Aesthetic Beautification

On Listening to the Gramophone: "And what, finally, [Hans Castorp] felt, understood, and enjoyed, sitting there with folded hands, looking into the black slats of the jalousies whence it all issued, was the triumphant idealism of music, of art, of the human spirit; the high and irrefragable power they had of shrouding with a veil of beauty the vulgar horror of actual fact. What was it, considered with the eye of reason, that was happening here [in the final scene of *Aida*]? Two human beings, buried alive, their lungs full of pit gas, would here together—or more horrible still, one after the other—succumb to the pangs of hunger, and thereafter the process of putrefaction would do its unspeakable work, until two skeletons remained, each totally indifferent and insensible to the other's presence or absence…[Yet] their voices rose *unisono* to the blissful sustained note leading into the octave, as they assured each other that now heaven was opening, and the light of its eternity streaming forth before their yearning eyes. The consoling power of this beautification [*die tröstliche Kraft dieser Beschönigung*] did the listener good, and went far to account for the special love he bore this number of his program."

-Thomas Mann, *The Magic Mountain*, (trans. H.T. Lowe-Porter, with slight modification)

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I. Introduction

Thomas Mann, in the wonderfully evocative passage quoted, trains his attention on a familiar artistic phenomenon. Even as they face death, heroes and heroines in operas still sing glorious music. So too outside the operatic realm. Characters in Shakespearean tragedies still deliver beautifully eloquent speeches in the throes of despair. Even when plumbing the depths of melancholy, Chopin Préludes can still resound with breathtaking melodiousness. And even depicting suffering and horror, paintings—whether of saints tortured, *pietàs*, or Actaeon mortally wounded—can still remain a transfixing delight for the eyes.

Since at least Aristotle, philosophers have weighed in on the more general issue of what is now referred to as the "paradox of tragedy." What explains the value of our engagement with works portraying suffering, death, and things of a similar ilk? In addition to Aristotle's view, various influential suggestions have been put forward

—by Lessing, Hume, Schiller, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, and many others.

My focus here is on something more specific, however: the phenomenon of what I will call, supplementing Mann's term, *aesthetic beautification*: where a work of art represents or expresses something we would, in ordinary life, attribute a negative valence (suffering, horror, death, and the like), but it does so, in Mann's image, with a "veil of beauty" over it. What is the artistic significance of this phenomenon?

Doubtless there is not a single explanation for what transpires in art of this sort or in our experience of it. (So too with the broader paradox of tragedy. This is often addressed, rather implausibly and unhelpfully, as though there were *one* answer to it, for all works and all spectators.) With some aesthetically beautified art, its foremost goal might be giving aesthetic pleasure, and the beauty of the aesthetic form, even when depicting horrors, is in the service of this primary aim. In other art, the beautification might seek to be jarring and thought-provoking, highlighting a disconnect between the aesthetic frame and what is portrayed. These explain much of aesthetic beautification, and our often variable reactions to it.

Yet I am particularly interested in considering another more specific response still: The response is one of finding ourselves—as Mann describes Hans Castorp as being—*consoled* by the beautification. Why might beautification aid in consoling us, and what could that consolation amount to? A softening or mitigation of the horror of what is presented? A catharsis? Some kind of "answer," some hint of justification or redemption that beauty vouchsafes? Again, it is likely not a single response for all works and for all spectators in all cases. But aesthetic beautification, Mann seems to suggest in this direction, might leave some of us entertaining thoughts of redemption

that in our more sober moments of reflection we never would countenance. We know, on some level, Aida and Radames will meet with an excruciating death. But enticed, or maybe seduced, by the beauty of Verdi's music, we can find our attention drawn away from a full reckoning with that. Indeed perhaps more: It is as though the music invites even the resolute atheists among us, at some emotional if not rational level, to feel, against our better judgment, that, in libretto's words, heaven is indeed opening and "the light of its eternity streaming forth." How might beautification aid in this? How might it tempt the amenable among us to such imaginings and thoughts? And what are we to make of this phenomenon? Is it a kind of objectionable sentimentality? Or might there be more to be said in its favor? I begin with some reflections on aesthetic beautification in general, and then turn to consider how beautification and consolation might be connected, and what to make of this.

II. Beauty and Beautification

To begin with: What is beauty? And what in turn is beautification? I don't think we can do much to define beauty in a general or informative way. We can say things like: Beauty consists in qualities the apprehension of which pleases the senses. But this doesn't really differentiate the beautiful from what Kant called "the agreeable;" it doesn't distinguish the music of Mozart from strawberry jam. Kant himself famously seeks to make this distinction by claiming that judgments of beauty are "disinterested," as well as universal. And further, in connection with his architectonic philosophy of mind, he sees beauty as occasioning in us a "harmony of

the faculties," a "free play" of the imagination and the understanding. For my purposes here, I am not interested in precisely demarcating the beautiful, or in arguing about the universality of beauty, or what, if anything, underwrites the legitimacy of judgments of it. One is tempted to echo what Justice Potter Stewart said about pornography and apply to it beauty as well—one can't define it, but one knows it when one sees it.[1] That is rather too glib here, but a full investigation of the nature of beauty is too far afield, and possibly fruitless, if one is hoping for answers to these metaphysical and normative questions.

We will have to make do with beauty as loosely and conventionally understood, albeit with one caveat. There is a contingent who seem to want to re-brand any aesthetic or artistic excellence as "beauty," perhaps in thrall to the dubious thesis that art is good just insofar as it is beautiful. This seems to me a misapplication of "beauty," stretching the notion beyond all intelligible recognition. In any event, what I mean by it is a *specific* (albeit admittedly difficult to define) paradigmatically if not exclusively perceptible aesthetic quality that is often (though not always) a good-making feature of the work of art, and the presence of which is sometimes a matter of dispute. It is not a catch-all term for any aesthetic or artistic excellence whatsoever. Works can be evocative, moving, profound, thought-provoking, clever, powerful, striking, disturbing, and so on. Beauty is *one among many* potentially valuable qualities in a work of art (and of course is to be found outside art as well).

Mid-century anglophone aesthetics, and to some extent strands in post-Kantian aesthetics of the same period and before, both represented reactions against

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[1] Jacobellis v. Ohio (1964).

the dominance of the beautiful as the central aesthetic notion. J.L. Austin counseled that we focus on a wider range of aesthetic descriptors, in his famous phrase, "the dainty and the dumpy" and give the beautiful a rest.[2] Other prominent aestheticians held similar views. For Nelson Goodman in *The Languages of Art* beauty is not a good general measure of aesthetic merit.[3] So too in the classic work of Arthur Danto. The key observation, put especially nicely by Danto, is that something can be good as art without being beautiful (e.g., Duchamp's *Fountain*).[4] John Passmore, in "The Dreariness of Aesthetics" is representative of an extreme of this tendency to downplay beauty: "there is something suspect ('phony') about 'beauty,'" he writes, "Artists seem to get along quite well without it: it is the café-haunters, the preachers, the metaphysicians and the calendar-makers who talk of beauty."[5] These philosophical reflections are in keeping with trends in 20th and 21st Century art-making: Beauty, at first glance, is not an especially apposite category in thinking about the work of Samuel Beckett, say, Francis Bacon, Adrian Piper or Karlheinz Stockhausen. Continuing to insist on the centrality of beauty can seem naive and quaint, and possibly even suspicious.

In the post-Kantian tradition, beauty is—speaking very generally—far less important than ideas or content that the work of art is thought to provide access to. While Hegel still couches much of his aesthetic theorizing in terms of beauty, the fundamental point for him is that beauty is the "sensuous appearance of the idea"—

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[2] J.L. Austin, "A Plea for Excuses," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* Vol. 57 (1956-7), p. 9.

[3] Nelson Goodman, *The Languages of Art* (Hackett, 1976), p. 255.

[4] Arthur Danto, *The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art* (Columbia, 1986), p. 13.

[5] John Passmore, "The Dreariness of Aesthetics," *Mind*, Vol. 60, No. 239 (Jul., 1951), p. 331.

thus the concern is less beauty *per se* than what is expressed (in Hegel's view, partially and inadequately) through it.[6] Similarly for Schelling and for Schopenhauer, for whom the metaphysical insight from art is its most significant value. And for the towering figures in 20th Cent. European aesthetics—Heidegger or Adorno, for instance—beauty is not a subject of great concern. They are far more interested in the ideational content potentially conveyed through the work of art, or embedded in it.

Beauty, of late, has had something of a rehabilitation. Against the long-standing mid-century orthodoxy, Mary Mothersill was long an important holdout and countervailing voice in the vanguard.[7] And so too, more recently, Ruth Lorand, Alexander Nehamas, Roger Scruton, Dominic McIver Lopes and others have taken up that banner.[8] In Danto's late work, he turns his attention to beauty (*The Abuse of Beauty*, 2003), after having said relatively little about it previously and after having implied that it is of no great moment when it comes to the evaluation of much art of the 20th century. [9]

Wherever we stand on these background issues, however, it should be evident that beauty is *an* important aesthetic quality. Beauty is a feature of many artworks, but also a feature of the natural world and of non-art artifacts. There are beautiful

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[6] G.W.F. Hegel, *Lectures on Fine Art*, Vol. I, trans. T.M. Knox (Oxford University Press, 1975), 7-10.

[7] Mary Mothersill, *Beauty Restored* (Clarendon Press, 1984).

[8] Ruth Lorand, *Aesthetic Order: A Philosophy of Order, Beauty, and Art* (Routledge, 2000); Alexander Nehamas, *Only a Promise of Happiness: The Place of Beauty in a World of Art* (Princeton University Press, 2007); Roger Scruton, *On Beauty* (Oxford, 2009); Dominic McIver Lopes, *Being for Beauty: Aesthetic Agency and Value* (Oxford University Press, 2018).

[9] Arthur Danto, *The Abuse of Beauty* (Open Court, 2003).

people, mountain vistas and sunsets, beautiful cars and suits, along with beautiful works of art. When beauty is present in artifacts, it is (usually, though not always) *meant* to be there. (And if one believes in a Creator God, this is presumably thought true of the natural world as well.) The creator or artist (in most cases) tried to make the thing in question beautiful. In a very broad sense, this could be thought a kind of beautification, where that is understood as about adding beauty, or bringing beauty into being, in the creation of something.

My focus in this paper is instead on a narrower phenomenon of beautification. I mean to refer to the artistic expression or representation of something that itself is not, or not ordinarily, beautiful, but representing or expressing it either *as beautiful*, or what is importantly different, *in a beautiful way*. A figurative painting depicts a certain scene: The lamentation over the dead Christ, for instance. The portrayal of these events can be beautiful, as in Giotto's *Lamentation* in the Scrovegni Chapel in Padua. Or it can *not* be, as in Francis Bacon's striking and powerful (but not, to my mind, beautiful) *Three Studies for Figures at the Base of a Crucifixion* that hangs in the Tate. An opera is a drama that involves representation of certain events: Aida and Radames are sealed together in a tomb to die. Some operatic deaths are depicted in a beautiful way, such as here and in many other cases. Other portrayals, as with Marie and Wozzeck's fate in Berg's *Wozzeck,* are set to music that is jagged, eerie and disturbing. "Beauty" is not a word that seems at all appropriate here, the excellence of Berg's music notwithstanding.

These cases just cited are ones where the content of the work is straightforwardly representational. But the notion of beautification could extend

beyond this. For example, instrumental music, without text or program, might be thought expressive of melancholy, as in the Chopin E-minor Prélude, but not thought to be representing it (as music might represent birdsong or a canon shot.) Abstract painting, that of say Mark Rothko, might be expressive of something (an emotion or a mood, for example), but not represent anything, at least if by that we mean anything recognizably figurative. Whether this expression vs. representation distinction which is often made in this philosophical sub-domain ultimately amounts to much (I myself am not sure) is less important than the idea that beautification, of the sort I'm interested in, can potentially extend to abstractions.

It is important to distinguish the properties of a beautiful representation or expression, on the one hand, from the properties of that which is represented or expressed, on the other. There can be a beautiful picture of something ugly, and an ugly picture of something beautiful.[10] Take a case where we think an artistic rendition of suffering to be beautiful. Does it follow that we must think that the suffering itself is thereby supposed to be beautiful in that work of art? Not necessarily. One might, for example, hear the opening of Bach's *St. Matthew Passion* as a beautiful expression of communal suffering. But one does not thereby need to think the beauty a property of *the suffering itself* that is expressed in that music. In fact, the latter understanding would be rather odd, even if we admit that there are sometimes cases where the suffering is itself in some way beautiful, or supposed to be seen as so.

Consider, by analogy, a simpler case that does not involve beautification at all.

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[10] For good examples, see Alexander Nehamas, *Only a Promise of Happiness: The Place of Beauty in a World of Art* (Princeton, 2007), p.96.

Picasso, in his Blue Period, paints people with blue faces. But we do not suppose that such people are themselves supposed to have a blue faces.[11] The painting's subject is not, we think, severely deprived of oxygen, or turning into a blueberry, as Violet Beauregard does in *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*. Picasso's color choice serves other goals—to create a sombre atmosphere in the work, for instance. Although less immediately evident, a similar distinction is possible in cases of beautification: We can judge art's expression or representation of suffering to be rapturously beautiful, without thinking that the work is expressing or representing suffering that is itself beautiful, much as we can see a blue representation of a face in a Picasso painting, without thinking that the painting depicts a person who is herself blue in the face. As Arthur Danto aptly points out in this spirit, a beautiful picture of a crucifixion needn't be thought a picture of a beautiful crucifixion.[12] The beauty, in other words, can be a property of the work of art without being a property of that which the work represents, even as represented in the fictional world of the work.[13]

Beautification, it should be added, is not necessarily a merit of the work of art. Beauty is generally-speaking good. But not always. And it is not straightforwardly additive. The addition of some beautiful element to a work will not necessarily make it more beautiful. Adding a random beautiful rainbow or a beautiful person to a painting will not thereby make the painting more beautiful, nor will adding ten such

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[11] I draw this example from Jonathan Gilmore, "Internal Beauty," *Inquiry*, Vol. 48, No. 2, 145-154, April 2005.

[12] Arthur Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, (Harvard, 1981), p. 153-4. Cf., Monroe Beardsley, "Beauty and Aesthetic Value," *Journal of Philosophy* 59:21 (1962).

[13] Arthur Danto discusses these issues in greater detail in *The Abuse of Beauty*, (Open Court, 2003). See especially his chapters 3-5.

objects result in a ten times the additional beauty. Indeed the effect may be precisely the opposite. Beauty must be assessed in holistic terms.

I now want to turn to considering the roles of beautification. As noted already, there is not one role for beautification, or one reaction to it. Rather, there are several. I will go through three possibilities for what role beautification might be playing in a work: a hedonic role, a subversive role, and a consoling role. These are not meant to be exhaustive. Yet it is meant to give us a start for some of the conceptual resources to understand this phenomenon better.

III. Preserving Aesthetic Pleasure

One natural assumption about works of art, more common historically than it is in art circles today, is that their point—or primary goal—is to give us aesthetic pleasure. Accordingly, when they take potentially disturbing subject matter as their focus, they need to tread carefully in their presentation so that we can still take aesthetic pleasure from them. This view is prevalent among several key figures in the 18th century, though is also far more widespread.

One seminal treatment is Lessing's *Laocoön*, its name and central topic based on the Hellenistic sculpture that was unearthed in Rome in 1506 and is presently to be found in the Vatican Museums. Pliny described the *Laocoön* as one of the greatest works ever produced.[14] The sculpture portrays the eponymous Trojan priest, along with his two sons, writhing as they are attacked by sea serpents, which coil menacingly around their torsos. Its subject might not antecedently seem to lend

[14] Pliny, *Natural History* (XXXVI).

itself to beautiful treatment. Yet as Lessing notes, among the ancients anyway, beauty was the "supreme law of the visual arts." "Once this has been established," he continues, "it necessarily follows that whatever else these arts may include must give way completely if not compatible with beauty, and if compatible, must at least be subordinate to it."[15] If the ancients couldn't represent something beautifully in sculpture, he suggests, they wouldn't represent it at all. In the case of *Laocoön*, the "master strove to attain the highest beauty possible under the given condition of physical pain. The demands of beauty could not be reconciled with pain in all its disfiguring violence, so it had to be reduced. The scream had to be softened to a sigh, not because screaming betrays an ignoble soul, but because it distorts the features in a disgusting manner."[16] There is a kind of adjustment in how the subject matter is portrayed in order to keep aesthetic pleasure from being outweighed by the horror of what is depicted. If we imagine what this scene might actually have looked like (based on Virgil's description in Book II of the *Aeneid*), our imagination gives us a different and more disturbing impression. Yet the sculpture gives us a beautiful presentation of this horrifying event.[17]

We find a similar view expressed in a letter of Mozart's to his father, where he describes his musical characterization of Osmin in *Die Entführung aus dem Serail*. Mozart writes: "…[P]assions, whether violent or not, must never be expressed in a

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[15] G.E. Lessing, *Laocoön: An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry*, trans. Edward Allen McCormick (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1962), p. 15

[16] G.E. Lessing, *Laocoön: An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry,* trans. Edward Allen McCormick (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1962), p. 17

[17] Ruskin notoriously dissented about the beauty of the *Laocoön*, though his opinions are, as ever, idiosyncratic. See *The Works of John Ruskin,* edited by E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn, (George Allen, 1903-12), Vol IV, p. 120.

way as to excite disgust, and as music, even in the most terrible situations, must never offend the ear, but must please the hearer, or in other words must never cease to be music."[18] Here again the goal of keeping the hearer pleased operates as a constraint on what is portrayed and the manner of its portrayal. A violent passion is not itself something likely to be beautiful, but it can be rendered beautifully in music.

A similar idea is central to Hume's resolution of the paradox of tragedy.[19] The events portrayed in a tragedy are ones that would ordinarily occasion displeasure and unease, Hume observes. But we nonetheless take pleasure in reading and watching tragedies. Why is this? According to Hume, our pleasure in the manner of representation outweighs our displeasure in what is portrayed, and indeed transforms that potential displeasure into a type of pleasure. "The impulse or vehemence arising from sorrow, compassion, indignation, receives a new direction from the sentiments of beauty. The latter, being the predominant emotion, seize the whole mind, and convert the former into themselves, at least tincture them so strongly as totally to alter their nature."[20] The beauty of the portrayal allows us to take pleasure where we otherwise would not. Hume's proposal relies on the "principle of concurrent emotions," as Malcolm Budd calls it. According to this principle, when two emotions come together, the hedonic tone of the stronger emotion subsumes the weaker

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[18] Letter to Leopold Mozart, 26 September 1781, in *Mozart: A Life in Letters*, ed. Cliff Eisen, trans. Stewart Spencer (Penguin, 2006), p. 177-8; Cf., discussion in Peter Kivy, *Osmin's Rage: Philosophical Reflections on Opera, Drama, and Tex*t (Princeton University Press, 1988).

[19] David Hume, "Of Tragedy" in *Selected Essays*, ed. Stephen Copley and Andrew Edgar (Oxford University Press, 1993).

[20] David Hume, "Of Tragedy," *Selected Essays*, ed. Stephen Copley and Andrew Edgar (Oxford University Press, 1993). p. 129

emotion and converts the raw power of the weaker into the stronger emotion. Thus, weak displeasure in the events portrayed combined with stronger pleasure in the beautiful manner of their portrayal yields an even stronger kind of aesthetic pleasure.[21]

From Lessing, Mozart, and Hume, we have one sort of explanation for what might be going on with aesthetic beautification. Namely, it is pleasure-preserving and pleasure-enhancing. Clearly, this hedonic role is one important way that aesthetic beautification operates. In part, it is a matter of genre-specific conventions and historical expectations: For most of its history, art (particularly music and visual art) has, with some exceptions here and there, *needed* to be beautiful. It is really only in and after the 20th Century that art that is *not* beautiful comes to occupy such a central place.

While this hedonic objective is central and common, we fail, I think, to realize the artistic complexity in aesthetic beautification if we focus on this explanation alone. Sometimes aesthetic beautification is not just serving to preserve aesthetic pleasure, but instead seeks to invite us to further consideration, spurred on by noting the fact of beautification itself. Danto draws a suggestive, if somewhat elusive, distinction between what he calls "internal" and "external" beauty. In cases of "internal" beauty, the beauty is part of the meaning of the work. In cases of "external" beauty, it is not. In cases of external beauty then, the fact of its being beautiful is

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[21] As Malcolm Budd aptly characterizes Hume's position: "This principle maintains that if someone experiences two emotions at the same time, one of them being positive (intrinsically pleasurable) and the other negative (intrinsically unpleasant), then if one emotion is stronger than the other not only will it efface the hedonic sign of the weaker emotion but it will capture that emotion's strength and thus magnify its own. The result of such an interaction is an unusually powerful emotional state with a uniform hedonic tone." *The Values of Art*, (Allen Lane, 1995), p. 113.

thus of no critical import when it comes to thematic interpretation of the work.[22] Danto elucidates the idea of internal beauty through two main examples—Maya Lin's Vietnam War Memorial in Washington, D.C. and Robert Motherwell's *Elegies to the Spanish Republic*. The beauty in these works is not ancillary or incidental. Danto sees the beauty in both of these works instead as interacting with their thematic meaning, with the artistic thoughts that these works express.[23] Much aesthetic beautification may just be there to keep pleasure from getting swamped by horror. But often, as these examples suggest, something more complex is going on. The aesthetic beautification invites more varied thoughts and reactions.

IV. Subversiveness and Reflection

Whereas some aesthetic beautification serves to deflect attention from the horror of what is portrayed, in other cases it serves as a stimulus to reflection. The fact that it is beautified is relevant to the work's meaning. Fred Rush gives the excellent example of Buñuel's and Dalí's *Un Chien Andalou*, in particular its notorious scene of a razor slicing into an eye. The film, Rush notes, "deploys beauty to subvert beauty." There is the "careful juxtaposition of the formal beauty of the shots and the

[22] Danto, *The Abuse of Beauty*, p. 101-102. I note that this distinction is somewhat elusive because external beauty is characterized in what seem to be two non-equivalent ways: i) as a potential property of the material object (e.g., the urinal), but not the work of art (e.g., *Fountain*); ii) as not part of the work's *meaning*, hence the contrast with internal beauty. I think the second of these distinctions is the more helpful one. It captures the class of cases where beauty is part of the work of art, and not just the material object, but is ancillary or incidental to its meaning. If every case where beauty is part of the work of art count as cases of internal beauty, Danto's main examples of the Vietnam War Memorial and the *Elegies to the Spanish Republic* would not form a very illuminating contrast class with many other beautiful works of art.

[23] Curiously, though, Danto describes the beauty in the Motherwell as immediately arresting. For further discussion on this point, see Diarmuid Costello, "On Late Style: Arthur Danto's *The Abuse of Beauty*," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 44:4 (2004), 431-2.

shocking content that so effectively undermines the placidity, architecture, and repose that often typify beauty."[24]

In other cases, there may be a similar effect for some audiences, but unintentionally—for instance, where the work has sought to give aesthetic pleasure, but its result leaves us disconcerted. Women, for example, get far more than their share of violence, and self-violence, in opera.[25] Stunningly beautiful though Liù's music is in Act III of Puccini's *Turandot*, many find unsettling her torture and self-sacrifice, set to such beautiful music, when she refuses to reveal the Prince's name. A work might, with some critically-engaged audiences anyway, end up being subversive despite itself.

The work could also invite a meta-reaction to the aesthetic pleasure one feels. The highly sensualized texture of Nabokov's prose, filtered through Humbert as narrator in *Lolita*, can, for instance, prompt a sort of first order aesthetic reaction to the prose, and then a dismayed reflection on that reaction when we reflect on how Humbert, literature's most infamous pedophile and creep, aestheticizes "nymphets."

Other cases are a bit more difficult to classify. Consider, for example, the photographs of Robert Mapplethorpe, which incited a furore from social conservatives in the 1980s. Some of his most celebrated pictures depict sado-masochistic homosexual content, but in a highly stylized way with carefully crafted compositions. To my mind, the point is not simply to subvert beauty (though for some they may have that effect), but instead they are invitations to reevaluate one's

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[24] Fred Rush, "Remnants of Beauty," *Inquiry* 48:2, 172-188 (2005), p. 172.

[25] Catherine Clément, *Opera: The Undoing of Women*, trans. Betsy Wing (University of Minnesota Press, 1999).

attitudes toward what is depicted, to find in the apparent incongruity of form and content, beauty where none might be expected to be found.[26] Baudelaire's poetic sensibility in *Les Fleurs du Mal* is an important precursor, finding for instance "singular music" in a decomposing corpse ("*Une Charogne*").

In all of these cases, our experience is not one of aesthetic pleasure pure and simple, but reacting to aesthetic beautification in a way that triggers reflection. What does it *mean* that the work is aesthetically beautified in the way that it is? What should our reaction to this be? What should we take away from this?

V. Consolation

We have so far seen ways in which aesthetic beautification can be pleasure-preserving and thought-provoking. I now want to turn to consider ways it might also be consoling. (These, it should be noted, are not exclusive, though there may be some tension among these different functions.) This capacity for consolation is highlighted in the quotation from Mann that we began with ("the consoling power of this beautification"), and it is also central to the two main examples of Danto's used to illustrate internal beauty: the Vietnam War Memorial and Motherwell's *Elegies for the Spanish Republic*.

Consolation comes in the face of suffering or grief. It can take different routes, which can potentially be combined. Sometimes at the heart of it is a sense of resonance or community: consolation comes through showing us that we are not alone in our experience. A work of art, in expressing something we feel or have felt,

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[26] Cf., Fred Rush, "Remnants of Beauty," Inquiry 48:2, 172-188 (2005).

can perform or embody this sort of consolation. The beauty might serve to further enhance the solidarity of feeling. This communality is reinforced in works, such as the Vietnam War Memorial, that are created as public art and that have a civic imprimatur.

Another route is to put something into a sort of frame, and thereby render it more tractable. Kathleen Higgins, describing this, notes that "aesthetic activities are a way of containing grief. They express its diverse emotions in and through means that order them and provide them a shape that others can appreciate."[27] When it comes to "containment," beauty might go hand-in-hand with the sort of framing she describes. Art can contain or frame the experience in an elegiac poem (e.g., "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd" by Whitman) or in an aria (e.g., Arianna's Lament by Monteverdi). The framing and the beauty might be connected, in that both might largely be grounded in the formal elements of the work.

Yet at the same time, beauty's consoling power seems to stretch beyond *just* providing a framing form, or reinforcing community. Its psychological underpinnings, here and elsewhere, are far from transparent. Danto offers one tentative suggestion: "It is as though beauty works as a catalyst, transforming raw grief into tranquil sadness, helping the tears to flow and, at the same time, one might say, putting the loss into a certain philosophical perspective."[28] This suggests a kind of catharsis that beauty might initiate and further, as well as a reflection that it invites.

Sometimes consolation, aided by beauty, can come through being brought to

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[27] Kathleen Higgins, "Aesthetics and the Containment of Grief," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 78:1 (2020).

[28] Danto, *The Abuse of Beauty*, p. 111.

see something as part of a narrative or pattern. This is perhaps one, though not the only, way of putting "the loss into philosophical perspective," to repeat Danto's phrase. Rilke's *Duino Elegies* invite us, for instance, to see death as inevitable part of a larger order of nature, with us flowering then falling, like catkins on a hazel tree, one of the beautiful images with which that cycle of poems ends. This can tilt toward a kind of redemption, in that such an order or pattern is an exercise in sense-making, or in providing a meaning.

Christian art is of course the paradigm when it comes to full blown redemption. The martyred saint looks heavenward to the gilded sky as God's saving radiance shines down upon her, as in Tintoretto's *St. Catherine*, or, as in Raphael's *Transfiguration*, Christ appears illuminated in white, floating above and, in his person, giving the answer to the sufferings below, represented in the possessed boy, whom the returning Christ will heal. In these cases, the beauty is not operating independently of the Christian narrative of redemption, and perhaps that is true in *Aida* as well, albeit in a somewhat more etiolated way perhaps. Whether the rays of gold or Giotto's lapis lazuli sky, or the sounds of harps, such art uses beautification, coupled with well-understood conventions, to further reinforce its redemptive message. Yes, it seems to say, there is suffering down in this vale of tears, but there is salvation.

At the other end of the spectrum from the Christian narratives, but still in the orbit of what is usefully thought of as redemptive consolation, we have Nietzsche's central suggestion from *The Birth of Tragedy*. It is has been aptly described

as Nietzsche's "aesthetic theodicy."[29] It is not, to be sure, the traditional theological project of reconciling God's omnipotence and goodness with the existence of evil. It is instead the idea that art is, potentially anyway, somehow is the business of justifying life and existence, particularly in its darker aspects. In Nietzsche's famous line, it is "only as an *aesthetic phenomenon* that existence and the world is eternally *justified*."[30] It is not, that is to say, justified in moral or in rational terms. But from a cosmic perspective, from the standpoint of "Artist gods," there is meaning in existence (even its most cruel dimensions) as a beautiful aesthetic spectacle. Cold comfort for us, one might think. But art (tragedy most centrally) can invite us temporarily to adopt this spectatorial position of the *theatrum mundi*, and tragedy's beautification (sonorous poetry, accompanied by music and delivered by masked actors) encourages us to see as aesthetically justified what in ordinary life we would not. This, in essence, is Nietzsche's attempted resolution to the paradox of tragedy, or at least a central part of it.[31]

Experiences surely differ, though one doubts what Nietzsche traces, in its psychological details, is an especially common reaction. When we see beautiful representations or hear beautiful musical expressions of suffering, we needn't think the suffering is *itself* beautiful, even when it is being expressed or represented

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[29] For further discussion, see Raymond Geuss, "Art and Theodicy," in his *Morality, Culture, and History* (Cambridge University Press, 1999). Cf., R. Lanier Anderson, "Nietzsche on Redemption and Transfiguration," in *The Re-Enchantment of the World: Secular Magic in a Rational Ag*e, ed. Joshua Landy and Michael Saler (Stanford, 2009).

[30] *The Birth of Tragedy*, trans. Ronald Speirs (Cambridge University Press, 1999), §5.

[31] Nietzsche also highlights something he describes as "metaphysical consolation." (*The Birth of Tragedy*, trans. Ronald Speirs (Cambridge University Press, 1999), e.g. at §17-18. There are various interpretive complexities that we cannot settle here about what this amounts to and how it relates to the sort of aesthetic theodicy just described.

beautifully in the work. As we've seen, aesthetically-beautified art can leave us with a range of reactions, and even consolation more specifically can leave us with a range of responses too. I'm particularly interested in the cases of redemptive consolation where we neither take the Nietzschean route just described, nor subscribe to a narrative licensing the specifically Christian route either. This, it seems to me, is the interesting space Mann is exploring in the quotation we began with. Verdi's music suggests a heavenly ascent, and for those who subscribe to such a Christian view, perhaps the consolation comes in thinking that Aida and Radames's love survives their bodily deaths, as suggested in the final words they sing:

O terra, addio; addio, valle di pianti…	*O Earth, farewell – farewell, vale of tears…*
Sogno di gaudio che in dolor svanì.	*dream of joy which vanished into sorrow.*
A noi si schiude il ciel e l'alme erranti	*Heaven opens to us, our wandering souls*
Volano al raggio dell'eterno dì…	*fly fast towards the light of eternal day…*

But what about for those who—presumably as with Castorp—*don't* believe this? Those of us who think, as he does, that art has thrown a veil of beauty over what will be a terrible—and final— end. How could *we* still be consoled, as he apparently, and rather puzzlingly, is?

To my mind, there are two main options here. One is imaginative initiation into the worldview. We *imagine* that Aida and Radames are heaven-bound. These are, after all, fictional characters in a fictional story. Might not their final redemption be an element of that fiction too? Perhaps. And as with more full-bloodedly Christian

art, the beautification has a rhetorical function. It tries to persuade us at an emotional level of the worldview on offer. (For those who think the text of *Aida* is the really crucial thing here, just imagine if we had the same text, set to the sonic world of Berg's *Wozzeck*. The effect would be that of a musical form of irony, undermining the sentiments in the libretto.) So we might play along with what we are being invited to make-believe, imagining that Aida and Radames's souls are to be lifted aloft. Here we have specific thoughts of what the redemption in question is supposed to be and we imagine in accordance with that.

What's puzzling is that Castorp seems to have a clear-eyed awareness of what Aida and Radames's awful fate will in fact be, but nonetheless still manages to be consoled. The more explicit our imagining of a redemptive ending is, the more difficult it is to sustain in the face of the scenario. And this brings me to the second possibility. Beauty might instead serve to invite thoughts and feelings that are less detailed and specific. Beauty could provide an intimation of meaning that it never actually grants us. When it gilds the sky and sets the harps twinkling, we might think of it, I suggest, as giving what, for many, will amount to an alluringly non-specific bluff, however earnest the art and artist may be in their conviction. We don't imagine, let alone believe, they will be saved and ascend to heaven. But we feel, at some more subliminal level, encouraged by the beauty, that there must be some redemptive meaning here, even if we can't put our fingers on it. If we become too self-conscious and try to find some reasoned justification of our feeling of momentary comfort, however, it may well evaporate.

Both of these options seem as though they could be live possibilities, for some

anyway; others no doubt are immune, or else find subscription to the Christian metaphysics unproblematic and appealing. But assuming we can or do engage in either of these ways, we can go on to ask the further question of whether we should. There are parallel issues about our reactions to works of religious art as non-believers, which have been taken up in the work of Aaron Ridley and Alex Neill.[32] They respond to a question, pointedly posed by Michael Tanner in his classic paper "Sentimentality" when he says:

> enormous numbers of our feelings and attitudes towards the most basic issues are based on some more-or-less traditional Christian outlook. But we are no longer living in a Christian society, in any serious sense, and most of us are not Christians. Our general view of the world is not at all like Christ's. And yet we depend for much of our emotional and spiritual succour on art and teaching that not only presupposes the truth of Christianity, but actively propagates it. Many an atheist thinks that the *B-minor Mass* is one of the greatest works of art; that is what I feel. But I am not at all clear that I should.[33]

Sentimentality was famously described by Oscar Wilde as wanting to have the luxury of an emotion without paying for it, an idea that Tanner picks up and explores. And that might be an apt description of what is going on in the reactions of redemptive

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[32] Aaron Ridley and Alex Neill, "Religious Music for Godless Ears," *Mind*, Vol. 119, No. 476 (October 2010), p. 999-1023.

[33] Michael Tanner, "Sentimentality," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society,* Vol. 77 (1976 - 1977), p. 145.

consolation described. We want the luxury of thinking that Aida and Radames are being drawn up into the eternal light, or redeemed in some non-specific way, but actually we are not entitled to think that. The veil of beauty has glossed over what we take to be the facts: that they will die excruciatingly painful deaths, and that no beyond is in store. So are we, in some fashion, being sentimental here? Is redemptive consolation a kind of sentimentality? It is these questions that I want to take up in closing.

VI. Conclusion

Beautified art, as we've seen, can be serving various ends, and can occasion a variety of reactions, some of which I have tried to outline here. We've trained our attention on one in particular—the way that art, aided by its beautification, can console its audiences in the face of what it depicts or expresses.

These days, attempted artistic redemptions of suffering, in the high arts anyway, are *passé.* It is a serious question whether one should be consoled by art, particularly in this more redemptive manifestation, or whether one should resist its temptations steadfastly. Adorno, for example, decries art that offers consolation.[34] Iris Murdoch also rails against approaching art in search of reassurance. We shirk our responsibility in the pursuit of truth, she thinks, when we give in to these consoling illusions.[35]

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[34] *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor, (Minnesota, 1997), p. 32. Although Adorno thinks that art should not offer us any false reconciliation with the world, he does think that art can hold out a kind of utopian *promesse du bonheur*, as he says, borrowing Stendhal's phrase (p. 311). The promise of happiness, Adorno thinks, cannot be filled out at all with any kind of specific content.

[35] *The Sovereignty of Good*, (Routledge, 2001) [1970], p. 81-89.

One dictum about Thomas Mann's work is that he keeps an ironic distance from the phenomena he describes. In beginning with an epigraph from Mann, I have more or less hoped to follow the same tack. Perhaps we shouldn't be wholly unsympathetic to Castorp's experience at the gramophone, so long as we retain a healthy suspicion about this sort of redemptive consolation in particular, and certain other forms of aesthetic beautification. My focus here is exploration and not defense. Nonetheless, I would like in closing to venture at least some preliminary remarks in support of what we might describe as "the Castorp experience."

One might think that art should be a truth-telling medium. This is an entrenched intuition and a deep commitment of the tradition of theorizing about the cognitive value of art, going back, as with the paradox of tragedy, at least to Aristotle. Art is rarely truth pure and simple. Much of it deals in fictions, of people who never existed, and situations that never occurred. But with great art anyway, the reaction of many is to think that if it is to count as genuinely great, it must also be truthful at some deep level, plumbing the depths of human existence and delivering us insight about it. When a work does not accept this challenge, one will likely think it lesser, perhaps meretricious or cheap.

Yet even if we think that one of the most important roles of art is to be cognitive, revealing the most important truths about the world, we might temper this with the competing idea that art can sometimes be all the better for presenting powerful illusions as well. Indeed, we might think some of the best art reveals the most profound truths, even as it veils those truths with illusions. It was one of Nietzsche's best philosophical insights to suggest in *The Birth of Tragedy* that art could

do both at once and be all the greater for doing so. Or as he puts it, with aphoristic concision in one of his late notebook entries, "We possess art lest we perish of the truth."[36]

Need we take a work of art's perspective at face value? Again, Nietzsche is instructive here: art can offer us honest illusions—illusions that we know to be illusions, illusions that needn't deceive us.[37] We do not rush onstage to fling open the tomb and let Aida and Radames have fresh air; as deeply affecting as that opera can be, we know, on one level at least, that it is just a fiction. So too, I suspect, with the redemptive consolations that art might invite. We can know in the back of our minds—and in the front of them—that art's glimmer of redemption is just a mirage, but at least for a few moments, it can console us by letting us feel that its promise is one that can be kept.[38]

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[36] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Kritische Studienausgabe*, ed. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari (de Gruyter, 1968), 13:499-500 (Notebook 16 [40], Spring-Summer 1888).

[37] Geuss, "Introduction" to *The Birth of Tragedy*, trans. Ronald Speirs, (Cambridge, 1999), p. xxvii; Cf. Timothy Stoll, "Nietzsche and Schiller on Aesthetic Semblance," *Monist*, Volume 102, Issue 3, July 2019, 331–348.

[38] Thinking back to an early stage of working on this material, which I had put aside for quite some time, I'm grateful for discussion with Bernard Reginster, Michael Tanner, Rose Subotnik, Nick Riggle, Jack Spencer, and Greg Freeman, as well as to an audience at the University of Toronto. Since returning to it more recently, my thanks are due to: