

Hospitality, Beauty, and the Sabbath: Overtures Towards an Adventist Theological Aesthetic

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“*She has done a beautiful thing to me*” (Mt 26:10).

1. Dislocating Beauty

“We can be sure that whoever sneers at [beauty’s] name as if she were an ornament of a bourgeois past... can no longer pray and soon will no longer be able to love.”¹ So writes Hans Urs von Balthasar famously in the opening pages of his seven-volume *magnum opus* the *Glory of the Lord*. There Balthasar weaves an intricate philosophical, theological, and historical account tracing, among other things, the marginalization of the third transcendental—that of beauty—in Christian theology. He observes how “the word ‘aesthetic’ automatically flows from the pens of both Protestant and Catholic writers when they want to describe an attitude which, in the last analysis, they find to be frivolous, merely curious and self-indulgent.”² Balthasar laments such de-aesthetization of theology and its adverse effects on the Christian practices of worship, spiritual formation, and evangelism. After all, argues Balthasar, “in a world without beauty... the good also loses its attractiveness, self-evidence why it must be carried out.” Why not prefer evil over good? “Why not investigate Satan’s depth?”³ Why desire the beatific vision? Accordingly, Balthasar seeks to rectify the given imbalance by embarking on an “archeology of alienated beauty”⁴ in dialogue with thinkers such as Irenaeus, Augustine, Pseudo-Dionysius, Dante, Hopkins, Solovyev, and others.

¹ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Seeing the Form*, vol. 1 of *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*, ed. Joseph Fessio and John Riches, trans. Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1982), 18.

² *Ibid.*, 1:51.

³ *Ibid.*, 1:19.

⁴ See Edward T. Oakes, *Pattern of Redemption: The Theology of Hans Urs Von Balthasar* (New York: Continuum, 1997), ch.6.

The merit of Balthasar’s trenchant critique notwithstanding, the evocation of beauty for Christian theology appears to be fraught with significant challenges. The rejection of beauty in favor of the Kantian sublime; the Kierkegaardian downgrading of the aesthetic sphere; the commodification of beauty in our hypersignified culture; the feminist critique of beauty as a vestige of patriarchal exploitation; the anti-aesthetic character of much of contemporary art; the frequent degeneration of beauty into truth-abdicating and action-sapping sentimentality⁵—these and other sardonic dismissals present serious challenges of how to speak of beauty in any meaningful way. Some postmodern thinkers in particular are highly suspicious of its rhetorical sublimations, and see them as invariably doomed to deconstructive implosions. David Bentley Hart in his *The Beauty of the Infinite* addresses the underlying thrust of such critiques with remarkable poignancy: “Who is to say,” he rightly asks, “that the beautiful is self-evidently free of violence or subterfuge? How can one plausibly argue that ‘beauty’ does not serve the very strategy of power to which it supposedly constitutes an alternative?”⁶ More specifically, “can the Christian evangel of peace advance itself rhetorically, as beauty, in such a way as to make that peace real? Is the ‘gift’ of evangelical appeal a peaceful gesture, or is it the most devious strategy of power, a violence that dissembles itself in order to persuade for persuasion’s sake?”⁷

To illustrate his point, Hart points to Nietzsche’s attack on Christianity’s self-presentation as the evangel of peace rooted in an ontology of charity. Nietzsche detects in it a sinister calculus masking a “will to power at its most vulgar and debased: power representing itself as the refusal of power, as the negation of strife, as the evangel of perfect peace—only in

⁵ Jeremy Begbie offers a helpful delineation of sentimentality in his “Beauty, Sentimentality, and the Arts,” in *The Beauty of God: Theology and the Arts*, ed. Mark Husbands Daniel J. Treier, Roger Lundin (Downers Grove: IVP, 2006).

⁶ David Bentley Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 4-5.

⁷ Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite*, 148-149.

order to make itself stronger, more terrifying, more invincible.”⁸ Such a stance is understandable in light of Nietzsche’s genealogy that renders “every regime of power as necessarily unjust... No universals are ascribed to human society save one: that it is always a field of warfare.”⁹ Thus on Nietzsche’s verdict the church’s witness to the world, notwithstanding all its appeals to beauty and peace, is in all its instantiations “an aggression, the ingratiating embassy of an omnivorous empire.”¹⁰

These questions invariably point us to the direction of Genesis 3 and the account of the Fall. There the serpent’s strategy, part of it anyway, is one of dislodging beauty from the idea of a primordial good or hospitality only to be cast as an ideological cover for domination and totality;¹¹ gifting, so it is argued, is simply a modality of seductive beauty. Thus, already in Gen. 3:1 we find, however implicitly, a rhetorical transvaluation of beauty. Yes, the garden is beautiful, yes, you may enjoy its harmonious fruitfulness, yes, you are free to delight in its pleasure-affording richness, yes,... but beware! All of it simply masks a sinister anti-humanistic onto-theology; a metaphysics of domination and totality. Do not be tricked by the ultimate purveyor of “Turkish Delight”—to evoke C. S. Lewis’ famed *The Witch and the Wardrobe* for a moment. The hospitality offered by the White Witch is but a subterfuge of an “omnivorous empire”¹² built on “original strife.” Adam and Eve, of course, buy into the serpent’s twisted “genealogy”—an act of a proto-Nietzschean deconstruction one could say—and the rest is, pun intended, (human) history.

⁸ Ibid., 102.

⁹ John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1991), 281-281.

¹⁰ Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite*, Hart, 2.

¹¹ See of example Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo*, trans. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1985), 75ff.

¹² Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite*, 2.

It is fascinating how analogous rhetorical strategies concerning (God's) hospitality, and by extension beauty, are nowadays being played out in some postmodern quarters. Pierre Bourdieu, for example, is critical of the economies of gifting as essentially exploitative, a form of "soft" oppression so to speak.¹³ Likewise, Jacques Derrida is suspicious of hospitality as inevitably hiding subterranean proclivities towards violence and exclusion. Hospitality, and more fundamentally giving, is always a part, however oblique, of an "economy of exchange." All our hospitality simply marks the ever present "hospitality of narcissism." Gifting, argues Derrida, is always propagated by self-interest.¹⁴ Thus the only gift that can be given "is no gift at all: given without intention to no one whom it can oblige, it must be a gift of nothing."¹⁵

The austerity of such phenomenological rendering of gifting, hospitality, and hope is truly remarkable. John Milbank focusing on the idea of pure hospitality, for example, helpfully notes "that it is presumptuous to assume that the given cannot be inventive and expressive gratuity of a truly creative giver, whose involvement in the gift is more than the perpetual recirculation of power and debt."¹⁶ Similarly, Hart detects a profound "ontological nihilism"¹⁷ in Derrida's proposal that shies away from even a hint of reciprocation. Distilling some meta-implications of this form of philosophical and theological asceticism, Hart offers the following helpful assessment:

The emaciated agape that gives without reserve but also without desire of return can never be anything but the energy of an absolute debt, the superincumbent burden that exacts from being an impossible, infinite return; but if divine agape is generous in another sense, if it is actually

¹³ See Stephen H. Webb, *The Gifting God: A Trinitarian Ethics of Excess* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 39-41.

¹⁴ For the wording of Derrida's position I am indebted to Hans Boersma, *Violence, Hospitality, and the Cross: Reappropriating the Atonement Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006), 34.

¹⁵ Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite*, 261.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 262-263.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 260.

charitable by giving way to otherness, by desiring the other dearly enough to give in a way that liberates the other even as it “binds” the other—by desiring the other, that is, as the very impulse of charity, and thereby relieving the other of any debt of pure and disinterested return—then the idea of the gift may yet prove resistant to too astringent an ethical purism. Truly, only when a giver desires a return, and indeed in some sense desires back the gift itself, can a gift be given as something other than sheer debt, only the liberating gesture of a gift given out of desire is one that cannot morally coerce another, and so can reveal the prior, aneconomic rationality of giving that escapes every calculation.¹⁸

What Hart clearly realizes is that that kind of radical hermeneutics has a larger ax to grind than one simply inane vexing on the nature of gifting. The assumption at work is that the moment you have a concrete expectation, the moment you have a determinate future, the moment you talk about a definite “presence,” in other words, the moment you have any sort of determinacy of content, being, proclamation, expectation, the specter of totality emerges. Thus, John Caputo’s mind-blowing claim that he cannot envision “how any religious tradition or theological language can take shape *without* violence,”¹⁹ because “as soon as a confession or institution takes on a particular, determinate shape, it is necessarily exclusionary and therefore violent.”²⁰

Now, one could respond to such critiques with a certain kind of meanness. We could chastise Caputo for exhibiting “a strangely imperious humility... (as his tirelessly sanctimonious tone makes unpleasantly obvious).”²¹ We could further argue that such “humble” petulance of postmodern discourse itself masks a backhanded totality, realized not in terms of “an enriching plurality but a fragmentation of competing communities, fuelled by greed, without dialogue or mutual responsibility.”²² Is not all of this, in other words, just

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 265.

¹⁹ John D. Caputo, “What Do I Do When I Love My God? Deconstruction and Radical Orthodoxy,” in *Questioning God*, ed. Michael Scanlon John D. Caputo and Mark Dooley (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 307. For this reference to Caputo I am indebted to James K. A. Smith, *Introducing Radical Orthodoxy: Mapping a Post-Secular Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 116.

²⁰ Smith, *Introducing Radical Orthodoxy*, 116. This is Smith’s restatement of Caputo’s position.

²¹ Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite*, 431.

²² Jeremy Begbie, “Christ and the Cultures: Christianity and the Arts,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Doctrine*, ed. Colin E. Gunton (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 114.

another instantiation of “colonial discourse,”²³ committed all in the name of purging ourselves from discourse of such kind? Postulating some sort of knowledge that is “metaphysical, totalizing, and illicit?”²⁴ Or we could pull out the trump card of Radical Orthodoxy and single-handedly dismiss all indeterminacy discourse as simply a decorative shell of a more original “ontology of violence.”²⁵

In the rest of this article, however, I would like to pursue, however so tentatively, a more irenic and constructive—and in the long run a more interesting—line of thinking; one that does indeed take seriously the ideological nature of language, while at the same time positing a plausible ontology of attracting peace. Undoubtedly, the tensions between desiring and gifting, aesthetic persuasion and hospitality, the beautiful and the good, raise important questions for theology that certainly merit close attention. That, of course, is easier said than done, as any attempt to provide a define statement of sorts will inevitably suffer from one form of reductionism or other. Still, as will become quite clear, I believe that Jonathan Edwards’s thought provides us with rich heuristics conducive for demarcating at least one possible approach to the issue at hand.

2. Jonathan Edwards’s Vision of Hospitable Beauty

In his helpful overview of theological aesthetics titled *Faith and Beauty* Edward Farley notes how in Jonathan Edwards’s thought “beauty is more central and more pervasive than in any other text in the history of Christian theology. Edwards does not just theologize *about* beauty: beauty (loveliness, sweetness) is the fundamental motif through which he understands the world,

²³ Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite*, 420.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 12.

²⁵ See Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, ch.10.

God, virtue and ‘divine things’.”²⁶ Roland Delattre seconds this observation when he writes that “beauty is one of the things Jonathan Edwards was most concerned with understanding.”²⁷ For Edwards beauty is “the first principle of being,” “the measure and objective foundation of the perfection of being—of excellence, goodness, and value,” “the first among the perfections of God,” “a major clue to his doctrine of the Trinity” as well as his anthropology, “the central clue to the meaning of conversion” and personal holiness, and the nature of true virtue.²⁸ In other words, “for Edwards the divine beauty is not simply one along side the other attributes or perfections of God... [O]f all God’s perfections it is by His beauty that He is primarily distinguished as God. God is not only beautiful, but beauty itself and the... fountain of all beauty.”²⁹

Edwards’s intricate theological aesthetics rests on a differentiation between two kinds of beauty.³⁰ First, he posits a *secondary* or natural beauty that greatly resembles the “great theory” in aesthetics—“beauty defined as *proportion and consonance of parts, brightness* or resplendence, *perfection* or integrity, and as *affording pleasure upon contemplation*.”³¹ Edwards himself defines secondary beauty as “mutual consent and agreement of different things, in form, manner, quantity, and visible end or design; called by the various name of regularity, order, uniformity, symmetry, proportion, harmony, etc.”³²

²⁶ Edward Farley, *Faith and Beauty: A Theological Aesthetic* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2001), 42.

²⁷ Roland André Delattre, *Beauty and Sensibility in the Thought of Jonathan Edwards* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968), 1.

²⁸ See *Ibid.*, 2.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 117.

³⁰ For a good discussion of Edwards on this point see Sang Hyun Lee, *The Philosophical Theology of Jonathan Edwards* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1988), ch. 6.

³¹ See Wladyslaw Tatarkiewicz, “The Great Theory of Beauty and Its Decline,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 31 (1972). For this reference to Tatarkiewicz and the wording of this sentence I am indebted to Jeremy Begbie, “Created Beauty: The Witness of J. S. Bach,” in *The Beauty of God: Theology and the Arts*, ed. Daniel J. Treier, Mark Husbands, and Roger Lundin (Downers Grove: IVP, 2006), 20.

³² Jonathan Edwards, *The Nature of True Virtue* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1960), 3.

While it is true that natural beauty is limited in its revelatory capacity, it nonetheless serves as a signpost to the Creator God. A helpful elucidation of the aesthetic sphere's signifying character that Edwards here maintains is found in C. S. Lewis' adumbration of the imaginative realm of human consciousness:

I think that all things, in their way, reflect heavenly truth, the imagination not the least. Reflect is the important word. This lower life of the imagination is not a beginning of (i.e. not necessarily and by its own nature. God can cause it to be such a beginning), nor a step toward, the higher life of the spirit, merely an image. In me, at any rate, it contained no element either of belief or of ethics; however, far pursued, it would never have made me either wiser or better. But it still had, at many removes, the shape of the reality it reflected.³³

In addition to this notion of secondary or natural beauty, Edwards postulates what he calls *primary* or spiritual beauty defined as “*benevolence to being in general*.”³⁴ This form of beauty is closely tied to the notion of moral agency, or more generally, to the idea of goodness. Its other-directed character is conjoined with the absence of malevolent intent, and as such presents an attestation of “true virtue,” or more fundamentally, the good. More than simply being a form of aesthetic sensibility, then, beauty is here rendered as “consent, propensity and union of the heart to being in general, which is immediately exercised in a general good will.”³⁵ Accordingly, beauty is not incidental to hospitality—here taken as the phenomenological instantiation of benevolent intent—but is in fact its desire-evoking “form.” It is not something added unto the good; it is, with some reservation, to be identified with the good or moral rightness. In providing this correlation between virtue and the beautiful, Jonathan Edwards here clearly follows the trajectory set by his contemporaries Shaftesbury and Hutcheson.³⁶

³³ C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy: The Shape of My Early Life* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1995), 167.

³⁴ Edwards, *The Nature of True Virtue*, 3.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 3.

³⁶ See Stephen H. Daniel, “Jonathan Edwards as Philosopher,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Jonathan Edwards*, ed. Stephen J. Stein (2007), 173.

By associating beauty and benevolence in this way, Edwards seeks to underscore its fundamentally relational nature. After all, as noted above, “beauty is a matter of proportion and harmony within the thing itself, and in its relations with other objects... Anything that is beautiful exhibits consent and agreement, so must be ‘distinguished in a plurality some way or other.’”³⁷ That is why primary beauty can never remain purely internal; it only may be “attributed to one being... by virtue of some relation between that being and some other being or beings... [Only] God, Who is being-in-general, both the sum and the fountain of all being, it is the only being Who has primary beauty internal to Himself.”³⁸ Consequently, Amy Plantinga Pauw is right in her insistence on the essential trinitarian structure of Jonathan Edwards’s aesthetics:

The aesthetic dimension of Edwards’s theology derived from the more basic category of loving consent, because ‘all the primary and original beauty or excellence that is among minds is love’. More specifically, they derived from his understanding of the Trinity: because there is true ‘plurality’ in God, there can be consent and thus true beauty within the Trinity itself. God’s ‘infinite beauty is his infinite *mutual* love of himself’.³⁹

Building on this “dispositional” (Lee) or “relational” (Pauw) ontology Edwards constructs a stupendous vision of a God-suffused universe. “For as God is infinitely the greatest Being,” writes Edwards, “so he is allowed to be infinitely the most beautiful and excellent: and all the beauty to be found throughout the whole creation, is but the reflection of the diffused beams of that Being who hath an infinite fullness of brightness and glory.”⁴⁰ That is to say, God “is the foundation and fountain of all being and all beauty; from whom all is perfectly derived, and on whom all is most absolutely and perfectly depended;... and whose being and beauty are, as it

³⁷ Amy Plantinga Pauw, *The Supreme Harmony of All: The Trinitarian Theology of Jonathan Edwards* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 81.

³⁸ Delattre, *Beauty and Sensibility*, 18.

³⁹ Pauw, *The Supreme Harmony of All*, 83. The reference in quote is to Jonathan Edwards, “The Mind,” in *Scientific and Philosophical Works*, ed. Wallace E. Anderson, vol. 6 of *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 363.

⁴⁰ Edwards, *The Nature of True Virtue*, 14-15.

were, the sum and comprehension of all existence and excellence.”⁴¹ As Lee helpfully observes, “for Edwards, God is essentially a perfect actuality as well as a disposition to repeat that actuality through further exercises...” Concomitantly, “the world... is meant to be the spatio-temporal repetition of the prior actuality of the divine being, an everlasting process of God’s self-enlargement of what he already is.”⁴²

What becomes evident here is that Edwards’s metaphysics rests on a dynamic reciprocation at the heart of divine and human gifting. He believes that “in the framework of desire that all creatures possess, self-love is a logically necessary and unavoidable desire that accompanies any attraction, that is, all love is a reflexive desire and need for something that we find lovely, worthy, valuable, pleasant or beautiful.”⁴³ Namely, far from being an instantiation of psychological egoism or mercenary interestedness, such appropriate self-love is implicit in this ontology of participation.

Edwards’s stress on beauty as God’s primary attribute has at least two quite practical intents. First, it immediately points to the proper modality of knowing God. Beauty can only be known by delighting in it; the form of aesthetic knowledge in itself implies delight, implies this notion of being drawn in. “In the apprehension of any good,” notes Delattre, “beauty is at once the measure of the existential character of the apprehension and the measure of the reality of the good apprehended.”⁴⁴ God, in other words, “can be fully known only if He is the direct object of enjoyment—that man’s knowledge of God is in part a function of his enjoyment of Him.”⁴⁵

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁴² Lee, *The Philosophical Theology of Jonathan Edwards*, 6.

⁴³ William J. Danaher, *The Trinitarian Ethics of Jonathan Edwards* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 2004), 24.

⁴⁴ Delattre, *Beauty and Sensibility*, 71.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 23.

Edwards himself writes of this kind of knowledge variously as having a “real sense” or “heart knowledge” or true apprehension” of the inner beauty of God. “Those who have this sense,” explains Danaher, “the beauty and the attractiveness of the object is irreducible, irreplaceable, and incommunicable; and to those who lack this sense, no image, argument, or description can serve as a substitute.”⁴⁶ This point is helpfully elaborated on in Edwards’s sermon “The Divine and Supernatural Light”:

There is a divine and superlative glory in these things; an excellency that is of a vastly higher kind, and more sublime nature, than in other things... He that is spiritually enlightened truly apprehends and sees it, or has a sense of it. He doesn’t merely rationally believe that God is glorious, but he has a sense of the gloriousness of God in his heart... There is a twofold understanding or knowledge of good that God has made the mind of man capable of. The first, that which is merely speculative or notional: as when a person only speculatively judges... And the other is that which consists in the sense of the heart: as when there is a sense of the beauty, amiableness, or sweetness of a thing; so that the heart is sensible of pleasure and delight in the presence of the idea of it. In the former is exercised merely the speculative faculty, or the understanding strictly so-called, or as spoken of in distinction from the will or disposition of the soul. In the latter the will, or inclination, or heart, are mainly concerned.⁴⁷

Balthasar’s own phenomenology of spiritual sight strongly resonates with Edwards’s sentiments on this issue. For him “there is something provocative and disturbing about the truly beautiful; it cannot simply be admired blandly but must be *seen* and taken in, dealt with.”⁴⁸ That is to say, “beauty by its very nature always elicits a response: one simply cannot experience a form of a phenomenon as beautiful without responding, without *assenting*.”⁴⁹ Attraction and conviction are fused, so to speak, in the moment of perception. Thus, the arresting appeal of beauty fosters a grammar of ocular *metanoia*; a conversion of sight, that is, where the beauty of the Christian gospel overwhelms us with its suasive loveliness, gracing us with “the light of the knowledge of

⁴⁶ Danaher, *The Trinitarian Ethics of Jonathan Edwards*, 125.

⁴⁷ Jonathan Edwards, “A Divine and Supernatural Light,” in *Sermons and Discourses 1730-1733*, vol. 17 of *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, ed. Mark Valeri (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 413-414.

⁴⁸ Robert Barron, *And Now I See: A Theology of Transformation* (New York: Crossway, 1998), 71.

⁴⁹ Oakes, *Pattern of Redemption*, 142.

the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ” (2. Cor. 4:6). Here apologetics is “not so much *arguing* as *showing*.”⁵⁰ In Balthasar’s words: “No explanation can help him who does not see the beauty [of God]; no ‘proof of the existence of God’ can help him who cannot see *what is* manifest to the world; no apologetic can be any use to him for whom the truth that radiates from the center of theology is not evident.”⁵¹ That is why he sides with Augustine’s contention in his *De Libero Arbitrio* (*On Free Choice*) that theology proper is apologetics; once we “see” God for who he is in his beauty and glory, Augustine argues, all objections to God fall away.

The second practical implication of defining beauty as God’s primary attribute is that it carries the notion of *analogia*, the knower’s correspondence to the object of knowing. Edwards repeatedly stresses how one of the primary ways in which we participate in the God’s beauty is through our holiness. As Danaher puts it, “Edwards’ argument... is not merely that morality is inseparable from piety, but that the life of virtue is one of *actual participation* in the spiritual life of the triune God.”⁵² This claim is not surprising if we recall that for Edwards “holiness is in a peculiar manner the beauty of the divine nature.”⁵³ In the words of Edwards:

Another thing wherein the emanation of divine fullness, that is and will be made in consequence of the creation of the world, is the communication of virtue and holiness to the creature. This is a communication of God’s holiness; so that hereby the creature partakes of God’s own moral excellency, which is properly the beauty of the divine nature. And as God delights in his own beauty, he must necessarily delight in the creature’s holiness; which is a conformity to, and participation of it, as truly as the brightness of a

⁵⁰ Edward T. Oakes, “The Apologetics of Beauty,” in *The Beauty of God: Theology and the Arts*, ed. Mark Husbands, Daniel J. Treier, and Roger Lundin (Downers Grove: IVP, 2006), 212.

⁵¹ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Studies in Theological Styles: Clerical Styles*, vol. 2 of *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*, ed. Joseph Fessio and John Riches, trans. Andrew Louth, Francis McDonagh, and Brian McNeil (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1983), 166.

⁵² Danaher, *The Trinitarian Ethics of Jonathan Edwards*, 41.

⁵³ Jonathan Edwards, *Religious Affections*, vol. 2. of *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, ed. Paul Ramsey (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), 257.

jewel, held in the sun's beams, is a participation, or derivation of the sun's brightness, though immensely less in degree.⁵⁴

In sum, Edwards presents us with a complex metaphysics in which the idea of beauty plays a key role in the apprehension of Being as good. His version of the “erotics of redemption” (Graham Ward) is a theological elaboration of the Neoplatonic *exitus-reditus* motif where everything is drawn to the “source of life,” defined here not as an undifferentiated *monad*, but a eternal consent of being to being within the immanent Trinity. The language of “overflowing,” “diffusing,” and “shining forth”⁵⁵ the Edwards regularly employs doxologically fuses the elements of beauty and goodness into a cosmic vision of kenotic hospitality. Thus when “when God is so often spoken of as the last as well as the first, and the end as well as the beginning,” writes Edwards, “what is meant (or at least implied) is, that as he is the first efficient cause and fountain from whence all things originate, so he is the last final cause for which they are made; the final term to which they all tend in their ultimate issue.”⁵⁶

3. God's Iconic Gesture

Few things could illustrate the argument in this paper as well as a reference to Anton Rublev's famed icon the “Old Testament Trinity” based on the story of Abraham's encounter with the three heavenly beings at Mamre.⁵⁷ Certainly the highest expression of Russian Orthodox iconography, Rublev's icon symbolically represents some of the essential elements of Christian

⁵⁴ Jonathan Edwards, “Dissertation Concerning the End for Which God Created the World,” in *Ethical Writings*, vol. 8 of *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, ed. Paul Ramsey (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 443.

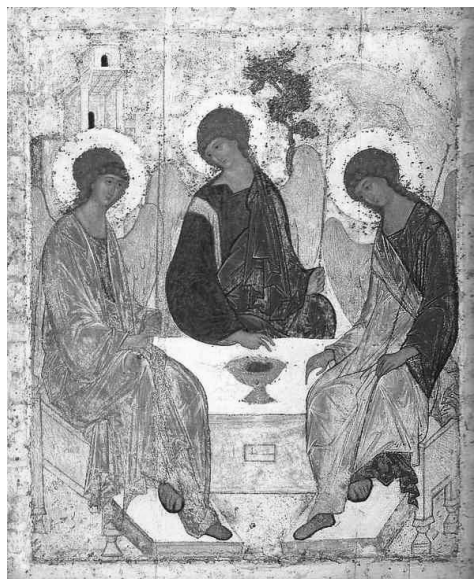
⁵⁵ For Neoplatonic elements in Edwards's thought see Lee, *The Philosophical Theology of Jonathan Edwards*, 172.

⁵⁶ Edwards, “End for Which God Created the World,” 467.

⁵⁷ For some of the insights on Rublev's icon I am indebted to Jim Forest, “Through Icons: Words and Image Together,” in *Beholding the Glory: Incarnation through the Arts*, ed. Jeremy Begbie (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), 91-93.

trinitarian theology and aesthetics. The *ousia* of the triune God is represented by the three *hypostases* of the Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, viewed from left to right. The three persons of the Trinity are perfectly contained within the circumference of a circle thereby symbolizing the essential oneness of God. Each of the figures holds a staff, a sign of authority, has hues of blue pointing to their eternity, and overlapping wings communicating intimacy. They differ in the color of their garments where the glory of the Father (gold), the royalty and suffering of the Son (purple), and the life-giving mission of the Spirit (green).

In the icon there is additionally a table (fellowship), a house (created order), a tree (the cross), and a mountain (theophanies/renewal) only because of the willingness of the superabundance of primordial love to go beyond itself and desire the presence of an “other.” We



are pointed to the idea of divine bounteousness were the syncopated rhythm of God’s creative act is rooted in an aesthetics of benevolent desire. This is beautifully articulated in *Canto XIX* of Dante’s *Paradiso* where Dante finds himself in the *Primum Mobile*, the ninth sphere of heaven. He is addressed by his guide, Beatrice (divine grace), who attests that God does not create to “increase [his] good,.. but that reflections of his reflection might declare ‘I am’.”⁵⁸

Thus contra Derrida, God’s “gift” of creation is not an exercise of hyper-narcissism, but rather a bestowal of superabundant goodness through an act of aesthetic excess. “God, who needs nothing,” famously writes C. S. Lewis, “loves into existence wholly superfluous creatures in order that He may love and perfect them.”⁵⁹ Edwards’s own position clearly presents a strong rejoinder

⁵⁸ Dante Aligheri, *The Divine Comedy: Paradiso*, trans. John Ciardi (New York: New American Library, 2003), XXIX, 10-18).

⁵⁹ C. S. Lewis, *The Four Loves* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1960), 178.

to such sentiments, in that for him “God’s beauty consists in the first instance... not in His seeking, receiving, or loving beauty but in His exhibiting, communicating, and bestowing beauty by his love of being.”⁶⁰

Returning to Rublev’s icon, we note that the figure in the middle points a v-shaped sign—symbolizing the divine-human nature of the incarnate Son—towards a cup entailing what appears to be a miniature lamb. It is in that gesture that the link between the immanent and economic Trinity is provided, forever preventing us from indulging in different forms of reality-inoculated sentimentality. There is something quite dull-witted in rhapsodizing about the “beauty of the earth” with the sort of apathetic abstraction that all too easily aestheticizes evil without as much as a hiccup. As Begbie perceptively puts it, in sentimentality “evil is acknowledged but in some manner deflated, rendered less angular or stark... There is drive toward simplicity, reducing the complexities and ambiguities that evil brings in its wake.” Very often in such line of thinking “there is a tendency toward premature harmony; in some forms of theodicy, for example, the pains and losses of the world are presented as necessary darkness in order that the light of goodness may shine.”⁶¹ In response to such emotional pathology, Begbie proposes a “countersentimentality of the three days of Easter”⁶² where beauty is being, so to speak, “performed for us.”⁶³ When viewed through such prism, “beauty need not stifle action or deafen us to the cries of the world’s wounded.” The same way that “justice concerns right relationships” so also “the beauty God desires for the human community is the proper dynamic ordering of lives in relation to each other. Justice is beautiful.”⁶⁴

⁶⁰ Delattre, *Beauty and Sensibility*, 169.

⁶¹ Begbie, “Beauty, Sentimentality, and the Arts,” 49.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 61.

⁶³ Begbie, “Created Beauty,” 22.

⁶⁴ Begbie, “Beauty, Sentimentality, and the Arts,” 65.

Such historicity of Christian aesthetics cannot be sufficiently overemphasized here. It is in it that the ontological symmetry of beauty and hospitality finds its true conceptual warrant. To appropriate Karl Barth's meditation on Grünewald's Isenheim altarpiece⁶⁵, we are not permitted to flinch away from the finger of John the Baptist pointing to the crucified Christ. The cruciform concreteness of ontological charity gives the divine emanation—that selfless outpouring of the triune God as the *bonum est diffusivum sui*—its “real historical shape and presence, a concrete story... in which violence has no place but rather stands under judgment as provisional, willful, needless: nonbeing.”⁶⁶ Rublev's icon thus reminds us that the Christian conception of beauty does not primarily rest on “extra-theological categories of a worldly philosophical aesthetics,” as Balthasar rightly observes, “but rather on the “data of revelation.”⁶⁷ After all, it is Christ who is “God's greatest form of art,”⁶⁸ “the transcendent archetype of all worldly and human beauty.”⁶⁹

Finally, one of the more important symbolism of Rublev icon is found in its inverted perspective. The depth of the icon is not found behind the three angelic figures, but in front of them, so to speak. It is as if we were invited to step into the space, to join the table of the trinitarian fellowship. “God draws near to us in such a way,” writes Thomas Torrance “as to draw us near to himself within the circle of his knowing of himself.”⁷⁰ It is an expression of ultimate

⁶⁵ See for example Karl Barth, *The Doctrine of the Word of God*, trans. Harold Knight G. T. Thomson, vol. 1.2 of *Church Dogmatics* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1956), 125.

⁶⁶ Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite*, 128.

⁶⁷ Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord*, 1:117.

⁶⁸ Hans Urs von Balthasar, “Revelation and the Beautiful,” in *Explorations in Theology: The Word Made Flesh* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1989), 117.

⁶⁹ Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord*, 1:70. For this reference to Balthasar I am indebted to Begbie, “Created Beauty,” 22.

⁷⁰ Thomas F. Torrance, *Trinitarian Perspectives: Toward Doctrinal Agreement* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1994), 1. For this reference to Torrance I am indebted to Darrell W. Johnson, *Experiencing the Trinity* (Vancouver: Regent College Publishing, 2002), 60.

interestedness, but one that is liberating, fully actualizing, and exponentially gracing. The idea of participation and *theosis* is clearly evoked here, one that is incidentally crucial to Edwards' theological aesthetics. As noted above, it is his contention that "God possess an effulgent nature that emanates throughout created existence and communicates to intelligent creatures the desire for knowledge and union with God as the ground of all being."⁷¹ After all, as Edwards's tirelessly emphasizes,

God's respect to the creature's good, and his respect to himself, is not a divided respect; but both are united in one, as the happiness of the creature aimed at is happiness in union with himself. The creature is no further happy with this happiness which God makes his ultimate end than he becomes one with God. The more happiness the greater union: when the happiness is perfect, the union is perfect.⁷²

It is there, in that "open space" of the icon, that the Sabbath becomes indeed the heart of Rublev's symbolic representation. Not in the sense that Rublev himself intended it so, but in the sense that the Sabbath epitomizes the hospitable gesture at the focal point of the icon. The Sabbath is the halo of that space, an intensified elaboration of benevolent Infinity that gifts us with its kenotic immanence. As Jürgen Moltmann puts it:

The Sabbath of God's creation already contains in itself the redemptive mystery of God's indwelling in his creation, although—and just because—he is wholly concentrated in himself and rests in himself. The works of creation display in God's act the Creator's continual transcendence over his creation. But the Sabbath of creations points to the Creator's immanence in his creation. In the Sabbath God joins his eternal presence to his temporal creation and, by virtue of his rest, is there, with that creation and in it... [The] sabbath, in its peace and its silence, manifest the eternal God at once exoterically and directly as he God who rests in his glory.⁷³

It is in God's *menuha* (rest) that a completely new thematism of liberating and empowering gifting is being enacted. As the apex of God's created work, the final act of God's

⁷¹ Danaher, *The Trinitarian Ethics of Jonathan Edwards*, 205.

⁷² Edwards, "End for Which God Created the World," 467.

⁷³ Jürgen Moltmann, *God in Creation: An Ecological Doctrine of Creation*, trans. Margaret Kohl (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985), 280.

creation (Heschel), the Sabbath memorializes our dependence on prevenient grace⁷⁴—totally irreconcilable with even a hint of meritorious legalism—pointing to a God who creates, acts, invites, blesses, guides, sustains, provides, sanctifies, and beautifies. As such, it radiates as an effulgent backdrop to a peaceable metadiscourse, or rather metapraxis, enacted in “Immanuel—God with us.” The Sabbath is God’s dramatic response, so to speak, to the serpent’s ideological deconstruction of primary beauty. That is to say, it is both the formal and the material cause of an apologetics of “showing”; a shape of performative theodicy fully to be realized only in “the coming beauty of the kingdom of God.”⁷⁵

I know of no better way of ending this article than to point to Thomas Traherne who in his *Centuries of Meditation* offers us spiritual vistas of God’s hospitable beauty that deeply engage the intellect and move the soul. At one point Traherne writes the following words:

To know God is life eternal. There must therefore some exceeding great thing be always attained in the knowledge of him. To know God is to know goodness. It is to see the beauty of infinite love... It is to see the king of heaven and earth take infinite delight in giving. Whatever knowledge else you have of God, it is but superstition... He is not an object of terror, but delight. To know him therefore, as he is, is to frame the most beautiful idea in all world. He delights in our happiness more than we, and is of all other the most lovely object.⁷⁶

Of this vision of infinite love the Sabbath is a mnemonic artifact, calibrating our gaze towards him who is the “fountain of life,” the one in whose “light we see light” (Psa. 36:9).

⁷⁴ On the idea of “God the Giver” see Miroslav Volf, *Free of Charge: Giving and Forgiving in a Culture Stripped of Grace* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), ch. 1.

⁷⁵ Jürgen Moltmann, “Messianic Lifestyle,” in *The Passion for Life: A Messianic Lifestyle* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978), 40.

⁷⁶ Thomas Traherne, *Waking up in Heaven: A Cotemporary Edition of Centuries of Meditation*, ed. David Buresh (Spencerville: Hesed, 2002), 10.