

Will Beauty Save the World?

Dean's Address Fall 2014

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Please listen to Arvo Pärt, *Cantus in Memoriam Benjamin Britten*, by cutting and pasting the following link into your browser:

<http://www.bing.com/videos/search?q=arvo+p%c3%a4rt+cantus+benjamin+britten&FORM=VIRE7#view=detail&mid=F26D9983C047952EDF3EF26D9983C047952EDF3E>

“I believe the world will be saved by beauty.” So claims Prince Lev Nikolayevich Myshkin, the protagonist of Fyodor Dostoevsky’s great novel, *The Idiot*. Dostoevsky is my lodestar. His works penetrate the carapace of humanity, splice open the human condition, laying bare our symmetries and incongruities, unlike any other writer I have yet to encounter. Needless to say, I take what he writes very seriously.

When Dostoevsky speaks of “beauty”, it is not as an aesthete; beauty is not for him something precious, something affected. Dostoevsky’s novels, which feature murderers, adulterers, madmen, the poor, the afflicted and the unredeemed, in a blighted world, wracked with pain, imbrued with sorrow, and nearly devoid of light, teach us that *consciousness itself emerges from suffering*. In this context, what can it mean to say that “beauty will save the world”?

Before I continue, I would like to ask your forgiveness. I have puzzled long over this claim, the claim that beauty will save the world. And now I would like to puzzle this out further with you. But I am very aware that as I touch on the qualities of fiction, music, painting, mathematics and poetry, I am confronted with auditors who know much more than I do, both individually and collectively, about each of these subjects. I hope that you will be generous with me.

Not very long ago, I was driving in my car, listening distractedly to a classical music station, when my attention was drawn gradually to the unfamiliar piece being played. I heard in it a pattern of perpetual falling, punctuated by the tolling of a bell. This is what I heard. **[play first three minutes of Pärt’s Cantus for Benjamin Britten]**. The song continued as I reached my destination. I put my car in park. But I couldn’t leave. I remained in my seat, listening to the cascading notes, to that faraway tolling of a bell. I sat in a state of suspended attention. As the music came to its end, I felt a warm tear running down my cheek.

The announcer noted that this was the Estonian composer, Arvo Pärt's, *Cantus in Memoriam Benjamin Britten*. I had no idea what the relationship of Arvo Pärt was to Benjamin Britten, one of the twentieth century's great composers. Did Pärt mourn the loss of a friend, a peer, a mentor, a stranger? I did not know.

What I did know for certain was that this piece of music was remarkably beautiful. Out of Pärt's mourning, from the void created by the passing of another person, came sounds, shaped into a form, which conveyed the sharpest edges of suffering. Yet howsoever much they expressed pain, I found in their expression something beautiful. Was this work only beautiful to me? Or did it, and by association I, touch on some current of beauty running through the world like a vein of gold running through the face of a rock?

We live in an era that insists that all value judgments are relative, that there is no way for someone to account for one thing being qualitatively better, and by inference, more beautiful, than another. We are committed only to the gauge of personal preference or taste. Moreover, we live in a world that denies that there is anything that is "true", at least beyond the verifiable hard sciences. But of course such a claim, by its own standards, cannot itself be true. The rational mind, denying truth, but holding *this* to be true, like the mythical *ouroborus*, eats its own tail.



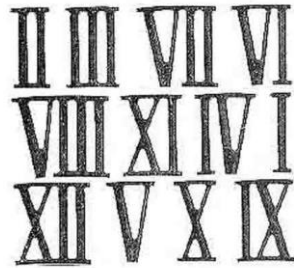
Keats' *Ode on a Grecian Urn* declares that, "Beauty is truth, truth beauty" – that is all / Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know." To both express and contain this claim, the poem uses the rhetorical figure of the *chiasmus*, inverting a phrase "Beauty is truth," in its second appearance, "truth beauty." A patterned is formed – one claim mirrors the other. The truth about beauty and truth is presented in a way that is not only axiomatic, but symmetrical, shapely, and dare we say, beautiful. Yet, if this statement is true, it opens onto further questions, rather than sealing them off. Are "beauty" and "truth" separate phenomena reflecting back, mirror-like, upon one another? Or are they consubstantial? Are all beautiful things true? Are *only* beautiful things true? Are all true things beautiful? Or is Keats' line simply gilded nonsense, pretty words in a pretty configuration that confirm what we would like to believe, but know ultimately to be false?

When we think of what can be said to be irrefutably true, we often turn to the concrete facticity of mathematics. Two plus two is always four. But is "two plus two" *beautiful*?

At the root of mathematics is the observation of patterns. When we place two apples beside two other apples, we have four apples. Mathematics represents the way by which we express this self-evident truth; real numbers, that is, are the containers --“two”, “four”-- that give form to that which we cannot deny.



But when we construct a mathematical system, we are not simply transcribing into concrete symbols abstract categories. Our way of constructing a language that speaks mathematical truths is intimately bound up with who we are. Our symbols are variable; the Romans used a different set, with their own internal logic; there are even other systems of numeric notation, such as the Cyrillic. But the Indo-Arabic numbers used throughout most of the world today, the ones used by the Romans, and the Cyrillic numerals are interchangeable because all are decimal systems, based upon units of ten.



Ā	Ḃ	Ḅ	Ḍ	Ḙ	Ṁ	Ṇ	Ṳ	Ṵ	
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
𐌰	𐌱	𐌲	𐌳	𐌴	𐌵	𐌶	𐌷	𐌸	𐌹
11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20
𐌺	𐌻	𐌼	𐌽	𐌾	𐌿	𐍀	𐍁	𐍂	𐍃
21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	
𐌰	𐌱	𐌲	𐌳	𐌴	𐌵	𐌶	𐌷	𐌸	
30	40	50	60	70	80	90	100		
Ḙ	Ṁ	Ṇ	Ṳ	Ṵ	Ṷ	Ṹ	Ṻ	Ṽ	
200	300	400	500	600	700	800	900		
𐌰	𐌱								
1000	2000								

In fact the entire architecture of our mathematics, is based upon groupings of ten. Why? Is this because when we first began looking out into the world, trying to sort out its patterns, and the purposes that lay beneath those patterns, trying to apprehend the order of things, we encountered a world bundled into groups of ten? Were there ten apples on every tree, ten trees in every grove? Of course not.

But as we began to take account of the world around us, we used quite literally what was at hand – our ten fingers. When we reached the tenth apple, the tenth tree, we began again.



So the system of mathematics, upon which every science, every objective truth we have yet to compute, record and test, conforms to *our* form. Starting with our hands held before our eyes, we were led to calculate the speed of light and the farthest distances of the observable universe. Is it sheer coincidence that our physical construction presents to us the cipher for the universe's encrypted secrets? What if we had eight fingers or twelve (there are, incidentally, cultures that use base-5, base-8, even base-12 numerical systems)? The conjunction between our subjective way of perceiving the world and the hard objective facts it contains is uncanny. Those who are mapping out the form of the universe are also marked with its form. Is this serendipity? We sometimes do hear someone claim that a mathematical proof is "beautiful," but when a mathematician says a proof is beautiful, what she means is not that she has "discovered" a truth, but that the apprehension of that truth and the expression of that truth are both inextricably bound up in who she, and we, are.

The mathematician's proof and Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel are works of the same order; they represent *us* trying to discover and represent the order of the universe, and, miraculously, finding

the means to do so. As we look at the Creator reaching out towards Adam, we see the five fingers of the hand of God reaching for the five fingers of the first man.



Ten fingers, human and divine, reaching for one another, but not quite joined. Will the distance between the two ever be closed? Are we are being in this moment gifted the key to knowledge?



Or is God pulling away? The truth, captured in this painting, is that we are forever *this* far from Truth. The truth is not that there is not truth, but rather that truth is something we can reach out for, in fact must reach out for, but which remains always at a remove, howsoever tantalizingly

close. Yet we need a means to convey *this* truth to ourselves, and this, I would suggest, is the truth of beauty.

As a Shakespearean scholar, when I think about things being ordered in tens, I think about the ten syllables that make up each line of Shakespearean verse. In his plays, Shakespeare's characters move back and forth between prose and poetry. It was a convention of the theater of his day that most dramatic verse was written in iambic pentameter – ten syllables, with the beat falling on every second syllable (da Dum, da Dum, da Dum, da Dum, da Dum): “If music be the food of love play on.” This arrangement was not arbitrary – ten English syllables are about as many as can be spoken by an actor in a single breath: “In sooth, I know not why I am so sad...” The ten-syllable line allows an actor to reach the end of the line and to retain enough air in the lungs to continue, after the briefest pause, with the next: “But, soft! what light through yonder window breaks?” Shakespeare's poetic form, therefore, is circumscribed by the limits of the body. Our capacity for apprehension and expression is shaped by our embodied self and bounded by its limitations.

When iambic pentameter lines are unrhymed, they are referred to as “blank verse.” The most famous line of blank verse may very well be Hamlet's “To be or not to be, that is the question.” In thinking about the interrelationship of truth and beauty, I would like us to take a moment to look at how the poetic form of this line, its formal qualities, may help us to achieve a sort of clarity about our own limitations and possibilities.

What is it that Hamlet is probing with this question? He is frustrated by the limits that human beings face. We cannot solve the myriad problems the world confronts us with. We are fated to suffer, and there is little we can do to mitigate our suffering. Given that we are bounded in capacity, he asks, is there any point to carrying on at all?

To be, or not to be: that is the question:
Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,
And by opposing end them?



To die: to sleep;
No more; and by a sleep to say we end
The heart-ache and the thousand natural shocks
That flesh is heir to, 'tis a consummation
Devoutly to be wish'd. To die, to sleep;
To sleep: perchance to dream: ay, there's the rub;
For in that sleep of death what dreams may come
When we have shuffled off this mortal coil,
Must give us pause: there's the respect
That makes calamity of so long life;
For who would bear the whips and scorns of time,
The oppressor's wrong, the proud man's contumely,
The pangs of despised love, the law's delay,
The insolence of office and the spurns
That patient merit of the unworthy takes,

When he himself might his quietus make
With a bare bodkin?

When Hamlet poses his question, “To be or not be?” he is at the point opposite to the moment of creation illustrated by Michelangelo. A bodkin is a dagger. Hamlet is considering whether or not he should turn his own hand against himself. He is contemplating his own erasure. He is mulling over not just death, but death by suicide. He ponders an act of self-abnegation. He feels anguish. He is suffering. Earlier in the play, Hamlet had cried out in torment, “Oh that this too, too sullied flesh, would thaw, melt and resolve itself into a dew.” It is not only that Hamlet wants to end his life; he wills his own annihilation. “To be or not to be” does not counterpoise “life” against “death”; it asks us to choose between “being” and “non-being.” Embedded in annihilation is, “nihil”, zero, nothingness. The void has its own gravitational pull, like a black hole. What brings Hamlet to its threshold? How can “being” will its opposite? This is where we can turn again to the capacity of beauty to teach us truth.

Art shuttles between expectation and surprise. All works of art, whether explicitly formalist or not, establish patterns, from the syncopated rhythm of Shakespeare’s blank verse lines, to the plummeting sequence of notes in Arvo Pärt’s *Cantus*. Art establishes a horizon of expectation, only to set up the conditions by which those expectations might be confounded. Where the pattern breaks—where we are surprised—is often a fault line where deeper meaning can surface.

Let us return to the opening of Hamlet’s soliloquy—“To be or not to be – that is the question.”

The line, a blank verse line, should end on the tenth syllable – “To be or not to be – that is the

QUEST.” The vestigial, eleventh syllable, what is called in technical terms a feminine ending, turns Hamlet’s “quest” into a “question.” Hamlet’s question elides with his quest, his quest is to question. He wants rational surety before he can proceed on any course of action. Yet he finds that the rational mind twists and turns, bends back upon itself. One question spawns the next. Questions for Hamlet do not lead to a solution; questioning is the end itself; it *is* his quest. When facing questions of qualitative nature – what is “nobler in the mind”—we find the mind receding in an infinite regress. We never do get an answer to Hamlet’s query. In fact, were he not interrupted by the fair Ophelia, we sense that his peroration could go on without end.

It is not that there are no answers, but rather that for certain categories of questions, particularly those of an existential nature, we have to seek our answer outside the circumscribed bounds of reason. “Beauty” is that flash of lightning that allows us to apprehend, perhaps momentarily, perhaps obliquely, the order that undergirds everything. Beauty is the celebration of being-ness. It is the answer to Hamlet’s question – it *is* better to be than not to be. But, Hamlet, entangled in threads of logic, cannot reach this end himself. Looking for a path through the unweeded garden of the world, through the purgatorial hours before a never-arriving dawn, Hamlet, the Prince, wanders in the dark. *Hamlet*, the play, beautifully illuminates his plight.

I believe the world *will* be saved by beauty. But I don’t know that I can ever find sufficient means to articulate why. I also know that I cannot, Hamlet-like, make a rational case for my belief. And I cannot make one for you.

Nearly two months ago, a very close friend of mine passed away. The circumstances of his death have remained shrouded by his family in secrecy, but I have every reason to suspect it was suicide. On the long drive to his funeral, I listened repeatedly to Arvo Pärt's *Cantus*. This work gave form to my grief. In its ever-declining notes, I found a way to apprehend the anguish that haunts us all. The tolling of the bell did not alleviate my friend's suffering, nor mine, it did not undo what had been done, but it was somehow necessary all the same. At some point, we cannot speak rationally about beauty any longer. We have to let beauty speak its truth on its own. I would like to take the last few minutes of our time today to do just that... [Play remaining music]