

Christ College Alumni Reading Groups Syllabus 2014/15

“What is Beauty?”

Written by Christ College Dean Peter Kanelos

As some of you may know, we have organized the Christ College Symposium this year around one of the most fundamental of human questions—“What is Beauty?” Our 2014-15 Christ College Symposium Speaker Series features eminent figures in the fields of music, philosophy, poetry, literary studies and theology sharing with our students their insights on this theme. I want to extend the conversation to our CC Alumni Reading Groups as well by arranging this year’s syllabus around readings associated with the Symposia. I hope that your conversations will prove as vibrant and engaging as those currently echoing around Mueller Hall.

Rather than a detailed syllabus, we are changing the format this time around. I am including a copy of the annual Dean’s Address to Christ College, which began our Symposium inquiries by asking the question, “Will Beauty Save the World?” I hope that these remarks will help frame your discussions as you read through these works.

1. Roger Scruton, *Beauty* (Oxford University Press, 2009) ISBN-978-0199229758

- Scruton identifies different types of beauty—human beauty, natural beauty, artistic beauty. How is each connected to the others? In what sense do they all share commonly in the concept of “beauty”? Scruton speaks freely of “souls” and “sacred” objects. In what ways are his notions of beauty preconditioned upon the acceptance of the validity of such phenomena?
- What does Scruton define as the role of subjectivity and individuality in the process of aesthetic judgment? How does his assessment run counter to common assumptions in contemporary culture?
- Do you agree that modernity has provoked a “flight from beauty”? If so, why is this? If not, where is beauty still to be found?

2. Mary Szybist, *Incarnadine* (Graywolf Press, 2013) ISBN – 978-1555976354

- Many of the poems in *Incarnadine* reflect directly or indirectly on the Annunciation, pictured on the cover by Botticelli. How is this sacred event manifest across the collection? Notice that it often appears in the most subtle of ways (the colors red and blue, for example, which are associated with the Virgin Mary recur over and over again).
- Szybist’s poems take many different forms throughout the book. How is each poem crafted to suit the needs of its subject? What do you think of the radically unusual form of “How (Not) to Talk About God”? Or of the prose form of poems such as “To Gabriela at the Donkey Sanctuary”?
- Consider the relationship of Botticelli’s *Annunciation* to Szybist’s *Incarnadine* while thinking about the question of beauty. Moving from Renaissance painting to contemporary poetry, has the notion of beauty altered?

3. Iris Murdoch, *The Sea, the Sea* (Penguin Classics, 2001) ISBN – 978-0141186160

- Reflecting on the way that Mary Szybist's *Incarvadine* is in conversation with Botticelli's *Annunciation*, what is the significance of Titian's *Perseus and Andromeda* in Iris Murdoch's *The Sea, the Sea*? How do groupings of characters such as Harley, Ben, and Charles, or Peregrine, Charles and Rosina, relate to the figures in the painting? How does the sea monster figure into the novel?
- Considering specifically the character of Hartley, how does the novel upend our conventional notions of beauty? How does it challenge us to reconsider the relation between passion and the beautiful? How do Hartley, Lizzie and Rosina each relate to Charles? How does each instantiate a (partial) ideal of female beauty? And how does the novel subvert such ideals?
- *The Sea, the Sea* is written as a "journal." Yet it bears all the hallmarks of the modernist novel. Notice how painterly Charles' descriptions of the house and the landscape are and how the natural elements of life are imbued with significance, even immanence. For example, you may want to discuss the ways that the "sea" is presented as the central symbol around which the plot and the inner lives of the characters revolve. How does Charles shape his life, and the account of this life, aesthetically? Is his aim "beauty"? If not, what does he strive for? And what does Iris Murdoch strive for in writing this novel?

4. Tom Stoppard, *Arcadia* (Faber and Faber, 2008) ISBN – 978-0571169344

- The play begins with the line, "Septimus, what is carnal embrace?" After discoursing comically on the Latin root, *carne* (meat), which elides with *caro* (dear, beloved), Septimus tries to distract Thomasina from the topic by turning her focus to Fermat's last theorem, which she has been attempting to solve. And, of course, he does so in order that he can return to reading the poem, *The Couch of Eros*. From its inception, the play sets up a dichotomy between passion and rationality. As moderns, we are often in the position of Thomasina, asked to focus on reason, while not allowing "passions" to interfere with our industry and objectivity. What does Stoppard's *Arcadia* have to say about this impulse?
- As a corollary to the reason vs. passion question, the play counterpoises two ways of knowing: the Classical and the Romantic (let us not forget that Lord Byron is stalking the grounds...). These categories are literally laid one over the other in Mr. Noakes' sketch book, which contains the plans for redesigning the grounds of Sidley Park. A passionate, emotive "gloomy forest and towering crag of ruins" is set to displace the ordered, symmetrical "Enlightenment" landscape; Captain Brice exclaims in alarm, "Is Sidley Park to be an Englishman's garden or the haunt of Corsican brigands?" The prospect that we might allow the chaos and incongruity to overcome what we have so carefully, and rationally, ordered, is daunting. Yet, what we are witnessing, after all, is a play, a poetic (and prophetic) vision that allows us access to other layers of truth. Do we need to make room for both the Classical and Romantic in our personal endeavors?
- The overlay of the two visions for the gardens, also exemplifies the overlay of one period of time upon another – the two temporal settings of the play that occur separately, yet simultaneously. Time, and its irreversibility, is the primary concern of Thomasina, who mourns for the loss of the Library of Alexandria, and all the knowledge that it contained. But Septimus argues that all that is lost will eventually be recovered. This certainly is born out by the recovery of Thomasina's work in her

primer, which is later validated. And the truth of Chater's "duel" with Byron also comes to the surface eventually. At the play's end, the two time settings are literally layered one upon the other, as the main characters waltz simultaneously (yet not) upon the stage – "keeping time" to the same music. Clearly, we can take the question of time in many directions with this play (and I hope you do), but as an opening bid, I would ask you to consider the role of time in our own lives: how do we see our lives "overlaid" by the past? Do we ever consider our work as a haunting presence in a yet unknown future?

5. *The Agony and the Ecstasy*, film directed by Carol Reed (1965)

- At the heart of *The Agony and the Ecstasy* is the struggle between Michelangelo and Pope Julius II. What does each believe to be the purpose of art? Why is the Pope so upset by Michelangelo's inclusion of pagan symbols and myths in the frescoes of the Sistine Chapel? Why does he relent?
- Michelangelo was considered by the Renaissance biographer, Giorgio Vasari, to be the first "modern" artist. What qualities does Michelangelo exhibit that might earn him this distinction?
- The creation of something beautiful is at the center of this film. What are the forces that endanger such beauty? Why does the Pope, as he is ailing towards the end of the film, rebuke the images of God and Adam, in the "Creation of Adam" panel, for being too serene? In what way do these figures represent Michelangelo and Pope Julius? And who is who in this comparison?