

**THE ARCHITECTURE OF BENEFICENCE: AN
ACCOUNT OF NONTOTALITARIAN
BEAUTY**

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Introduction

While much work has been done in recent decades to restore the centrality of beauty to its rightful place in constructive theology, such an aesthetic turn, as I will note in this article, is far from problem-free. Specifically, suspicions about the ideological character of aesthetics have been voiced by a number of postmodern thinkers, for whom the identification of beauty and justice—already present in pre-Socratic cosmogonies—is irrevocably dissolved. The broader assumption underwriting my approach is that such dislocations of beauty from goodness, when transposed to the religious sphere, are but contemporary modulations of the “Great Controversy” theme central to Seventh-day Adventist theology and piety.¹ After delineating the basic contours of this problematic, I will turn to Jonathan Edwards’s Trinitarian aesthetics and its rich relational ontology in an attempt to provide a constructive engagement with these issues. While retaining reservations about certain aspects of his thought, I will nevertheless suggest that his understanding of the nature of true beauty adds an important voice to current debates. In the final section of the article, I will turn to a theological interpretation of Andrei Rublev’s *Trinity* icon as a form of art to help me further elaborate on Edwards’s proposal, eventually pointing to the biblical Sabbath as a possible focal point for a distinctive Adventist approach to theological aesthetics. The account of *theodramatic* beauty that will be articulated in that context, furnishes us with a credible apologetic platform from which a response to (postmodern) qualms about the ethical viability of beauty can be cogently crafted.

Genealogies of 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,”² so writes Hans Urs von Balthasar in the opening pages of his

¹The “Great Controversy” concept as present in Adventist discourse is a shorthand expression for the cosmological conflict between good and evil as evidenced in salvation history.

²Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*, vol. 1: *Seeing the Form*, trans. Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis, ed. Joseph Fessio and John Riches (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1982), 18.

magnum opus, *The Glory of the Lord*. With a virtually unmatched erudition and depth of insight, Balthasar weaves an intricate philosophical, theological, and historical account, tracing the marginalization of beauty in Christian theology. He observes how, among other things, “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.”³ Balthasar laments such deaesthetization of theology and its adverse effects on the Christian practices of worship, spiritual formation, and evangelism. After all, he argues, “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?”⁴

Fortunately, much has changed in regard to the treatment of beauty as a key theological category since Balthasar first voiced his clarion call. The steady outflow of scholarly literature dealing with various questions of theological aesthetics clearly attests to an increased attention given to this important conundrum.⁵ Yet the evocation of beauty for Christian theology remains fraught with significant challenges. The rejection of beauty in favor of the postmodern sublime, the commodification of beauty in our hypersignified culture, the mass media diffusion of the aesthetic ideal into an “absolute and unstoppable polytheism of Beauty,”⁶ the feminist critique of beauty as a vestige of patriarchal exploitation, the Protestant suspicions of beauty as a “meretricious Hellenistic import,”⁷ the sociohistorical location of taste, the unavoidable dialectic of subjective/objective entailed in any aesthetic perception, the frequent degeneration of beauty into self-indulgent sentimentality⁸—these and other sardonic dismissals present serious challenges of how to speak of beauty in any meaningful way. Beauty is simply too nebulous, as it seems, too tame, too easily complicit with oppression and evil, too escapist in the face of rampant injustice to be able to function as a

³Ibid., 1:51.

⁴Ibid., 1:19.

⁵Note, e.g., Edward Farley, *Faith and Beauty: A Theological Aesthetic* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2001); Richard Viladesau, *Theological Aesthetics: God in Imagination, Beauty, and Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999); John Navone, *Toward a Theology of Beauty* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1996); Jeremy Begbie, *Resounding Truth: Christian Witness in the World of Music* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007).

⁶Umberto Eco, *History of Beauty*, trans. Alastair McEwen (New York: Rizzoli, 2004), 428.

⁷Patrick Sherry, “The Beauty of God the Holy Spirit,” *Theology Today* 64 (2007): 12.

⁸Jeremy Begbie offers a helpful delineation of sentimentality in “Beauty, Sentimentality, and the Arts,” in *The Beauty of God: Theology and the Arts*, ed. Mark Husbands, Daniel J. Treier, and Roger Lundin (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2006).

central theological category. It would thus appear that in contrast to the other two transcendentals—the truth and the good—beauty is not in the position to claim invariable and unconditional beneficence.⁹ As Roman Guardini rightly puts it, “Beauty ought to be reserved only for that which is valid, good, and true, and in a certain sense it is so—but the other aspect of beauty is also undeniable and disturbing, namely that it is not in fact so, and that it can shine forth in evil, in disorder, in indifference, and even in stupidity.”¹⁰

The tenuous way in which beauty and justice are related is well illustrated, in Peter Cohen’s documentary, *The Architecture of Doom*, in which the calamitous connection of beauty and evil is hauntingly explored. More than just chronicling the different ways in which art both reflected and informed the *Weltanschauung* of the Nazi elite, the film is a well-documented exposé of National Socialism as a “pervasive manifestation of a perverse aesthetic doctrine: to make the world beautiful by doing violence to it.”¹¹ As Cohen poignantly shows, the concoction of Hitler’s genocidal madness led him to decry “doom as art’s highest expression.” What a triumph of the grotesque! No special measure of moral astuteness is required to tag such a chilling amorality of beauty as positively deviant and ghastly.

Given this and other, perhaps less drastic, examples of the misuse of beauty, it does not come as a surprise that some postmodern thinkers are highly suspicious of rhetorical sublimations of beauty, seeing them as invariably doomed to deconstructive implosions. In response, various “detoxification therapies” are proposed intent on uncovering the interplay of vested interests embedded in ostensibly innocuous appeals to beauty.¹² Pierre Bourdieu’s sociological analysis, for example, leads him to assert that the aesthetic sphere is never one of innocent enjoyment and simple human pleasure. Aesthetics is always deeply political in that a set of values is established “according to which the dominant class automatically comes out on top. Their political and natural supremacy is recast as natural supremacy.”¹³ Given the exploitative

⁹For an illuminating account of how beauty came to be considered as one of the transcendentals of being during the Middle Ages, see Umberto Eco, *Art and Beauty in the Middle Ages* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), chap. 2.

¹⁰Romano Guardini, *Dostoevsky: Il mondo religioso*, 4th ed. (Brescia: Morcelliana, 1995), 289, cited in Bruno Forte, *The Portal of Beauty: Towards a Theology of Aesthetics*, trans. David Glenday and Paul McPartlan (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 45. Again, this is not a novel observation. Already in Leonardo da Vinci we find the statement that “beauty is not always good.” See Wladyslaw Tatarkiewicz, *History of Aesthetics*, trans. Adam and Ann Czerniawski (New York: Continuum, 2005), 3:131.

¹¹Benjamin Forgey, “The Architecture of Doom,” *Washington Post*, 22 February 1992.

¹²See Farley, 7.

¹³John Armstrong, *The Secret Power of Beauty: Why Happiness Is in the Eye of the Beholder* (New York: Penguin, 2004), 98. For an extended discussion of this issue,

character of the aesthetic, even seemingly laudatory endeavors such as art education, have a menacing undertone to them. The very cultivation of art means that we are “constructing a cruel instrument for exclusion. In loving beauty we are not—as we may have innocently supposed—doing something essentially good.”¹⁴ Beauty, in other words, is not what it appears to be.

Admittedly, I find much sympathy with such cautionary remarks, particularly when broader issues of economic exploitation are brought to the table. The project of genealogical uncovering is certainly not inimical to the task of Christian theology; in fact, it is principally invited and welcomed by it. After all, Christianity is a religion informed by a deep realism about the fallenness of the world and its proclivities to violence and untruth, and, as such, carries a strong presumption against viewing reality, including beauty, through rose-tinted glasses. My reservations begin to emerge, however, when such deconstructive strategies become hostage to forms of essentialist discourse—“such and such *always* amounts to such and such”—and, in the process, succumb to an unmitigated *apotheosis* of scope that posits strife and malevolence as foundational cosmic principles.

Gilles Deleuze serves as a case in point. In his nocturnal revisionism, the apocalyptic vision of the New Jerusalem becomes an ultimate embodiment of panoptical oppression. Its streets of gold and precious stones amount to nothing less than an “architecture of doom”—a ploy intended to hide the fact of an “all-encompassing control of society by the state.”¹⁵ Thus what Christians would see as embodying the ultimate outpouring of divine benevolence is stunningly transmuted into or “uncovered” as the final takeover of a totalitarian regime; an *apokalypsis* indeed. Deleuze writes:

The Apocalypse is not a concentration camp (Antichrist); it is the great military, police, and civil security of the new State (the Heavenly Jerusalem). . . . The New Jerusalem, with its wall and its great street of glass, is an architectural terror. . . . Involuntarily, the Apocalypse at least persuades us that what is most terrifying is not the Antichrist, but this new city descended from heaven, the holy city “prepared like a bride adorned for her husband.” All relatively healthy readers of the Apocalypse will feel they are already in the lake of sulfur.¹⁶

see Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984). See also Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990).

¹⁴Armstrong, 98.

¹⁵Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 287.

¹⁶Gilles Deleuze, “Nietzsche and Saint Paul, Lawrence and John of Patmos,” in *Essays Critical and Clinical* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997). Cf. Volf, 287.

It does not take much to see the specter of Friedrich Nietzsche looming here in a menacing fashion. After all, for him Christianity's self-presentation as an announcement of peace masks a sinister calculus at work, camouflaging as 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 order to make itself stronger, more terrifying, more invincible."¹⁷ 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."¹⁸ In contemporary philosophy such deconstructive suspicions are expressed by Jacques Derrida, who claims that any act of hospitality, regardless of its aesthetic appeal, inevitably hides subterranean proclivities toward violence and exclusion. Hospitality, and more fundamentally giving, is always a part, however oblique, of an "economy of exchange" that is never fully extricated from narcissistic impulses. Clearly, the wider philosophical assumption at work here is that the moment you have a concrete expectation, a determinate future, or the moment you speak about a definite "presence"—in other words, the moment you have any sort of determinacy of content, being, proclamation, or expectation—the shadow of totality emerges. Thus John Caputo's 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

One cannot but see these sentiments pointing in the direction of Genesis 3—I am speaking hyperbolically here, of course. There the serpent's strategy, part of it anyway, is one of dislodging beauty from the idea of a primordial good or hospitality²¹ only to be cast as an ideological cover for

¹⁷David Bentley Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 102.

¹⁸John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1991), 281-282. For an extended treatment of Nietzsche's version of "piety" and "redemption," see Bruce Ellis Benson, *Pious Nietzsche: Decadence and Dionysian Faith* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008); and Giles Fraser, *Redeeming Nietzsche: On the Piety of Unbelief* (London: Routledge, 2002).

¹⁹John 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, cited in James K. A. Smith, *Introducing Radical Orthodoxy: Mapping a Post-Secular Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 116.

²⁰Smith, 116. This is Smith's restatement of Caputo's position.

²¹As I will develop it more clearly in the subsequent section of this article, I am employing the word "hospitality" to name concrete actualizations of benevolent intent.

oppressive intent.²² God's gifting, so it is argued, is simply a modality of seductive beauty; an exercise in hypernarcissism, hiding stratified proclivities toward totalitarian domination. Thus in Gen 3:1 we find, however implicitly, a primordial transvaluation of beauty. Yes, the garden is beautiful; you may enjoy its harmonious fruitfulness; yes, you are free to delight in its pleasure-affording richness, but beware! All of it simply masks a sinister antihumanistic ontotheology, a veritable "architecture of doom." Do not be tricked by the ultimate Purveyor of "Turkish Delight"—to evoke C. S. Lewis's famed *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* for a moment. The hospitality offered by the White Witch is but a subterfuge of an "omnivorous empire"²³ built on "original strife." Adam and Eve, of course, assent to the serpent's twisted "genealogy"—an act of a proto-Nietzschean deconstruction one could say—and the rest is, pun intended, (human) history.

Undoubtedly, these issues concerning the relationship of aesthetic persuasion and agential intent are of enormous significance not only for theology, but for Christian praxis as well. As one can easily attest, scarcely any element of the church's apologetic, kerygmatic, diaconical, missional, and formative task is left untouched by some modulation of this problematic. After all, the deep underlying issue here—the correlation of God and human flourishing—is one that profoundly informs all these considerations and endeavors.²⁴ With that in mind, a number of questions need to be addressed: What is the relationship of the good and the beautiful, if any? What do we mean by beauty and, specifically, the "beauty of the Lord"? Is an apologetics of beauty possible at all? After all, "who is to say," to borrow from Hart, "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?"²⁵

Quite clearly, it is impossible to address the full range of those concerns here. My goal is a more modest one in that I simply want to suggest one possible, yet hopefully plausible approach. Specifically, I want to engage some key insights of Edwards's Trinitarian aesthetics as they pertain to the topic at hand. As is widely known, the relationship of the good and the beautiful as it relates to the doctrine of God and to wider metaphysical considerations is

²²See, e.g., Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo*, trans. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1985), 75ff.

²³Hart, 2.

²⁴Unfortunately, there is not sufficient space here to engage more fully the seminal study by Robert Merrihew Adams, *Finite and Infinite Goods: A Framework for Ethics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999). Some of the central claims of this article deeply resonate with his account of moral and nonmoral excellencies in relation to God as the ultimate Good.

²⁵Hart, 4.

something that occupied Edwards for the better part of his life. My broader goal in doing so here is to propose a conceptual appropriation of a traditional Adventist philosophy of history—in the sense of a harmonious and faithful development of its thematic *cantus firmus*—in order to unearth some plausible ways in which its theological and philosophical markers might be employed to address postmodern critiques of Christian metadiscourse and its incarnational particularity.

Jonathan Edwards's Vision of Hospitable Beauty

In his helpful overview of theological aesthetics, *Faith and Beauty*, Edward Farley notes how in 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, 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, beauty for Edwards is not simply incidental to how we are to think about the nature and character of God, or the structure of reality in general. Rather, it should be seen as the key ontological category through which other coordinates of being, such as unity, truth, and goodness are mapped out.

As is widely known, Edwards's intricate theological aesthetics rests on a differentiation between two kinds of beauty. First, he posits a *secondary* or natural beauty that greatly resembles the “great theory” in aesthetics,²⁹ famously encapsulated in Thomas Aquinas's definition of beauty as integrity or completeness (*integritas*), right proportion or harmony (*proportio*), and radiance or resplendence (*claritas*).³⁰ Edwards defines secondary beauty as

²⁶Farley, 43.

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

²⁸See *ibid.*, 2.

²⁹See Wladyslaw Tatarkiewicz, “The Great Theory of Beauty and Its Decline,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 31 (1972), cited in Begbie, 20.

³⁰See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (Allen: Christian Classics, 1981), Ia, Q. 39, A. 8.

“mutual consent and agreement of different things, in form, manner, quantity, and visible end or design; called by the various names of regularity, order, uniformity, symmetry, proportion, harmony, etc.”³¹ Notably, and I take this to be an essential point, such beauty is manifested not only in material objects, but also in the right-ordering of society and the practice of justice.³²

That such beauty would possess a sacramental character is self-evident to Edwards. His stand on this issue echoes a long intellectual tradition resembling, among others, different modalities of Pythagorean, Platonic, Neoplatonic, and, of course, Christian thought. Long indeed is the list of philosophers and theologians who have reflected on beauty—specifically transcendental beauty—as a sacramental manifestation of God’s presence, variously articulating the core idea that “beauty happens when the Whole offers itself in the fragment,”³³ the idea that in encountering beauty, we encounter, however dimly, the Source of beauty himself.³⁴ The fifteenth-century Neoplatonist Marsilio Ficino, for example, notes how “by its utility, harmony, and decorativeness, the world testifies to the skill of the divine artist and is proof that God is indeed its Maker.”³⁵ Or perhaps one might recall the well-known lines from George Herbert’s poem, “The Elixir”:

A man that looks on glass,
On it may stay his eye;
Or if he pleaseth, through it pass,
And then the heaven espy.³⁶

Similarly, Edwards emphasizes the revelatory capacity of natural beauty precisely because of its “resemblance of spiritual beauties.”³⁷ In fact, “that beauteous light with which the world is filled in a clear day is a lively shadow

³¹Jonathan Edwards, “The Nature of True Virtue,” in *Ethical Writings*, ed. Paul Ramsey, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, 8 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 561-562.

³²See *ibid.*, 568-570. This point will be elaborated at greater length below.

³³Forte, vii.

³⁴I am aware that this claim immediately thrusts one into the middle of the longstanding debates surrounding, e.g., *analogia entis* versus *analogia fidei*, *theologia gloriae* versus *theologia crucis*. Addressing this problematic, however, goes beyond the scope of this article.

³⁵Tatarkiewicz, *History of Aesthetics*, 102.

³⁶George Herbert, “The Elixir,” in *The Complete English Poems* (New York: Penguin, 2005), 174.

³⁷Jonathan Edwards, “The Beauty of the World,” in *Scientific and Philosophical Works*, ed. Wallace E. Anderson, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, 6 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 305.

of [Christ's] spotless holiness and happiness, and delight in communicating himself."³⁸

This, in brief, is how Edwards approaches natural beauty. As is well known, however, he does not stop there. There is, after all, a need to speak of beauty beyond the realm of mere material objects—a point, incidentally, already made by thinkers such as Plotinus³⁹ and Boethius.⁴⁰ Such *primary* or spiritual beauty, as Edwards calls it, bespeaks of the sort of “consent” or “harmony” appropriate to moral agents, which he goes on to define as “benevolence to Being in general”⁴¹—that is, a disposition of well-regard not only to the immediate circle of natural bonds or self interests, but to whatever there is. More than simply being a form of aesthetic sensibility, therefore, beauty is rendered into “propensity and union of the heart to being in general, which is immediately exercised in a general good will.”⁴² Beauty, accordingly, is not incidental to hospitality—by which I refer here to phenomenological instantiations of benevolent intent—but is, in fact, its desire-evoking “form” or embodiment. It is not something added to the good; it is, with some reservation, to be identified with moral rightness or ethical self-transcendence.⁴³ In fact, Edwards’s entire aesthetic and metaphysical edifice is built on the supposition that “the primary and original beauty or excellence that is among minds [or moral agents] is love,”⁴⁴ in other words, benevolent relatedness. In Amy Plantinga Pauw’s words:

Beauty was irreducibly relational for Edwards. His aesthetics “does not, therefore, begin with the assumption of the ontological independence of

³⁸Jonathan Edwards, The “Miscellanies,” a-500, ed. Thomas A. Shafer, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, 13 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), Misc. 108, 279. For a discussion of how imagination and natural beauty reflect “higher realities,” see C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy: The Shape of My Early Life* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1995), 167.

³⁹An interesting comparison, that cannot be developed here, is the one between Edwards and Plotinus on the nature of soul beauty. While they operate on different metaphysical assumptions, there are noteworthy similarities in their respective accounts. For a helpful summary of Plotinus, see Armstrong, chap. 8. See also Farley, 20.

⁴⁰If “men had the use of Lynceus’ eyes,” writes Boethius, they would see that Alcibiades, “so very handsome on the surface,” was, in fact, “totally ugly once his inner parts came into view” (Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1999], III.8).

⁴¹Edwards, “The Nature of True Virtue,” 540.

⁴²Ibid.

⁴³On the idea of “ethical self-transcendence,” see Farley, chap. 5.

⁴⁴Jonathan Edwards, “The Mind,” in *Scientific and Philosophical Works*, ed. Wallace E. Anderson, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, 6 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 363; cf. Amy Plantinga Pauw, *The Supreme Harmony of All: The Trinitarian Theology of Jonathan Edwards* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 82.

the [beautiful] thing; it is not a thing first and only afterwards designated as beautiful.” Rather, 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, and so must be [in Edwards’s words] “distinguished in a plurality some way or other.” Beauty does require complexity.⁴⁵

That explains why, for Edwards, primary beauty by definition can never remain purely internal, purely individualistic. The only exception to this basic rule is the being of “God, Who is being-in-general, both the sum and the fountain of all being” and, therefore, “has primary beauty internal to Himself.”⁴⁶ The Trinitarian subtext of Edwards’s thought comes clearly to the fore here. Since “there is true ‘plurality’ in God,” as Pauw puts it, “there can be consent and thus true beauty within the Trinity itself. God’s ‘infinite beauty is his infinite *mutual* love of himself.”⁴⁷

What becomes evident in this context 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.”⁴⁸ Far from being an instantiation of psychological egoism or mercenary interestedness, therefore, such appropriate self-love is implicit in this ontology of participation. It is this point that is repeatedly stressed in Edwards’s *Dissertation*,⁴⁹ where God’s self-glorification is postulated as the ultimate end of creation. To the charge that such claims present a thoroughly narcissistic and megalomaniacal God, Edwards simply responds that such a critique quite wrongly feeds off a barren image of *potentia Dei absoluta*, betraying a loss of theological nerve at a crucial point. For him, to restate the point already made, divine self-regard is a form of ethical self-transcendence that is synonymous with benevolent consent. God is most passionate about his glory, but what characterizes that glory is a donative disposition toward his creation. That is to say, God’s self-regard

⁴⁵Pauw, 81. The reference in this paragraph is to Stephen H. Daniel, *The Philosophy of Jonathan Edwards: A Study in Diverse Semiotics* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1994), 182.

⁴⁶Delattre, 18.

⁴⁷Pauw, 83. The reference in this paragraph is to Edwards, “The Mind,” 363.

⁴⁸William J. Danaher, *The Trinitarian Ethics of Jonathan Edwards* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004), 24.

⁴⁹Jonathan Edwards, “Dissertation Concerning the End for Which God Created the World,” in *Ethical Writings*, ed. Paul Ramsey, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, 8 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989).

and kenotic other-regard perfectly coincide in Edwards's metaphysical and theological scheme.⁵⁰

A point of practical intent is worth stressing here. One of the reasons why Edwards is so intent on seeking after beauty is because it points to the proper modality of knowing God. He variously writes of such knowledge as having a "real sense," "heart knowledge," or true "apprehension" of the inner beauty of God as contrasted to a mere noetic grasp. Consider, for example, the following statement from his sermon "A Divine and Supernatural Light":

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.⁵¹

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."⁵² Attraction and assent 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 the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ" (2 Cor. 4:6). Here apologetics is "not so much *arguing as showing*."⁵³ In Balthasar's words (summarizing Pseudo-Dionysius's position): "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."⁵⁴ In pursuing that line of thought, Balthasar sides with Augustine's contention in his *De Libero Arbitrio*

⁵⁰For a helpful development of this theme, see Farley, 89.

⁵¹Jonathan Edwards, "A Divine and Supernatural Light," in *Sermons and Discourses 1730-1733*, ed. Mark Valeri, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, 14 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 413-414.

⁵²Robert Barron, *And Now I See: A Theology of Transformation* (New York: Crossway, 1998), 71.

⁵³Edward 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: InterVarsity, 2006), 212.

⁵⁴Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*, vol. 2, *Studies in Theological Styles—Clerical Styles*, trans. Andrew Louth, Francis McDonagh, and Brian McNeil, ed. Joseph Fessio and John Riches (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1983), 166.

(*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. To this point, Edwards would gladly accede.

To summarize, Edwards presents 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,”⁵⁵ rooted in the idea of an eternal consent of being to being within the immanent Trinity, doxologically fuses the elements of beauty and goodness into a cosmic vision of kenotic hospitality. As he so eloquently states in his *Dissertation*:

God in seeking his glory, therein seeks the good of his creatures: because the emanation of his glory (which he seeks and delights in, as he delights in himself and his own eternal glory) implies the communicated excellency and happiness of his creature. And that in communicating his fullness for them, he does it for himself: because their good, which he seeks, is so much in union and communion with himself. God is their good. Their excellency and happiness is nothing but the emanation and expression of God’s glory: God, in seeking their glory and happiness, seeks himself: and in seeking himself, i.e. himself diffused and expressed (which he delights in, as he delights in his own beauty and fullness), he seeks their glory and happiness.⁵⁶

To this vision of God, I readily assent. On a more critical note, however, I feel that a stronger Christological basis would have strengthened Edwards’s argument considerably. I do not intend to suggest that Christology is entirely absent from his aesthetics—one needs only to recall his landmark sermon, “The Excellencies of Christ”—but I do wish there was a stronger narrative component to his edifice. After all, the best response that Christianity can give to the subversive logic of those such as Nietzsche and Deleuze is one that comes in the form of an alternative story, a cruciform aesthetics, a metanarrative of self-giving love dramatically enacted in “God with us,” attesting to the unselfing hospitality of the triune God. I take this to be a point of great importance, and it is one that I would like to develop further through an examination of Andrei Rublev’s painting, *Trinity* (ca. 1410 A.D.). While it is impossible to here do justice to Orthodox iconographic history with its various renderings and interpretations of Genesis 18 (the story of Abraham’s visitation by the three heavenly beings at Mamre), I will nevertheless utilize some of the icon’s profound symbolism to engage some of the central planks of Edwards’s vision.

God’s Iconic Gesture

Pavel Florensky, in his *Iconostasis*, offers the following “irrefutable” argument for the existence of God: “There exists the icon of the Trinity by St Andrei

⁵⁵See Graham Ward, *Cities of God* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 182-202.

⁵⁶Edwards, “Dissertation,” 459.

Rublev; therefore, God exists.”⁵⁷ Setting aside the validity of such a “proof” for a moment, intriguing as it is, the theological and spiritual appeal of this fifteenth-century icon is undeniable. Undoubtedly the highest expression of Russian Orthodox iconography, the *Trinity* symbolically represents some of the essential elements of Christian trinitarian theology and aesthetics.⁵⁸ In it, 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 figure 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 noninterchangeable garments (*chiton* and *clamsys*) that point to the glory of the Father (pale purple interspersed with hues of gold), the royalty and suffering of the Son (purple with a golden *clavus*), and the life-giving mission of the Spirit (green). Additionally, there is a table (representing fellowship)—or rather an altar, giving the icon a liturgical cast—a house (representing the fact that “In my Father’s house there are many mansions”), a tree (symbolizing the cross), and a cracked rock (implying the outflowing of water by the Spirit of life). In other words, the table, or the space of fellowship, exists for us as a possibility only because of the willingness of the primordial love to go beyond itself and desire the presence of an “other.”

As we contemplate the theological meaning of the icon, we are pointed to the idea of divine bounteousness, where the ecstatic (*ek-stasis*) rhythm of God’s *bullitio* (immanent “boiling”) and *ebullitio* (economic “boiling over”) is rooted in an aesthetics of benevolent desire.⁵⁹ This notion 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.’”⁶⁰ Thus *contra* Derrida, God’s “gift” of creation is not an exercise of hypernarcissism, but rather a bestowal of superabundant goodness through an act of aesthetic

⁵⁷Pavel Florensky, *Iconostasis*, trans. Donald Sheehan and Olga Andrejev (Crestwood: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1996), 68, cited in Gabriel Bunge, *The Rublev Trinity: The Icon by the Monk-Painter Andrei Rublev*, trans. Andrew Louth (Crestwood: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2007), 107.

⁵⁸For further insights into Rublev’s icons, cf. 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.

⁵⁹For a discussion of *bullitio* and *ebullitio* in the theology of Meister Eckhart, see Bernard McGinn, *The Mystical Thought of Meister Eckhart: The Man from Whom God Hid Nothing* (New York: Crossroad, 2001), 72ff.

⁶⁰Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy: Paradiso*, trans. John Ciardi (New York: New American Library, 2003), XXIX, 10-18.

excess. That, of course, is one of Edwards's main contentions. As we have noted in our discussion above, Edwards points to God's self-glorification as the ultimate "end" (*terminus*) of creation. The potential charge of divine self-absorption is fundamentally subverted by identifying God's glory and beauty precisely with that of self-giving love. After all, for Edwards, "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."⁶¹

This relationship of beauty and benevolent intent or "virtue" seems to be additionally enforced in the Rublev icon through the seemingly laconic gesture by the middle angelic figure (the Son) pointing toward the cup entailing a lamb's head.⁶² It is in that gesture, it would seem, that a link between the immanent and economic Trinity is provided, reminding us that the symmetry of beauty and goodness is established foremost through the historical enactment of God's *theodrama*; a redemptive "play" in and through which beauty is "performed for us" with the climax being the three days of Easter.⁶³ Accordingly, in seeking to provide a Christian account of primary beauty we are not permitted to flinch from the index finger of John the Baptist—to appropriate Karl Barth's meditation on Matthias Grünewald's Isenheim Altarpiece for a moment here⁶⁴—pointing to the crucified Christ. Paradoxically it is there, in the very formlessness of beauty, that the "consent of Being to being" is most clearly exhibited, giving the divine emanation—that selfless outpouring of the triune God as the *bonum est diffusivum sui* (the self-diffusive Good)—its full revelatory expression. In that sense, Rublev's icon reminds us that Christ is indeed "God's greatest form of art,"⁶⁵ "the transcendent archetype of all worldly and human beauty."⁶⁶ In truth,

the church has no arguments for its faith more convincing than the form of Christ. . . . Christian thought must remain immovably fixed alongside Christ, in his irreducible particularity. . . . What Christian thought offers the world is not a set of "rational" arguments that (suppressing certain of their premises) force assent from others by leaving them, like the interlocutors of Socrates, at a loss for words; rather, it stands before the world principally with the story it tells concerning God and creation, the form of Christ, the

⁶¹Delattre, 169.

⁶²For a Pentecost-centered interpretation of the icon, see Bunge, 79.

⁶³Begbie, 22. Not, of course, as the terminus of redemption, but as the true foundation of glorification.

⁶⁴See, e.g., Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics: The Doctrine of the Word of God*, trans. Harold Knight G. T. Thomson (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1956), 1.2:125.

⁶⁵Hans Urs von Balthasar, "Revelation and the Beautiful," in *Explorations in Theology: The Word Made Flesh* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1989), 117.

⁶⁶Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord*, 1:70, cited in Begbie, 22.

loveliness of the practice of Christian charity—and the rhetorical richness of its idiom. Making its appeal first to the eye and heart, as the only way it may “command” assent, the church cannot separate truth from rhetoric, or from beauty.⁶⁷

It becomes clearer at this point why the connection of primary and secondary beauty is so central to Edwards. As discussed before, both represent a certain kind of consent, an appealing harmoniousness of constitutive parts. And again, the sort of harmoniousness that is proper to moral agents over against inanimate objects is one that consists in benevolent intent. Thus for Edwards, justice and beauty, ethics and aesthetics have a common ontological grounding. 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.”⁶⁸ That is to say, beauty and justice are deeply intertwined.⁶⁹ Elaine Scarry concurs when she claims that “beautiful things give rise to the notion of distribution, to a lifesaving reciprocity, to fairness not just in the sense of loveliness of aspect but in the sense of a symmetry of everyone’s relation to one another.”⁷⁰ Any treatment or evocation of natural beauty at the expense of a wider transcendental nexus of values and excellencies presents a flattening of vision that will always be susceptible to manipulation and misuse. While, to the certain displeasure of most postmetaphysical philosophy, this *is* a recourse to metadiscourse, it is one, I believe, that needs to be defended at all cost.⁷¹ Edwards, I think, would agree.

Finally, one of the more important symbolisms of the Rublev icon is found in its inverted perspective in that its depth 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.”⁷² It is an expression of ultimate interestedness, but one that is liberating, fully actualizing, and

⁶⁷Hart, 3.

⁶⁸Begbie, 65.

⁶⁹Jonathan Edwards, “The Excellency Christ,” in *Sermons and Discourses, 1734-1738*, ed. M. X. Lesser, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959), 561.

⁷⁰Elaine Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 95.

⁷¹I am in agreement with Milbank, 1ff., at this point. Also pertinent is Iris Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (London: Penguin, 1993).

⁷²Thomas F. Torrance, *Trinitarian Perspectives: Toward Doctrinal Agreement* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1994), 1, cited in Darrell W. Johnson, *Experiencing the Trinity* (Vancouver: Regent College Publishing, 2002), 60.

exponentially gracing. The idea of participation and *theosis* is clearly evoked here, one that is pivotal to Edwards's theological aesthetics. As noted above, it is his contention that "God possesses 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."⁷³ 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.⁷⁴

It is there, in that "open space" of the icon, that the Sabbath as a symbol of God's availability becomes the heart of Rublev's symbolic representation, although not in the sense that he intended—the biblical doctrine of the Sabbath most certainly was not at the forefront of his thought—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 creation 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, manifests the eternal God at once exoterically and directly as the God who rests in his glory.⁷⁵

It is in God's rest that a completely new theme of liberating and empowering gifting is being enacted. As the apex of God's created work, the final act of God's creation, the Sabbath memorializes our dependence on prevenient grace—totally irreconcilable with even a hint of meritorious legalism—pointing to a God who creates, acts, invites, blesses, guides, sustains, provides, sanctifies, and beautifies.⁷⁶ As such, it radiates as an effulgent backdrop to a peaceable metadiscourse, or rather metapraxis, enacted in

⁷³Danaher, 205.

⁷⁴Edwards, "Dissertation," 533.

⁷⁵Jürgen Moltmann, *God in Creation: An Ecological Doctrine of Creation*, trans. Margaret Kohl (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985), 280.

⁷⁶For a rich treatment of this theme, see Sigve K. Tonstad, *The Lost Meaning of the Seventh Day* (Berrien Springs: Andrews University Press, 2009), chap. 24.

“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.”⁷⁷

Conclusion

In this article I have sought to address the following questions: How is one to speak of God’s beauty when the very notion of aesthetic persuasion is rendered into an ideological, violence-bent smokescreen? What place is there for the aesthetics of faith when beauty is transmuted into a deceptive front for the purpose of oppression, manipulation, duplicity, and totality? In other words, how should one properly emulate the longing to “gaze at the beauty of the Lord” (Ps 27:4) when the relationship of aesthetics and ethics is rendered void? Admittedly, these are complicated issues, carrying the weight of a long history of theological and philosophical reflections and thus need to be approached with caution and interdisciplinary awareness. The strategy in this article was to pursue two different tracks of reasoning. On one hand, I have suggested that such deconstructive reservations are not necessarily inimical to the Christian worldview and its account of human fallenness. Christianity is a profoundly nonsentimental religion and is accordingly realistic about the possibility of malformed beauty and the ways it might become implicated in different forms of subjective, objective, and symbolic violence.⁷⁸ One only needs to recall Augustine’s *Confessions*, for example, and the way the dialectics of seductive and benevolent beauty is played out in Augustine’s conversion story.

At the same time, I have taken issue with those (postmodern) approaches that axiomatically consign any form of (aesthetic) persuasion to violent intent, however implicitly manifested. Quite apart from the question of whether such postmetaphysical hermeneutics itself feeds off a cleverly concealed “ontology of violence” (Milbank), I have attempted to provide an account of nontotalitarian aesthetics within which God’s benevolence is revealed as desire-evoking form (*species*) and splendor (*lumen*). Taking my cue from Edwards’s account of primary beauty, I have tried to argue that a Christian defense of the third transcendental cannot simply take the form of a generalized philosophical aesthetics, but must remain irrevocably fixed on God’s Trinitarian history of “God with us.” That is why in distinction to Edwards—again, I take this to be more a matter of emphasis than

⁷⁷Jürgen Moltmann, “Messianic Lifestyle,” in *The Passion for Life: A Messianic Lifestyle* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978), 40.

⁷⁸For a discussion of those forms of violence, see Slavoj Žižek, *Violence: Six Sidenways Reflections* (New York: Picador, 2008).

substance—I have tried to provide a more robust Christological foundation to my account, that, together with Augustine,⁷⁹ affirms that Christ’s *kenosis* is the ultimate revelation of divine beauty and a theodramatic fusion of the three transcendentals.

It should be clear by now, I trust, that I have simply tried to address the “Great Controversy” problematic in a different key. After all, the “Great Controversy” between good and evil revolves around the question of the character of God in that his benevolent intent is creating, offering, promising, proclaiming, and redeeming beauty—of which the Sabbath is the primordial memorial—as evidenced in election, creation, redemption, and glorification. So when we speak of a correlation of God and human flourishing, the parameters of a humanistic God, the announcement of the *evangel* of peace—in other words, all the multifaceted rhetorical and performative responses of the Christian faith to various subversions of divine benevolence—we are inevitably thrust into the realm of aesthetic discourse.

Of course, so much more could be added to this investigation. For one, additional space is needed to provide more detailed phenomenological analyses of beauty and justice and their respective interactions. Similarly, the question of why a defense of benevolence should resort to an account of theological aesthetics also deserves further exploration. That applies as well to various issues concerning the subjective turn in aesthetics that are nibbling at the outskirts of this problematic. In the meantime, however, I would like to simply gesture toward Thomas Traherne’s words from his *Centuries of Meditation*, that encapsulate the theological terminus toward which such explorations should be ineluctably directed. What matters most, after all, is that

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.⁸⁰

⁷⁹Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord*, 2:123.

⁸⁰Thomas Traherne, *Waking Up in Heaven: A Contemporary Edition of Centuries of Meditation*, ed. David Buresh (Spencerville: Hesed, 2002), 10.