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St. Thomas and the Bard: On Beauty in the *Tempest* and the Limits of Aesthetic Experience

We tend to assume that certain matters admit of no difference of opinion, while others allow for a wide range of viable viewpoints. Understandings of the cosmos, for instance, seem generally to demand acceptance of one viewpoint to the rejection of all others. Those who hold with a flat earth theory cannot also accept that the earth is round. Aristotelian hylomorphism is incompatible with Cartesian dualism. On the other hand, in matters of taste we generally have no difficulty with differences of opinion. We expect that one person will like vanilla ice cream and that the other will like chocolate. And while we could perhaps trace the neuronal paths from the taste buds to the brain to determine on a chemical level why one person prefers vanilla to chocolate, we are also perfectly satisfied to accept the taster’s testimony that “I just like vanilla better.” “De gustibus non disputandum est,” Horace reminds us. There is no disputing when it comes to taste. Experience tells us, of course, that we do engage in such disputes. When my brother tells me he does not care for pickled okra, I find myself gazing at him in astonishment, demanding that he try another piece, extolling the crunch and the spicy flavor of the okra. In the end, though, I can only

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concede the point. He does not like the taste, and no appeal to reason can moderate his dislike.

The same principle tends to hold in matters of aesthetic judgment. We concede as a matter of course that “beauty is in the eye of the beholder.” And we know that we often have very different tastes in beauty. One listener enjoys Mahler. Another finds his symphonies brutal and turns instead to Mozart. A father enjoys Picasso. The son prefers Braque. One vacationer prefers mountainside vistas. The other likes the roar of the ocean and the laughter of the gulls. As in the case of matters of physical taste, we argue about aesthetic judgments. Engaged in such arguments, we quickly notice something different about aesthetic judgments, though. Namely, in matters of beauty, there seem to be clear cases of superiority and inferiority which exercise a kind of necessity on the mind of the observer. When it comes to a difference of opinion over ice cream, we tend not to think that someone ought to like one over the other. We might argue that someone should prefer a salad to ice cream on the grounds of the health benefits the salad supplies, though we would probably have to admit that as far as taste itself is concerned, we cannot argue that someone should like the taste of salad more than ice cream. We might well argue, however, that Mozart is objectively preferable to, say, the Wiggles. That is, we tend to argue that a listener should prefer the experience of hearing Mozart to that of hearing the Wiggles, though many little children—and even, perhaps, some adults—would prefer the Wiggles. There are degrees of aesthetic excellence, and there are likewise means for the development of aesthetic taste so that the observer recognizes those degrees, and we often act as though those degrees demand to be recognized.

The question of aesthetic taste is set before us in particularly striking fashion in William Shakespeare’s play *The Tempest*. Toward the start of the play, Miranda, who has been stranded with her father, Prospero, for fifteen years on his enchanted island, meets Ferdinand, who

has just been shipwrecked in a storm conjured up by Prospero's arcane arts. Amazed, she tells her father that this man, Ferdinand, is the most beautiful creature she has ever beheld. He responds that this is only a matter of relativity and ignorance. Miranda, after all, has only ever seen Prospero and Caliban, the kind of half-man, half-monster enslaved to Prospero. Ferdinand only appears beautiful in comparison with Caliban, but Ferdinand is a Caliban, Prospero insists, when compared to the rest of mankind, and the rest of men are angels when compared with Ferdinand. The scenario raises an array of questions as formidable as is it amusing. As readers, we do not know what Ferdinand looks like, of course, and we are given to believe that Prospero is making sport of the two young would-be lovers. Yet it is entirely possible that Ferdinand is only handsome relative to Prospero. We wait with some level of anxiety to see how Miranda will respond to the sight of other men later. Will she find them more beautiful than Ferdinand and, like Romeo turning from Rosalind to Juliet, turn also from the Ferdinand she has so recently declared the ultimate object of her affection?

St. Thomas Aquinas, in typical fashion, provides us a fairly straightforward way out of our apparent conundrum, our uncertainty as to Miranda's taste, by his definition of beauty: "Pulchrum autem respicit vim cognoscitivam, pulchra enim dicuntur quae visa placent."¹ The beautiful, that is, is that which, having been seen, pleases in respect of its ability to touch the cognitive power of the observer. The common sense definition provides us with a common sense means of analyzing Miranda's exaltation of Ferdinand's beauty. She looks at him and finds the sight pleasing to such a degree that he strikes her as something almost divine. Therefore, he is beautiful.

¹ St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 5, a. 4, ad 1. Available online—see the section *References* for details. Hereafter: *S.Th.*

Yet this understanding of beauty demands further exploration. To that end, we propose to conduct a study of Thomistic aesthetics via the *Tempest*. We shall first lay out some of the aesthetic discussions presented in Shakespeare's play. With those in mind, we shall turn to St. Thomas, first to examine his thinking on genera and their arrangement by contrary opposition of virtual quantum intensities, and second to parse out in greater detail his definition of the beautiful. With our Shakespearean-Thomistic matrix in place, we hope then to address three principle lines of inquiry:

(1) What does beauty require on the part of the beholder?

(2) What characterizes the beautiful thing beheld? And how do we discern degrees of beauty?

(3) How do aesthetic judgments differ from sensual apperceptions? And how can one undergo training in the matter of aesthetic judgment?

Let us dive, then, into the *Tempest*, where we will find the materials of our study laid out for us.

Beauty in the *Tempest*

As we set out, it is worthwhile to note the sheer philosophical richness of Shakespeare's works in general. To look into his plays in the course of philosophical examination is not simply to turn a philosophical eye upon a literary work but rather to engage philosopher with philosopher. Formally, of course, the plays, like Plato's works, deliver most of their content to us through dialogue. More importantly, the dialogue Shakespeare supplies often serves as a vehicle whereby the big questions of the sort Plato or Aristotle raise, the questions about beauty or the best life or virtue, can be brought to the table and addressed from a variety of angles, as we shall see in the *Tempest*.

Much of the wonder of the *Tempest*, one of the last of Shakespeare's plays, stems from the kind of orphanage experienced by both Miranda and Caliban. Miranda, shipwrecked with her father, can hardly remember anything of that life her family knew in Milan, save for the vague and indistinct faces of her several maid servants. Caliban, on the other hand, is a strange creature apparently begotten by the devil upon the witch Sycorax, who held the island in her thrall prior to Prospero's arrival. Finding Caliban alone on the island, Prospero took him on as a servant and, according to Caliban, educated him. We see the mark of that education in Caliban's speech, which even in its cruder moments conveys a kind of poetic beauty which stands in sharp contrast to his unbecoming appearance and even to the crude speech of some of his eventual companions. It is telling that both Miranda and Caliban are interested in making aesthetic judgments and that both are aware of the limitations of their secluded existence in that regard.

Let us look first to Miranda's early encounter with Ferdinand. When she first lays eyes upon him, she says, "I might call him / A thing divine, for nothing natural / I ever saw so noble."² She is so struck by his appearance that she is tempted to call him a god, though in her praise there is at least the implicit admission that his beauty transcends only the bounds of her experience. Shortly thereafter, when Prospero has snared Ferdinand and Miranda has begun to advocate for the young prince, she does so primarily on account of his appearance, and Prospero takes her to task for her ignorance.

Thou think'st there is no more such shapes as he,
Having seen but him and Caliban: foolish wench!
To the most of men this is a Caliban
And they to him are angels.³

² William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, I, 2, 583–585. Available online—see the section *References* for details.

³ *Ibid.*, I, 2, 667–670.

As noted above, Prospero here sets us in a strange position as readers. We cannot see Ferdinand, and so we have no way of seeing him save through Prospero and Miranda. It is possible that he is not so lovely as Miranda thinks.⁴ Or it could be the case that Prospero and Miranda differ in their perceptions of the beautiful. In any case, Prospero sets up for us an important consideration: namely, the assumption, acted upon by all, that beauty admits of degrees within members of a class.

Miranda, aware of her own limitations as a judge of human beauty, remains steadfast in her admiration. She tells her father, responding to his reproof, that “My affections / Are then most humble; I have no ambition / To see a goodlier man.”⁵ Whether or not her father is correct that Ferdinand is only beautiful by comparison to other men, Miranda is pleased with the sight of Ferdinand. She recognizes in him a kind of radiant goodness.

We find a similar assessment of beauty in Caliban’s description of Miranda. Attempting to use Miranda’s beauty as an inducement for Stephano to kill Prospero and become lord of the island, Caliban says

And that most deeply to consider is
The beauty of his daughter; he himself
Calls her a nonpareil: I never saw a woman,
But only Sycorax my dam and she;
But she as far surpasseth Sycorax
As great’st does least.⁶

Like Miranda, Caliban has very limited experience of human beauty. Where women are concerned, he has only ever seen Sycorax and Miranda. And the two occupy opposite ends of the spectrum of beauty, with Miranda the most beautiful of creatures and Sycorax the least. We

⁴ It is worth nothing, though, that our sense as readers is that he is, in fact, a very handsome man, and that her education by Prospero, along with innate disposition toward beauty, has allowed her to appraise his appearance rightly.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 671–673.

⁶ *Ibid.*, II, 3, 1493–1498.

might parse Caliban's comparison in two ways. On the one hand, it is in fact the case that Sycorax is the least beautiful woman, and Miranda the most beautiful woman, that Caliban has ever seen. By default they occupy opposite ends of the spectrum of beauty, given Caliban's ignorance. On the other hand, we sense that Caliban is producing an aesthetic judgment that runs beyond the limitations of his own experience. It would seem that Miranda is not only more beautiful than Sycorax but eminently so. There is a kind of surpassing radiance about her beauty. Sensing the limitations of his own judgment, Caliban even calls Prospero to witness in the matter, noting that he himself says Miranda is without equal when it comes to beauty.

In the cases of both Caliban and Miranda, then, we see an uncertainty about beauty. On the one hand, judgments about beauty seem to depend upon the limitations of the beholder's experience. On the other, there appears to be a kind of real relation among different beautiful things, a relation which exists upon a spectrum discernible to everyone, or at least to anyone reasonably educated. To understand this relation between the observer and the beautiful object, we turn to St. Thomas.

Genus, Contrary Opposition, and Virtual Quantity

Our inquiry will benefit greatly from an understanding of how things within groups relate to each other. And here St. Thomas and Aristotle provide us with guidance in their notions of genera and how genera are organized according to contrariety of their members in terms of their virtual quantum excellence.

A genus may be understood as a substance, as an organization of parts toward an end, with the parts arranged according to differences in their individual intensity of being in relation to that end. In the broadest sense all of being might be said to constitute a genus, with the hierarchy of beings running from God down through the angels and then man to

animals, plants, and elements. This hierarchy is organized according to the degree to which each being approximates the excellence of God as the source of all being. And these degrees of excellence correspond to what St. Thomas calls virtual quantity.⁷

Virtual quantity, simply as a phrase, rings odd to the modern ear. To say something is virtual is often to say it is false, or that it is only like something else. Virtual reality is a false reality, though very like reality in the quality of its illusion. It is so like reality that we could almost think it real. To the modern ear, virtual quantity might seem to indicate some strange or illusory likeness to quantity.

St. Thomas rather intends virtual quantity as a measure of how much virtue, of how much excellence, a thing has, particularly with respect to other members of its genus. The measure is useful, especially since it indicates that excellence is to be measured, in a spiritual sense, not by size or physical strength but rather by a thing's intensity of being. An angel possesses greater virtual quantum intensity than a man does, while a man has much greater virtual quantity than a dog. This will prove of the utmost importance in understanding how, in the *Tempest*, Miranda and Sycorax or Ferdinand and Caliban relate to each other.

We see the same principle at work in more limited genera as well. In an army, for instance, the hierarchy of ranks is determined not by size or physical strength but by proximity to the general. Thus Homer's Agamemnon maintains a kind of ascendancy over Achilles, who is the stronger man, in virtue of his kingship, a role which conveys upon Agamemnon a greater intensity of being.⁸

⁷ Cf. Fran O'Rourke, *Pseudo-Dionysius and the Metaphysics of Aquinas* (South Bend: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992), 157.

⁸ Cf. Homer, *The Iliad*, trans. Richmond Lattimore (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), Book 1.

The same obtains yet again in even simpler genera. Where human beauty is concerned, we observe that a spectrum obtains according to just such a hierarchy. Here we recall Caliban's claim that Miranda is as far in beauty from Sycorax as greatest is from least, and it is along the spectrum from greatest to least that all genera are organized. It is just this kind of organization, in fact, which begins to account for this strange element of beauty Shakespeare points out, namely, that while beauty within a genus is in some way relative, it also has certain limits. There is a kind of internal organization, according to virtual quantum intensity, among humans in respect to their beauty, and we are able to recognize degrees along that spectrum. It nonetheless remains a spectrum with upper and lower limits.

It is important to note here that while virtual quantity is distinct from physical or numerical quantity, both measures provide a kind of self-contained referential system existing within certain limits. Thus while height does not correspond to spiritual excellence, it still exists along a spectrum within certain limits.⁹ Most grown men, for instance, are somewhere between five and six-and-a-half feet tall.

Caliban, it appears, does not mean simply to say that Miranda is as far in beauty from Sycorax as greatest is from least because the two are literally the most and least beautiful women he has seen. Rather, Miranda displays just such intensity of beauty as places her near the upper limit of beauty, while Sycorax occupies a space near the lower limit.

⁹ Plato's discussion of participation in forms relies often on just this kind of contrary opposition. Where tall and short are concerned, we see that a man may be tall with respect to one friend and short with respect to another. On Plato's theory of forms this apparent contradiction is difficult to explain. Aristotle's understanding of contrary opposition, on the other hand, affords a means whereby things within a genus may maintain their relative positions while also existing within certain fairly well defined limits.

With this understanding in mind, let us turn to our consideration of the relationship between the perceiver of beauty and the beauty perceived.

Beauty in St. Thomas

St. Thomas has observed for us that the beautiful is that which, having been seen, pleases on a cognitive level. And, as often interpreted, this can be taken to echo the adage that beauty is in the eye of the beholder. Both St. Thomas and the author of the commonplace situate beauty with respect to sight and the pleasure the sight grants to the seer. There is, however, a critical difference between the two definitions. With St. Thomas, it is not that beauty is limited to the eye. Rather, in St. Thomas's definition, beauty resides in a relationship between sense experience and the cognitive pleasure it brings. That is, beauty is not simply in the eye of the beholder, but in the relationship between the eye and the mind of the beholder. How this relationship functions will provide key insights for understanding the relation of perceiver to beauty and for noting the difference between aesthetic experience and mere sense experience.

For St. Thomas, as for Aristotle, sight occupies a privileged place among the senses.¹⁰ Sight is the highest of the senses in that it can provide us with the most useful sense data whereby we can act within the world, and it also gives the grounds for most aesthetic experience in that it is the sight most closely connected with the intellect. It is in virtue of this connection that we are able to use such an expression as "I see what you mean." What we mean when we say that, of course, is that we understand, but sight occupies such an elevated place that it may act as a kind of stand-in for understanding.

¹⁰ Cf. St. Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on Aristotle's Metaphysics*, trans. John P. Rowan (Chicago, 1961), 1, 1, n. 5.

In virtue of this privilege granted to sight, we may also place sight in a synecdochal relationship with the rest of the senses. That is, by sight, St. Thomas seems here to refer to other senses as well. For we surely admit that music is beautiful, and the experience of that beauty resides not in the sight of the notes written upon the score but in the actual sound of the notes performed.¹¹ So aesthetic experience, on the Thomistic view, may be said to reside in the cognitive pleasure given by something seen or heard.¹² Or, as St. Thomas puts it himself, “those senses chiefly consider the beautiful which are maximally cognitive: to wit, sight and hearing, ministering to reason; for we call visible (things) beautiful, and (we call) sounds beautiful.”¹³

The aesthetic moment does not reside in the sense experience itself but in the pleasure occasioned by the sense experience. And in this we can begin to grasp some of the complexity and flexibility of St. Thomas’s definition of beauty. We find ourselves taking aesthetic pleasure, after all, in many things which are not, on a sense level, pleasing. Picasso’s *Guernica* springs immediately to mind. The image he gives us is not, in itself, pleasant in the way of a sunset or even of Monet’s *Water Lilies*. Likewise the content of the paintings, the destruction of *Guernica* during the Spanish Civil War, is not pleasant. In the distorted sense data of the painting we find a kind of match for the distortion of humanity, civilization, and nature the painting depicts. There thus obtains a kind of harmony between the sense data and the intellectual content of the work. It is in just such a harmony that the aesthetic experience lies.

¹¹ An expert musician, of course, may intuit the sound of the music in the sight of the notes on the score, but most music lovers require the actual sound of the notes for that kind of experience which might properly be deemed aesthetic.

¹² Later we shall address the question of the other senses. For the most part we do not seem to encounter the beautiful through smell, taste, or touch, though a case can be made that there are exceptions.

¹³ *S.Th.*, I-II, q. 27, a. 1, ad 3.

A still more arresting example may be found in the Grunewald *Crucifixion*. Again, the image Grunewald paints is not pleasant.¹⁴ The crucifixion is here not that sort of Medieval depiction of the triumphant Christ standing in his divinity upon the cross. Rather it is a record of all the agony humanity might endure. It is an agony which presents itself in every detail of the painting, from the contortion of Christ's hands to the curvature of John the Baptist's finger. And all of this is suitable in that it harmonizes with an element of our cognitive understanding of the crucifixion, which Christ undergoes for the forgiveness of sin. The horrors contained in the physical details of the painting harmonize with the spiritual horror to which the painting points, and in this harmony we can take pleasure. And in taking pleasure we make an aesthetic judgment upon the work.¹⁵

Consider a final example from music. Debussy's *La Mer*, as it flows through the many moods of the sea, often jars the ear. Many passages in the piece do not please us on a sensory level. By evoking the terror of the sea, though, a terror we recognize as somehow fundamental to the human experience in the face of the vast uncaring power of nature, Debussy introduces a consonance between the sense experience and the intellectual apprehension we undergo in listening to the piece.

¹⁴ On one occasion the author had the opportunity to view il Santo Volto di Mannopello, the sudarium or facial burial cloth imprinted with the image of the face of the crucified Christ. The face was beaten and bloody, and even below the marks of the abuses it did not seem a face beautiful according to our common understanding of the term. Even in this there is perhaps a deepening of the intensity of Christ's beauty. We might expect the incarnate God to be surpassingly handsome, as perhaps were Saul and David. In the highest aesthetic judgment, though, Christ may be considered more beautiful if he foregoes that kingly appearance and instead becomes like one of the lowly of the earth.

¹⁵ It would be interesting to conduct an aesthetic analysis of the film *The Passion* under these terms. Watching the film one might have occasion to wonder whether the intensity of the physical torment portrayed is such as to draw attention from Christ's deeper spiritual torment and whether this proceeds from Mel Gibson's sanguine tendencies.

The Thomistic definition of beauty, then, offers tremendous flexibility. It is not a definition which limits aesthetic experience to the visual field, nor does it reduce it to a kind of elevated sense pleasure, the kind of emotional elevation we might feel on seeing a sunset or viewing a Thomas Kinkade painting. Rather, the beautiful is that which establishes a harmonious relationship between sense experience and cognitive understanding.

With St. Thomas's tools in hand, let us turn our attention back to the *Tempest* and the relation between the aesthetic observer and the beautiful thing perceived.

Beauty in the Beholder

From our discussion of St. Thomas's aesthetic principles, we can begin to enumerate certain characteristics of the one who would experience beauty. In the first place, the experience of the beautiful, or at least the apprehension of its beauty, would seem to require sense and intellectual faculties. A dog may witness a sunset without experiencing the aesthetic pleasure a human might know. Likewise, though dogs display a certain connoisseurship with respect to television, their viewing of a film like Bergman's *The Seventh Seal* probably does not constitute an aesthetic experience.¹⁶ Authentic aesthetic experience requires a being who can both sense the beautiful object and recognize the goodness it contains.

One wonders about the degree to which children are capable of aesthetic experience, or at least of aesthetic judgment. Certainly they

¹⁶ There is a lovely passage in Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* in which the old man reflects on the terror dusk holds for fish as well as for men. Night is a hard time for fish, the time when their predators emerge to feed. Probably the fish have no higher apprehension of such terror, yet as human observers, ourselves often frightened by the terrors of the night, we feel a kind of sympathy for the fish in or sympathy for the old man out alone in his boat, facing a nature which could easily overwhelm him.

take pleasure in nursery rhymes and songs and in images, and they early establish preferences about such things. Probably in such instances there is at least a nascent aesthetic judgment, though it may lack the nuance needed to go beyond the simple instances of beauty—those things which merely by their sense characteristics give pleasure—to that refined aesthetic judgment which may take pleasure in things which are not pleasing on the level of sense.¹⁷

In any case, the one who would make aesthetic judgments requires at a minimum such sense and intellectual faculties as will allow a harmony to emerge between sense experience and intellectual understanding. Further, the development of aesthetic judgment would seem to depend primarily on education. We recall, for instance, Caliban's uncertainty about his own aesthetic taste. He knows that he has only seen two women and that his own taste might thus be skewed. And so he appeals to Prospero, who has had experience of the broader world and calls Miranda a "nonpareil" in respect to beauty.

We might argue further that Caliban's categorization of Miranda and Sycorax as most and least beautiful of women, respectively, arises not simply from his sense perception of the two but more from his understanding of the place each plays on the island. Part of the horror of Sycorax may have been found in her role as a witch condemned to life on the island for her unspeakable crimes, as one who would breed with the devil, as one who kept the island enslaved to herself. On the other hand, Miranda, who is lovely, on the testimony of Prospero and Ferdinand, represents for Caliban a means to people the island and become king thereover. Caliban himself has once attempted to rape Miranda and bring forth a whole tribe of Calibans, and it is the prospect of such fa-

¹⁷ One wonders, likewise, about the ability of the angels to recognize beauty. The fact that beauty is primarily a cognitive power, on St. Thomas's understanding, makes it seem likely that the angels can recognize beauty in a more immediate way than humans can.

thering—and kingship—which Caliban uses as part of his inducement to Stephano to kill Prospero.

Aesthetic judgment, then, calls for the proper facultative equipment—the proper senses and intellect—as well as for a certain degree of education. Contained in this is the expectation that proper aesthetic judgment will most likely require a broad range of experience. It is on the strength of just such experience that Caliban appeals to Prospero as witness in respect to Miranda’s beauty. There is in both Caliban and Miranda a kind of childish appreciation of beauty, and this suits their positions in the play as Prospero’s sheltered daughter and his miserable servant.

Beauty in the Beautiful

If aesthetic judgment requires certain faculties, education, and experience on the part of the perceiver, it would also seem to demand certain characteristics in the beautiful thing perceived.

In the first place, a beautiful thing would seem to need to fall within a certain physical and generic range. Aristotle tells us in the poetics that a beautiful thing must occupy just such a range.¹⁸ A creature too small to be seen cannot be called beautiful, nor can a creature so vast that we cannot see it in its entirety be properly called so either. The beautiful thing must fall within the spectrum of experience afforded us by our senses.

There are ways around this matter of physical quantitative limits, of course, ways afforded by advances of the human intellect. With a microscope we become capable of observing the beauty of very small things, and advances in microscopy have in fact yielded ever more astonishing instances of such beauty. Likewise the earth as a whole would

¹⁸ Aristotle, *Poetics*, VII. Available online—see the section *References* for details.

probably have exceeded Aristotle's physical limits for the object of aesthetic judgment. Now, however, spacecraft allow for observations of the whole earth, observations which are quite beautiful. In both the microcosmic and the macrocosmic cases, the experience of beauty depends not only on the sense images technology provides but also on the intellection made possible in such images. To see a photograph of a cell is to wonder on the infinitesimal machinery which makes our own lives possible. To see a picture of the earth is to wonder at the place of humanity in the vastness of space. We see on each end of the physical spectrum a capacity to harmonize sense experience with thought.

It is here worth emphasizing that among members of a genus, physical quantity plays some role in our conceptions of beauty. People who are either very small or very large tend not to be considered the most beautiful. It is rather people of more or less average size who are beautiful, and their beauty resides in a certain kind of radiance, an overwhelming goodness of appearance which commands our attention.

While physical limitations play a role in our capacity for experiencing beauty, the beauty of a being is thus more definitively governed by its virtual quantity than its visual quantity. A beautiful woman may frequently make everyone in a room stop what they are doing and look at her, not because she is extremely large, but simply in virtue of her having entered the room and introduced her own particular radiance.¹⁹

We see the same in the arts. Novels do not achieve their beauty by being especially long or especially short, but by obtaining such length as needed to tell their story and by doing so with language which may pierce the reader's mind with its excellence. *The Great Gatsby*, though relatively short, compels our admiration, compels our pleasure, by the skill of its language and the emotional heft of its plot. Likewise

¹⁹ Hemingway, in Hotchner's memoir, recounts once having been on board the same trans-Atlantic vessel as Marlene Dietrich. When she appeared at the top of the stairs to enter the dining cabin, all conversation ceased and every eye turned to her.

paintings do not take their beauty from their size. At times, of course, a subject calls for treatment on a large surface, as for example in Picasso's *Guernica*, Monet's *Water Lilies*, and Michelangelo's works in the Sistine Chapel. In each case size contributes to the total effect of harmonization between sense and intellect. On the other hand, Da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* is quite small. But anyone who has been to the Louvre has seen the way in which crowds form about the canvas all throughout the day. The painting exudes a kind of overwhelming radiance which more or less compels the admiration of the viewer.

Beauty, then, depends more on a thing's virtual intensity than its physical intensity, though it is sometimes the case that size may play a role in virtual intensity. With this in mind, we turn back to the *Tempest* and the kind of aesthetic spectrums which exist between Caliban and Ferdinand on the one hand and Sycorax and Miranda on the other. In both cases we see that virtual quantity determines beauty, and that because of this, beauty can only be said truly to exist within certain virtual quantum limits. Caliban is a difficult creature to envision. Though apparently humanoid in many respects, he is also called a monster, a fish, and a tortoise.²⁰ He is thus at the bottom of the spectrum of human beauty because he is in some sense less than fully human, and true beauty must exist within virtual limits. Ferdinand, on the other hand, seems to strain at the other end of the spectrum. Miranda finds him so beautiful that, as we have seen, she wishes to call him a thing divine. He strains the upper limit of human beauty so that it is almost as if he is something more than human. In the case of the women, we find a parallel case. Sycorax the witch represents the bottom limit of humanity and beauty, whereas Miranda gives us the upper limit, the unparalleled beauty at the very apex of human possibility. And just as Ferdinand is compared to the gods, Miranda is deemed something more like an angel

²⁰ Shakespeare, *The Tempest*.

than a woman. Alonso, Ferdinand's father, asks on seeing Miranda for the first time, "Is she the goddess that hath sever'd us, / And brought us thus together?"²¹ So beautiful is Miranda, so intense is the goodness of her appearance, that she causes those around her to wonder whether she is in fact mortal.²²

Where the beautiful being is concerned, then, we can discern that to be beautiful, it must fall within certain physical and virtual quantitative limits. The two, of course, are intimately connected. To be human is necessarily to have a body which grows and develops within relatively fixed physical quantitative limits. We see, too, that the degrees of beauty within a certain class, whether among human beings or paintings or poems, depend not so much upon physical size as upon the degree of virtual excellence. The more beautiful something is, the more its radiance tends to command the admiration of observers.

So much, then, for the perceiver of beauty and for the beauty perceived. We turn next to the question of taste and the matter of aesthetic judgment, and to do so, we begin by considering how aesthetic judgments differ from sensual perceptions.

Sense Perception Versus Aesthetic Judgment

We have noted already Horace's dictum that there can be no dispute concerning taste. Where sense perception is concerned, this seems to be the case. Some people enjoy the taste of Brussels sprouts. Others find them abhorrent. While we might feign indignation over someone's sense preferences, we generally accept them without too much difficulty. After all, people simply have different taste buds which more or less

²¹ *Ibid.*, V, 1, 2240–2241.

²² Fans of P. G. Wodehouse's Jeeves books will recall some of Bertie Wooster's more romantic friends as referring to esteemed ladies as "tender goddesses."

dictate what they find pleasant or otherwise. Sense experience has about it an incontrovertible air.

On the other hand, we do tend to think that aesthetic judgments lay some kind of claim to universality. Consider, for instance, the case of the *Mona Lisa*. The crowds which form around it day in and day out would suggest that every person finds the painting beautiful, or that every person at least ought to find the painting beautiful and any failure to do so stems from inadequate education or the like.

The difference between the two cases—the sensitive on the one hand, and the aesthetic on the other—lies in that while sense experience is simply that, that perception conveyed by the physical senses, aesthetic judgment lies in the harmony between sense perception and intellectual understanding. A kind of triangulation thus occurs among the observer of the aesthetic object, the sensory content of the aesthetic object, and the intellectual content the sensory content conveys, embodies, or elaborates.

When I taste a Brussels sprout, for instance, there is no attempt on the part of the sprout to bring my mind into relationship with any sort of reality beyond the sprout itself. I taste the sprout, and that, as it were, is that. Either I enjoy the taste or I do not.

On the other hand, when I look at the *Mona Lisa*, it is not simply that I see the colors on the canvas. Those colors, deployed as they are, set my intellect into motion. I ask myself, for instance, why the woman is smiling. Where is she located? Who was she? Through the canvas I am brought into historical considerations as well as into mystery. What, I might ask, does this portrait convey about femininity? What it conveys seems above all to be the mystery of femininity, and it is in the mystery of the smile that the painting achieves that near perfect beauty which has made it one of the most universally admired works of art.

Because aesthetic judgment depends on the interaction between sense experience and intellectual understanding, it admits of education

in a way that mere sense experience does not. We have seen that Caliban, of course, has been educated in beauty, in a way, by Prospero. He speaks in beautiful language, and he is able to recognize the vast expanse that lies between Sycorax and Miranda as far as beauty is concerned. Likewise Miranda has the ability to perceive that Ferdinand has about him a godly air which reflects not only his outward appearance but also the reality of his role as prince.

In general terms, we find that aesthetic judgment admits of relatively easy teaching. A child who has gone from reading Dr. Seuss to reading Shakespeare will probably at first find the good Dr.'s rhymes more palatable. So intense is Shakespeare's language alone that a first experience of it can be as disorienting as the full light of day is to an owl. With the aid of good teachers, though, one can come to see that the depth of Shakespeare's language more fully reflects the varieties of human experience than Seuss's rhymes and simple (often nonsensical) diction.²³ Shakespeare's dramatic narratives, too, express the reality of lived human experience much more nearly than Seuss's scenarios.²⁴ Aesthetic education is thus made possible by the interplay of sense experience and intellect. Sense experience tends not to admit of education or dispute. But the intellect may be brought around to an understanding which allows the student to take pleasure where mere sense did not.

It may be argued, of course, that sensual taste can be educated. Our taste in food does change, and particularly in the matters of beer and wine, we observe that a kind of gustatory education can and frequently does take place. This occurs partly through habituation and

²³ It would be very interesting to conduct an aesthetic study of Lewis Carroll's "Jabberwocky." Can such a poem be beautiful if its language is so heavily fabricated?

²⁴ All this is not to condemn Dr. Seuss. His books are not intended to convey all the depth of human experience in the way that Shakespeare's plays are. His books rather serve as a kind of entrance into the aesthetic education which is very much needed for appreciation of Shakespeare's work.

change of the taste buds. But it also provides grounds for a broadening of the field of aesthetic judgments which is worth here exploring.

We have mentioned already that St. Thomas's definition of beauty allows aesthetic judgment in relation to both visible and audible stimuli. We say that sunsets as well as paintings are beautiful. We say that the song of the mockingbird is beautiful, and we say that Mozart's symphonies are beautiful. But what of the other senses? We do not commonly say that things we smell, touch, or taste are beautiful. Given St. Thomas's definition, though, it seems that aesthetic judgments may be made on the objects of these senses, at least in the modern setting, though St. Thomas himself did not admit such judgments were possible.

Certainly we often take pleasure in scents, whether those of flowers or of fresh-mown grass or of rain. And such natural pleasures could be said to verge on the aesthetic, if they are accompanied by reflection on one's place in the natural world or the like. Then, too, scents often set us in relation to other humans in a particular way. A certain smell may remind us of a deceased relative, and the pleasure thereby produced is probably on some level aesthetic. Consider the importance of the odor of verbena in Faulkner's *The Unvanquished*. The verbena gives Bayard Sartoris to know that his cousin Drusilla has embraced her femininity in the process of calling him to fulfill the dictates of his own manhood. Finally, we experience the beauty of scents in religious ceremony, where chrism and incense not only provide a pleasant smell but also point to spiritual realities, and the pleasure taken in the physical scent and the spiritual reality indicates the presence of real beauty.

Touch may likewise admit of aesthetic experience. A probably disingenuous example can be found in the instance of Braille, which may provide a blind person with a sensory experience which harmonizes with intellectual reflection in such a way as to provide pleasure.

Then, too, the sexual touch shared within marriage provides an aesthetic moment, an elevation of sense pleasure to the spiritual realm.²⁵

Finally, where taste is concerned, we recognize a difference between the plain dictates of sense pleasure and the aesthetic experience of connoisseurship. Particularly in the case of fine wines or liquors, the cultivation of taste through study of origins, flavor palettes, and so on, leads to a kind of harmonization of sense experience and intellectual understanding, and in such instances we have moved, perhaps, beyond mere sense experience to aesthetics.

Through all this we can discern two principles of aesthetic education. The first is that, generally speaking, it requires broad experience. One becomes a good judge of paintings by seeing many paintings, and one comes to have taste in poetry by reading across a broad range of poets. The second is that aesthetic judgment often depends on an initial suspension of sense impression. On first glance one may find a painting or poem distasteful, and this can ruin the opportunity to find beauty therein unless judgment is suspended until the intellect can assess the content to which the sense data point. In some sense it is in the possibility of such suspension that aesthetic judgment itself becomes possible, at least in those things which are most beautiful of all. For viewed only in its sensible characteristics, there is nothing so distasteful as the cross of Christ. Considered in relation to the depth of human sin, though, and the possibility of human salvation, there is nothing else so beautiful.

St. Thomas, Shakespeare, and the Beauty that Leads into Mystery

Both St. Thomas and Shakespeare left off writing toward the ends of their lives. St. Thomas, after his vision of Christ, could not complete his *Summa*, finding that all he had written was as straw.

²⁵ Cf. Aquinas, *Commentary on Aristotle's Metaphysics*, 1, 1, n. 8.

Likewise Shakespeare, retiring to Stratford, eventually gave up writing. The *Tempest* was one of his final plays, and the person of Prospero is often said to represent Shakespeare himself. And certainly it is moving to consider Shakespeare speaking Prospero's last lines to us:

Gentle breath of yours my sails
 Must fill, or else my project fails,
 Which was to please. Now I want
 Spirits to enforce, art to enchant,
 And my ending is despair,
 Unless I be relieved by prayer,
 Which pierces so that it assaults
 Mercy itself and frees all faults.
 As you from crimes would pardon'd be,
 Let your indulgence set me free.²⁶

Shakespeare's end, he tells us, was to please us. He wished to give us beauty. And perhaps it was in his own experience of beauty that he was led into the silence that marked the end of his life. It is to silence that all beauty leads us, to the silent contemplation of the beatific vision which is our own most pleasant end.



**St. Thomas and the Bard:
 On Beauty in the *Tempest* and the Limits of Aesthetic Experience**

SUMMARY

The paper addresses the matter of differences of aesthetic judgment by examining Shakespeare's *Tempest* through the Thomistic understanding of substance and of beauty. It seeks principally to explore three elements of aesthetic inquiry: (1) what characterizes the subject who perceives beauty? (2) what characterizes the object of aesthetic experience? and (3) how do aesthetic judgments differ from sensual perceptions? The *Tempest* serves as particularly fruitful territory for such exploration in virtue of the persons of Miranda and Caliban, who by the limitations of their experience delineate the generic

²⁶ Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, V, 1, 2414–2423.

borders, the degrees of virtual quantum excellence, which characterize the beautiful object. Their education at the hand of Prospero likewise elucidates somewhat the process of aesthetic training.

KEYWORDS

Thomas Aquinas, Aristotle, William Shakespeare, genus, aesthetics, virtual quantity, substance, beauty, perception, taste.

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