisocial behaviors, let alone to drugs or alcohol.

NATURE, GREATEST OF ARTISTS

We may perhaps understand the creative artist better if we envisage how Nature—the Third Person of the Trinity, to use a conventional phrase—operates. I have several times referred to Nature as the greatest of artists. One can think of Him/Her as emanating from a Center in which there is the Archetype of the universe about to be manifested. This Archetype is in no sense a blueprint, an Idea projected into a fixed form, however clear and categorical that Idea may be in the transcendental Mind. On the contrary, the expression of it is infinitely flexible and adaptable, so that manifested natural objects arise spontaneously and instantly in an infinite variety of forms. The exact shape of the manifestation cannot be said to have been explicit and fixed within the Archetype, but springs into being in a way dependent on the moment at which it is, so to speak, required. One can think of Nature working existentially, from instant to instant, unconditioned by past experience or memory.

In other words, the supreme Creator is not beset by the things which get in the way of the human disciple of the Holy Ghost, whose cult is quite as valid as that of the Father or Shaivite, or the Vaishnavite, Christian or Buddhist, whose prime devotion is to the Second Person. So Nature succeeds fully where the human artist often succeeds only partially, especially if he tries to achieve without undergoing the necessary inner

discipline, or without troubling to learn the craftsmanship that is essential to all true physical expression.

The words *discipline* and *technique* are nowadays not very popular with people who label themselves artists. There is an idea that what matters is the gratification of the urge to express, and that to stamp on tubes of paint, to pour colors out of a bucket, to write a jumble of words, to weld together odd bits of metal, is sufficient. But it is obvious that to create in the true sense, there must first be vision. Then one must assemble tools and materials and discover how to use the one on the other in such a way that the result expresses the archetypal vision adequately, and in such a manner that it will communicate itself to others. As in other forms of yoga, the first steps are of a kind which can be learned from others; and, again as in yoga, it is only after these steps have become an integral part of the individual's mind that they can—and should—be abandoned lest they become a prison.

A teacher in an art school once said, "I can teach you how to look at an object; I can give you a recipe of how to set about drawing the human body; I can teach you how to mix, paint, and that kind of thing. But only you can make yourself into an artist, though as you begin to draw and to paint, however badly, the very fact that you are doing this will increase and deepen your perceptive ability." He was a good teacher even though his own pictures were rather indifferent. He knew the limit of what he could do. But he set many a pupil on the right path. Another more philosophical artist spoke of there being a tension between his mind and the paper on which he wanted to project something he had seen. This tension can be compared with the "web" spoken of in the Stanzas of Dzyan as one of the earliest steps in cosmogenesis. In this case, one "end" of it would be in the higher mental levels of the artist, the "lower" where pencil or brush touched the paper. And the essence of good work would be that he should then get his personal self out of the way and *allow* (not *force*) the inside vision to flow out from the spiritual world into that of extended space-time and matter. The more limpid the stream of spiritual force, by whatever name we call it, the better the work of art created.

A further point about the creative artist is that his vision is clear but its expression has to be allowed to develop as he goes along. Nature, the great artist, probably does not follow a blueprint of all the forms and species which emerge, but adapts and improvises according to circumstances. This is the function of devic-elemental intelligence. Mozart is said to have told that when he first "heard" a symphony, it was, as it were, in a single—and, one might say, multi-dimensional—chord. He then had to use his technical knowledge as the tool for expressing that chord, assembling bits of melody and harmony (his material) in order to give us what we eventually hear. Basically, this is true of all genuine artistic creation. The Chinese artist is said not to paint a landscape on the spot, but to look at it repeatedly and to meditate on it until he

feels ready to express its essence in a painting or a drawing. Further, it has been put that his aim is not to objectivize a certain thing but to create a space, a vacuum, into which the archetype may flow—a chalice or grail for the spirit to fill.

This brief analysis of the creative minority leads on to certain considerations, which apply to the large majority whose artistry is perceptive and not active. They form the large class of those who appreciate music, pictures, sculpture, and natural beauty. These things mean something real to them and touch them deeply, if only at moments. It is not with them a matter of being in the fashion, which often takes the place of true appreciation; but neither is it the kind of effect which comes simply from novelty, and which may be no more than an emotional reaction at a mundane level where it may be compared with the excitement of seeing anything unusual. Nor, as I have already said, is it anything connected with pleasant associations or memories or ideas. Indeed, the less personal feeling there is, the greater the likelihood of the deeper experience, for the personal—as in all forms of spiritual seeking—merely gets between the object and the percipient and prevents them from being realized as one.

The discipline of the seeker of God as Beauty here consists, as in all other forms of seeking, in removing the factors that stand between him and what he seeks. Patanjali tells us that if we want to find Truth we do not have to move from where we are, but simply to take down the shutters in our minds, to stop letting the mind interfere with our perceptions. We then see what has been within reach of us all the time. So it is with the aesthetic: a matter of allowing the vision of the Beautiful to flow into us freely and without obstruction.

VIVEKA AND VAIRAGYA NEEDED

It is because of the simplicity of what is needed that the preparatory stages are arduous. They involve (as elsewhere) the need for the qualities of *Vairagya*—emotional objectivity—and *Viveka*—intellectual discrimination and clarity. It is here, and perhaps here only, that we can be helped by others; for they can—as did the art-school teacher—set us on the path of learning how to observe, whether with eye or ear, and to "listen" with all our senses to the still small voice within. We need to learn to distinguish between that which has true value and that which, however clever, technically perfect, and well executed, lacks the archetypal, spiritual quality. One is reminded once more of Paul Tillich's warning to the religionist that there is a world of difference in principle between the religion of Ultimate Values and of that form which tries to give ultimate value to creeds, rituals, and personalities, however exalted. He makes a sharp distinction in the field of art between similar classes: that which is genuine, and that to which he applies the pungent German word *kitsch* (a near translation, yet one which lacks a certain sharpness, would be "trash").

This distinction is often easy enough when it comes to the contrast between a Beethoven symphony and music of that order versus sugary musical comedy airs, or between the kind of picture sold over the counter in stationery shops versus the great masterpieces, ancient or modern. The difficulty arises, however, when one comes to intermediate things, or those that seem so to the individual.

Much Victorian art can be placed in this class: sentiment, not deep insight and emotional idealism, formed the shape of what poets, painters and musicians expressed. The pictures of a G. F. Watts, for instance, show a man with a certain sense of the beautiful—perhaps at its best in his landscapes. But, however expertly painted and however good the compositions, many of his works embody little or nothing of the deeper aspects of life. Tennyson, too, was undoubtedly a great poet, but here too Victorian sentimentality tends to blur the edges of his works.

These obviously personally tinged examples could be multiplied and would certainly include much modern art, poetry and music, not to mention drama. Yet if modern art forms can be approached objectively and without prejudice, it may occasionally happen that a sudden experience of beauty emerges from a mass of dull or even worse than dull atrocities. Since I have had to introduce the personal element, I feel entitled to mention an occasion when, turning over a folio of colored prints, one of these suddenly made me catch my breath because of what it brought in. On detailed examination it was virtually a patchwork of color with no visible object depicted: but it was by Picasso, that much debated painter. His genius, even if perhaps some of his work belongs to the *kitsch* order, emerged in this print and made it stand out among other much "better" pictures. In the same way, the sudden and unexpected impact of the great new cathedral in Coventry may lift one clean out of the ordinary world, should one be in tune with it just as it may fail completely to touch another person.

It is obviously, too, a matter of a certain synchronization of mood with the moment at which one is presented with a thing, whether or not it makes a profound mark. For one thing, it is unwise ever to try and repeat an experience, for never again can it be the same memory of what happened on one occasion as the memory itself becomes a bar to its recurrence. But if the archetypal quality is in the thing which evoked it, it is possible that a new experience can be evoked by it. It is not merely reputation which makes some people visit the Monna [4] Lisa many times! It touches something in those people and shows them another aspect of Shakti, or the Yin principle, of the World Mother, embodied in the features of an Italian peasant woman by the spiritual insight of a Leonardo.

[4] Author's foot note: "Monna" is the correct spelling, not Mona with one N.

Mood, however, is something that can be controlled with systematic yoga training. Ideally, the disciple should be perpetually open to the inner worlds and his task is to aim towards this state, if only by enlarging or prolonging the periods when he is able to remain detached and openly perceptive. This is where constant practice is required in order to produce a state of mind that is poised and balanced. This is the state known as *laya*, and presumably that which Mr. Krishnamurti often described as being similar to a bird about to take off from a tree, at the moment when it is neither in flight nor yet standing still.

In the field of aesthetics, any kind of meditation or training which aims at this state is of value. The student can further help himself along these lines in a very practical manner, and according to his inclination. It is good for him to play music, to paint or draw badly, to write verse which is not worthy of being called poetry, to experiment with his medium and to do things with it—provided he does not think that he is an artist. (Of course, he also needs to remember his social obligation not to inflict his attempts on others!) In so doing, he will find his vision and understanding increase. The prime condition for this growth is that he should not feel personally pleased or proud of what he has done or of the praise he may receive, be it genuine or merely polite. True art is always impersonal and the only value of approbation is as a measure of whether or not the artist has succeeded in expressing his deeper vision. The search for the Beautiful is austere, impersonal, unsentimental. The disciple needs to cultivate a stark honesty of self-knowledge before he can confront it in all its wonder.