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Aquinas on Contemplative Beauty

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Abstract

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This paper examines the treatment of beauty and aesthetic experience in the writings of Thomas Aquinas by making an analogy between Thomistic philosophical contemplation and aesthetic contemplation. Aesthetic contemplation, imagined as it would function within the philosophy of Thomas Aquinas, is strictly mediated through the human senses and focused on the object of our perception, yet places the human being at a critical juncture between the subjective and objective, infinite and finite, and invisible and visible, jolting new possibilities into our daily lives and allowing for a unique spiritual experience.

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Introduction

In his essay *Beauty and the Soul*, theologian John Milbank gives us a stark condemnation of the modern aesthetic; “in modernity,” he writes, “there is no mediation of the invisible in the visible,” no “aura of invisibility hovering around the visible,” and, in consequence, “there is no beauty” (Milbank 3). What we experience instead can be divided into the sublime, or a feeling of overwhelming incomprehensibility (our struggle with the invisible) and the merely pretty, or a feeling of artfulness in something which follows a duplicable procedure (the shallowly visible). The Catholic priest and writer Romano Guardini echoes this critique in his work *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, where he delineates between “true beauty”—a profound modesty that resides “in the intrinsic truth of an entity or a genuine spiritual experience,” a “victory and avowal” of the “splendor of perfectly expressed intrinsic truth” that is never simply expression for the sake of expression, but rather brings forth new possibilities for, and demands on, our daily lives—and “aestheticism,” a complete separation between invisible and visible: “absolute form,” a “manner without (...) matter,” and “radiance without heat,” ending in a joyless and shamelessly empty view of the world (Guardini 44-45).

The latter is where we seem to fall today. In “aestheticism,” only having available either the sublime or the pretty, we only ever see the unknown as the unknown and the known as known, lacking that which falls between: an experience of the unknown in the known. Milbank and other modern theorists see this dualism—an impassable divide between known and unknown, and by analogy the visible and invisible, the matter and the form, the material and the transcendent—as a crucial problem of our age, and one that carries some disturbing real-life implications, perhaps the least of which is our incapacity for beauty. Following Milbank’s writing, for instance, we find ourselves unable to escape a dystopian and inhuman world of

“capitalist nihilism” (Davis 3). This is a world where there is no Incarnation—no entrance of the unknown into the known, the immaterial into material, or the impossible into the possible—merely lives trapped in deterministic material cycles with futile attempts at sublime transcendence, where little can be changed and little about the human fulfilled. This line of thought follows other critics, such as Catholic writer Josef Pieper, in using the lens of aesthetics to identify fundamental flaws in modernity, while attempting to correct them with re-invigorated applications of medieval theology such as the work of Thomas Aquinas. Aquinas’ theory of beauty, I argue, endeavors precisely to find the invisible in the visible through contemplation, reaching fully beyond a psychological account that comes too close to prettiness and a Neoplatonic theory that edges too close to the sublime. For Aquinas, beauty is constituted by proportion, integrity, and clarity, and is, above all, experienced through contemplation. What gives Aquinas’ theory its uniqueness is his addition of Pseudo-Dionysius’ notion of clarity to what would be an otherwise standardly Platonic medieval aesthetic theory. Aquinas answers how it can be that an image possesses the integrity of the intelligible, how it can possess both the unseen and the seen at once, and how this can be perceived, felt, and possessed in an image in a way that is analogous to but different from philosophical knowledge. Situating Aquinas as the chief successor to a line of pre-medieval theorists on beauty and exploring Aquinas’ ideas on our experience of beauty can allow us to think about what Aquinas can bring to the table to solve a post-modern dilemma: what Guardini would call a life in an empty “aesthetic” world, where there is no possibility for the drastic shock, change, and hope that a true experience of beauty brings to human life.

My first chapter addresses the earliest important philosophical discussions of beauty, from Plato’s ascent and Plotinus’ One to Pseudo-Dionysius’ divine names of God. Each

philosopher emphasizes a particular aspect of beauty that come together as a trio of properties in Aquinas' formulation of beauty: proportion, integrity, and clarity. Aquinas' unique adaption of Plato, Plotinus, and Pseudo-Dionysius gives us an experience of beauty that hinges upon the Christian mysteries of Creation and Incarnation and opens up beauty to the common man and his religious encounter with sacred art, rather than limiting it to the philosopher or theologian and their ascents to the incomprehensibility of God or to abstract "pure" beauty in itself, for its own sake.

My second chapter explores Aquinas' conception of beauty more deeply. Beauty is addressed directly by Aquinas, and not merely brought up as a quote from another author or in reference to another subject, in less than a dozen instances throughout the *Summa Theologica*. (I count seven: ST I, Q. 5, Art. 4; ST I, Q. 39, Art. 8; ST I-II, Q. 27, Art. 1; ST. I-II Q. 49, Art. 2; ST. II-II Q. 141 Art. 2; ST II-II Q. 145, Art. 2; ST. II-II, Q. 180, Art. 2.) Because of this paucity, I attempt to fill out Aquinas' account of our experience of beauty—or aesthetic contemplation—by making analogies to philosophical contemplation, a topic Aquinas does talk about in detail. I also make use of some of the major books on beauty in Aquinas' writing, in particular, *The Aesthetics of Thomas Aquinas* by Umberto Eco, and *Aquinas on Beauty* by Christopher Scott Sevier. Rather than strictly following Eco and Sevier's presentation of Aquinas, however—Eco focusing mainly on situating Aquinas within an historical, medieval context, and Sevier within an ethical and psychological one—I depart from their accounts by first restricting my focus to sacred art rather than to art in general (which neither Eco nor Sevier account for), and second, by rejecting the way Sevier construes Aquinas' theory of our experience of beauty as a psychological process in favor of interpreting aesthetic experience in Aquinas as a form of contemplation, which I will argue matches more fairly to Aquinas' actual view. Finally, my

paper considers Aquinas as a thinker whose adaptability and pragmatism would have had him use a broad variety of modern arguments (such as those made about art by Etienne Gilson, Robert Sokolowski and Josef Pieper) to construct a theory that is as faithful as possible to everyday human experience and his own Christianity, thinking about beauty as we experience it in ordinary religious life, and not just as it can be reached from the heights of philosophy.

First Chapter: Beauty's Evolution to Aquinas

Diotima's Ascent and Beauty's Proportion

Conversing with Glaucon in *The Republic*, Socrates introduces a famous description of the process by which we reach the Good, known as the divided line. The line—or our ascent to the Good—is divided between the visible world and the world of the mind. Just as in the first world we are able to see and sense things by virtue of the Sun, so in the second world everything exists by virtue of the Good. Beginning in the first world with imagination or an imaginative perception, by which we see images such as shadows or reflections, we then see what these images represent; the actual things in the visible world (objects of sense) which are the models for these images. We can only have imperfect and changing knowledge about the actual objects we see with our senses—forming beliefs about them as we move around and live our lives—and so this knowledge is more properly only practical knowledge. This comprises the first section of the divided line, which corresponds only to the visible world. From this point onward, the soul uses images that represent figures “which one cannot see except in thought”—for example, the image of a perfect triangle in geometry, or a number in mathematics—working from hypothesis to conclusion (Republic 165). This is “reasoning,” yet it is still a process that falls short of the actual act of understanding, as our hypotheses themselves cannot be investigated but simply have to be taken for granted; we must assume things such as “the existence of figures” or “the odd and the even,” as though we already knew them to be true (165). At the uppermost section of the divided line, or “by the other section of the intelligible,” as Plato teaches us, we are able to use hypotheses to “reach that which is beyond hypothesis, the first principle of all that exists” (165). Beginning with the intuitive perception of images, or imaginative knowledge, we work our way towards practical knowledge using opinions about sense objects as they exist in the real world.

Across the divide into the intelligible world, we begin with assuming the invisible things of the intelligible world and work out conclusions from these hypothetical assumptions, using discursive reasoning. Finally, by philosophizing, we investigate the actual principles behind the intelligible things our mind must assume in its reasoning, and end up contemplating the world of Forms.

In Diotima's account of love in Plato's *Symposium*, this method of ascent—from the visible to the invisible and from imagination to true understanding—is applied specifically to Beauty. One begins by loving a beautiful body, and then realizes that the beauty of the body is something shared by all bodies. This realization resembles the first section of the divided line, as our love of a particular image leads us to love of the model for that image, or the beauty of the body in general. The crossover between visible and intelligible worlds is repeated in Diotima's account when we transition from loving physical beauty to “mental beauty,” crossing over from loving the body to loving the soul, or the “activities and institutions” that inform our actions and lives (*Symposium* 53). From here, we reach the penultimate stage, which is our love of the beauty of understanding. The reverse of this beauty of understanding—the understanding of beauty—is the final stage of Diotima's ascent, and serves as the highest aspiration and the founding principle of love. After seeing beauty in the things people know, we inquire after the beauty of knowledge itself, and end up with a “unique kind of knowledge,” that of beauty itself (54). Beauty Itself for Plato is timeless, un-representable, and universal—“in itself and by itself”—the source of what is beautiful for “every other beautiful object” (55). Beauty is implicitly defined as a proportion—a compatibility with the divine (49)—and as with the divided line in *The Republic*, it is only via the images that have arranged in them a certain proportion (by virtue of their proportion to their models in the intelligible world) that we can ascend. Two ideas

are especially prominent here: that Beauty itself (the unseen) gives source to the beauty we find in sense-objects (the seen), and that the endpoint of our experience of Beauty consists of a contemplative state that transcends time and space, making a unity of our experience and transforming who we are.

Neoplatonic Integrity in Beauty and Images

Plotinus emphasizes another key element in the Platonic ascent to true Beauty: that of integrity. Like Plato, Plotinus emphasizes that experiencing Beauty is nothing less than understanding. Truly admiring the beauty of something is not so much seeing *what* it is as the knowing of *how* it is; experiencing beauty in things is nothing less than knowing how they are disposed, or by what principle they are as they are. The “archetype” for beauty in the body is “the rational forming principle” in nature—how nature forms bodies—while the archetype for nature is “the rational principle in soul,” or how nature is ruled by forces we can only understand with intellect (Ennead V.8.3). Each formative principle we find progressively more beautiful. Plotinus also attacks the Stoics by arguing against proportion as a concept pertaining to beauty—“if the whole is beautiful the parts must be beautiful too”—and so the parts themselves of an image—insofar as they are only parts of a beautiful thing—cannot be beautiful themselves (Ennead I.6.1). Only the fact that each part has a relation to a whole allows each part to be beautiful, as the beauty of the whole emanates to the parts and gives them their beauty. A part of a whole—as well as a whole, and even proportion itself—must all be beautiful only by virtue of something outside themselves, something that purely in itself is beautiful. For Plotinus “reaching” beauty is similar to “reaching” gold; “it is like taking a piece of gold as a sample of all gold, and, if the piece taken is not pure, purifying it in act or word by showing that not all this sample is gold, but only this particular portion of the whole mass” (Ennead V.8.3). A piece of

gold, like a beautiful object, is only golden because it has at its source something that is purely “gold” in itself, which we must reach if we are not to be ignorant of “goldness.” These arguments—that we can only admire the beauty of something by knowing its formative principle, and that only something whole and “in itself” can be beautiful—leads Plotinus to conclude that “Intellect” is the primary principle of Beauty, as Intellect is both the purest thing in itself and also the ruling principle for all that is. It is not apprehended at once, but reasoned to discursively by eliminating the chaff from the pure. This leads Plotinus to the conclusion that we cannot apprehend beauty through images. Intellect can take no image because “every image will be drawn from something worse” than Beauty Itself. Only for the gods is the source of beauty immediately available, because in their transcendent plane of existence Intellect is actually visible. In the world of the gods, “beauty is just beauty, because it is not in what is not beautiful” (Ennead V.8.4).

Despite this aloof notion of beauty, Plotinus also holds that a true unity compels an outpouring of itself. Sensible beauty may only be a shadowed representation of intelligible beauty, but it is beautiful all the same by virtue of the intelligible beauty it is representing. Beauty may not be “apprehended through an image,” but images can be “taken from” beauty (Ennead V.8.3). Plotinus gives us what may be a description of the method we can use to ascend to the Intellect, having us first “apprehend in our thought this visible universe, with each of its parts remaining what it is without confusion, gathering all of them together into one as far as we can” (Ennead V.8.9). Plotinus has us see the visible universe in our thought then as a “shining imagination of a sphere” in our soul. We “keep this” image in our minds while cutting away or purifying it of matter: “and apprehend in your mind another, taking away the mass: take away also the places, and the mental picture of matter in yourself.” Finally, we petition the god of this

image, calling on him “who made that of which you have the mental picture” to come to us and bring “his own universe with him.” Plotinus then has us petition this god for the heavenly world and all of its gods, which “are all together and each one again apart in a position without separation, possessing no perceptible shape.” Finally, we end at “the [intelligible] All,” “universal power, extending to infinity and powerful to infinity” (Ennead V.8.9).

Images play a special role in Plotinus’ philosophy here and elsewhere in the *Enneads* in a way that somewhat separates him from Plato. Plotinus writes that “the wise men of Egypt [...] when they wished to signify something wisely, did not use the forms of letters [...] but by drawing images” (Ennead V.8.5). An image, though it is merely a model, is also a particular and unified model of one particular and unified thing; there belongs to it a “kind of knowledge and wisdom” that is unavailable to us in the temporal plane, where we use speech or reasoning. Images are manifestations of the “non-discursiveness of the intelligible world,” because they are “not discourse or deliberation.” There is a oneness and timelessness in an image that allows it to reflect the nature of the intelligible world, which similarly is one and timeless. Yet this special symbolic integrity of the image is still surpassed by the heights to which discursive reasoning can soar: “But [only] afterwards [others] discovered, starting from it in its concentrated unity, a representation in something else, already unfolded and speaking it discursively,” travelling beyond what images can convey to the principles that govern existence. By this process, we arrive discursively at a non-discursive truth—Beauty Itself or the One—something that was always really true independent of our reasoning process.

God’s Light and Clarity

As Plato finds in the image an essential proportion to its model, and as Plotinus finds in the image an essential integrity connecting it to the intelligible, so for Pseudo-Dionysius does the

image have clarity, in its possession of God's light. Pseudo-Dionysius first brings up light when he sets out the basis of his methodology, treating the "divine names" as images of God and explaining how God allows us to know these images. The "founding ray beyond being (...) abidingly and fittingly" illuminates every being (*Divine Names* I.2). On the side of the observer of beings, God's light "stretches forth the sacred intellects toward their desired contemplations of it [light], toward communion and likeness with it." God's light both illuminates every being and fits our intellect to every being, bringing us closer to God. This is not so much a universal ascent as it is a commensurate stasis; it is individually tailored to each and every intellect and being so that they neither fall behind nor (just as importantly) exceed their potential, and so beings are "stretched forth steadfastly and unswervingly toward the ray which illumines them" (I.2).

Aquinas, in his commentary on this section of the *Divine Names*, adds further that "light does not extend itself to the point" at which we can comprehend things such as God's essence, but only as far "as some certain terminus or measure" (Aquinas, "Cosmic Structure" 272). Because light in Pseudo-Dionysius makes the intelligible manifest, it can serve as an explanation for how images in Plotinus' account share in the intelligible world (which Plotinus argues causes them to have a non-discursiveness and unity that separates them from speech or reasoning); an image's clarity makes it a manifestation of something intelligible. As Aquinas adds, this manifestation occurs, however, only to a "certain terminus or measure" that preserves "temperance and sanctity." In defining temperance and sanctity, Aquinas shows that clarity can also be seen in a way as the source of proportion, in that it preserves temperance—which is the proportion of our minds according to which we can behold divine things—and sanctity, which is the proportion by which God reveals divine things to us. With Aquinas' emphasis of this concept of clarity preserving "temperance and sanctity," we can see in Pseudo-Dionysius' discussion of

light an important element of restraint—restraint in the overall method of ascent Pseudo-Dionysius describes, which preserves sanctity, and the restraints proper to each particular being, which preserve temperance—that is largely missing from the accounts of Plato and Plotinus.

Only with severe restraint, according to Pseudo-Dionysius, can we receive God’s light; we must refuse outright “logos, intellect, and being,” in order to allow “the ray of the godhead” to “freely [give] of itself” (Divine Names I.1). This is a radically passive contemplation, in stark contrast to the intellectual activity involved in Plato and Plotinus’ ascents. For Pseudo-Dionysius, prior to our ability to comprehend with the intellect there is a complete rejection of intellect: a trust and hope in God’s light, which both illuminates every being and illuminates our intellects so that we may comprehend any being. In Pseudo-Dionysius’ words, it is a complete “non-searching” (Divine Names I.3). As trust or hope in God’s light is necessary at the beginning of this non-searching, so joy is necessary at its end; “light” guides us “toward the thearchic celebration,” and we ultimately discard Platonic *logos* for “the sacred logos of celebration” (I.3). Clarity restrains our comprehension, but only so that we are able to enjoy.

While this radically passive contemplation ultimately discards comprehension, it does not disallow for meaningfulness in art. Contemplation itself, for Aquinas, must be a kind of restrained comprehension; contemplation is knowing “one thing through another,” as “through one thing” we see “the essence of a higher thing,” comprehending the essence of this higher thing not with perfect knowledge but only “in so far as it is knowable” through the medium of the lower (Aquinas, “Cosmic Structure” 274). The comprehension of the essence of a thing, by contrast to its contemplation, requires us to know it in its own medium; we can only comprehend intelligibles via the intelligible realm, for instance. For Plato and Plotinus, this necessitates an ascent to higher and higher realms and to more formative principles, which must continue even

until our own being is one with a thing's essence (and as Plotinus writes, one starts to understand the reflexive meaning of beauty only when one becomes beautiful himself). This is the reason behind Plato and Plotinus's discounting of the sensible world and of the image. For Aquinas, we can contemplate something like beauty through the medium of an image, never actually ascending beyond that medium. This is not because we are comprehending the essence of beauty through an image—Aquinas's commentary echoes the argument of Pseudo-Dionysius that “intelligibles can not be comprehended through sensible things”—but because we are avoiding comprehension entirely. Instead, aesthetic contemplation involves veneration. God's light makes the intelligible manifest to us, and so only our reception of this light in the manner detailed by Pseudo-Dionysius can make beauty manifest to us, and never manifested to the degree that it can actually be known. Accordingly, Aquinas explains in his commentary that we “venerate the hiddenness of divinity which is above mind and substance, by inscrutable reverences of mind (...) i.e., by being so disposed toward God that we do not search out the hiddenness of God” (279). This is also what distinguishes contemplation from thought and understanding; while thought is the “search after the truth,” contemplation ceases thought as it is the intellect “attain[ing] to the form of truth,” and while understanding is an “act remaining in [the] intelligent agent,” the veneration owed to God that is involved in contemplation instead necessitates in some part “an act going out from the intelligent agent” (Aquinas ST I Q.34 Art.1).

This veneration entails not only a non-searching but a non-scrutiny, amongst other restraints. Because “we venerate hidden things when we do not scrutinize them,” aesthetic contemplation must not involve the scrutinizing of its object, making it clear that aesthetic contemplation cannot involve scrutinizing a particular beautiful thing for its relation to universal beauty, as in Diotima's ascent or in Christopher Sevier's explanation of Aquinas' account of

aesthetic experience. Sevier expresses a psychological interpretation of Aquinas in which the experience of beauty consists of our intellect taking sensory information and abstracting it into “a universal concept,” relating and comparing this concept to a “universal species,” where we must find a “conformity between” the particular image “and the species under which it falls.” At the end of this process is a judgment; “the closer the approximation to the archetype, the better the ‘fit,’” and “the better the fit, the more beautiful the object” (Sevier 122-123). There is some confusion, however, noted by Sevier, of “how much the pleasure experienced relates to the cognitive act of aesthetic judgment” (123). Sevier divides aesthetic experience here into two categories—pleasure and judgment—the one appetitive, the other cognitive, while allowing for some interplay and ambiguity between them. While there is indeed a rational psychology in Aquinas of how image perception (and the knowledge and judging of beauty) works through discursive steps—by abstracting from the senses, forming “phantasms” or images of sense objects in our minds, applying them to “universal” ideas about things, and then returning from universals back to particular sense objects—the human experience of beauty as a whole for Aquinas does much more and its accompanying pleasure easily escapes psychological categorization, at least when it involves sacred art. A construal of aesthetic experience as a kind of contemplation more faithfully matches, for instance, Aquinas’ reading of Pseudo-Dionysius, his idea of clarity and veneration, and his descriptions of sacred music lifting the mind beyond the limits of natural reason. In an uncharacteristically breathless aside to his commentary on the *Divine Names*, Aquinas adds that hymns illuminate us “supermundanely, i.e, beyond the virtue of natural reason” and configure us to their “enunciations” (Aquinas, “Cosmic Structure” 279). The same occurs in all forms of sacred art, and at a diminished level in all beautiful objects; experiencing beauty supersedes natural reason, and is ultimately an adaption to the object we are

observing, as we are “configure[d]” to its “enunciations.” Aesthetic contemplation then must be free from the characteristics of natural reason—such as scrutiny, discursivity and temporality—and instead must importantly involve the “configuration” occurring between the observer and the object. It must focus, not on the image’s relation to its universal species, to its model (for Plato) or to its formative principle (for Plotinus), but on our relation to the image.

Aquinas’ Aesthetic Contemplation

For Plato and Plotinus, aesthetic contemplation is only imperfect comprehension; beauty is not even seen, for if one “sees it [beauty] as something different, he is not yet in beauty, but he is in it most perfectly when he becomes it” (Ennead V.8). By ascending to the intelligible realm, we are “in” beauty far more perfectly than when we see it; for Plotinus, we even “must not have sight” of beauty, or at the least we must not have any sight except for an insight that occurs after the observer “is identical with its object.” Only those “who have some kind of knowledge and have experienced some kind of awakening” can begin to embark on the journey towards truly experiencing beauty, and only those who are truly beautiful or those who are one with beauty themselves can complete it. By contrast, Aquinas’ notion of contemplation—made possible in turn by Pseudo-Dionysius’ notion of clarity—allows us to see and enjoy beauty in sensible objects, and so has no need of an ascent; just as though, while the sun may make an object clearer to us, we do not need to gaze at the sun in order to see an object more clearly. The sight and enjoyment of Beauty—as well as the non-discursiveness and timelessness of its contemplation—are all theoretically available within Plato and Plotinus’ frameworks, but only after we become like the gods, one with the essence of what we are comprehending. Seeing and enjoying beauty for Aquinas, on the other hand, occurs completely without comprehending its essence, in the mere act of beholding an object with the senses.

While for the Platonists there is less of a distinction between aesthetic contemplation and philosophical comprehension—and aesthetically experiencing something can function for them as another way of philosophically comprehending it—Aquinas, by adapting their concepts through Pseudo-Dionysius, implicitly carves out a separate theory of aesthetic contemplation where by beholding a beautiful object with our senses we enter into a non-discursive and joyful, celebrative state. Beauty is venerated, seen, enjoyed, and contemplated, but (and even because) it is not known. With the Platonist’s focus on Beauty itself, “the Beautiful is not only not available to all” but exists “for itself and not for any possessor”; only beauty can see and enjoy itself, and we use every instance of beauty only as a stepping stone to reach a union with beauty itself (Rist 54). For Aquinas’ aesthetic contemplation, every instance of the beautiful leads not to beauty itself but back to the human beholder; every property of beauty is intimately connected with the very properties that govern our perception. Proportion is not only the proportion of an object’s parts to its whole, but also the proportion of an object’s parts to our own senses. Clarity is not only an object’s relation to God’s light, but it is the quality of an object that draws our own perception towards it.

While Plato, Plotinus and Pseudo-Dionysius’ accounts of beauty itself may all be broadly similar, each philosopher emphasizes a different property of beauty and puts forward a different perspective concerning images. Aquinas combines their theories, borrowing from all while ending with a theory uniquely his own, a theory that is perhaps more considerate of human experience and that does not limit beauty to the philosopher and theologian. For Plato, beauty and the image chiefly have proportion. Images are images insofar as they are proportional to their model. Images are shadows and reflections of their models, and are used by us as tools to arrive at the unseen. In addition, the beauty of a thing cannot be possessed or experienced in as

real and true a way as knowledge is possessed and experienced. Plato's approach leads to Plotinus', for whom both beauty and the image are ruled by integrity, with the image reflecting the oneness of the intelligible (in comparison to speech and discursive reasoning). Images have a symbolic integrity, apart from words, that can reflect the unseen. Plotinus arrives at this integrity from analyzing Platonic proportion; parts themselves of an image are not beautiful, but the relation of each part to the one is beautiful, and the multiplicity of many parts related to a one is beautiful, due to the all-encompassing outpouring of the one itself. Branching off from this Plotinian notion of beauty, Pseudo-Dionysius emphasizes the clarity of an image and beauty's connection to God's light. The unseen is brought to the seen in light, and our ascent to light is one that exceeds natural reason. A "non-searching"—the essence of contemplation—lifts us up to receive the light, which guides us to a celebration. If there is logos in aesthetic contemplation for Pseudo-Dionysius, it is the "sacred logos of celebration."

Contemplation venerates the essence of a higher thing through the medium of a lower thing without knowledge of its essence. This works similarly to how we can contemplate the essence of an advanced argument merely by knowing what the argument concludes—for instance, when a layman ponders some discovery in quantum physics—while still remaining far from comprehending the argument, which would require us to understand each of its steps. For Plato and Plotinus alike, however, comprehension is the goal; to admire the beauty of a thing is to know that thing's formative principle. When we contemplate beauty through the medium of an image in Aquinas, we never escape beyond that medium, and our goal is not to do so. An object's brightness or clarity has the dual function of drawing us to the object and restricting us from surpassing it by fully knowing its principle. We are as unable to fully glean the essence of an object as we are to know God's essence from one of his divine names. For Aquinas as well as

Pseudo-Dionysius, we venerate rather than know the unseen in an image, by contemplating it without scrutiny. Though these restraints may seem a puritanical self-restriction or abnegation of our human desire to transcend, there is in aesthetic contemplation a different kind of ascent to the First Principle or God; without surpassing the medium of the senses, we ascend through a relaxed reception of God's ray of light, a rejection of logos and a celebration. Beauty is tactilely venerated, praised, enjoyed, and celebrated even though—and in fact because—it is not philosophically known.

Second Chapter: Beauty Contemplated in Aquinas

From Plato to Aquinas: Form to Inner Form to Essence

Form in Plato becomes, for Plotinus, an inner form that is deeply embedded in an object, following a switch from “transcendent” to “immanent” thinking about forms. In contrast to the transcendent world of forms in Diotima’s ascent, Plotinus writes of a form which “approaches and composes that which is to come into being from many parts into a single ordered whole,” allowing it—when the matter successfully submits to this “formative power”—to rest in beauty (Ennead I.6.2). In Pseudo-Dionysius, this form also participates in a ray of God’s light—a clarity descending from God, which holds a thing together and in place, and gives it its particular beauty. In Aquinas, finally, we arrive at a concept of “essence”: a complete union of form of matter—neither of which would have more power over the other, or any existence at all without their union together—that requires a continual divine intervention from God.

The Properties of Beauty and the Primacy of Clarity in Aquinas

For Aquinas, beauty is defined most simply as species. Aquinas writes that “species (...) means the form derived from one thing to another”; when form is derived from one thing to our perception, form becomes figure, as for instance the human form has a unique and essential visible figure: an upright posture, symmetrical limbs, and other features. What is crucial for Aquinas is not merely the form or formative principle of matter, but the conjoining of the formative principle of a thing with the matter of the thing, making a thing’s species, which finally impresses the nature of a thing on our cognitive faculty. Form and matter are “united in an act of existence” due to a divine participation (Eco, “Art and Beauty” 75). Because of this participation, the species “is made individual by the matter” (Aquinas ST I Q.39 Art.2). As Eco

writes, “For Aquinas (...) form without matter was nothing” (Eco 75). An image, then—a material, visible instantiation of something immaterial and invisible, as the human figure is to the human form—is not a mere shadow or reflection of a form, but is linked closely to the mysterious union of form and matter. Images can never be static or unreal; they are the living evidence of a continuous act, an object’s *esse* or act of uniting form and matter. This act is always somewhat perilous; only unremitting divine participation wrangles together the form and matter of a thing into a union, without which there would be nothing whatsoever.

An object’s species, for our sight, refers to the image of an object’s nature: a thing’s essence or union of form and matter. Beauty—which Aquinas explicitly identifies with species—does not require direct knowledge of an object’s formative principle, or even an object’s essence (and such knowledge is even impossible for us as humans). Our intellect cannot know things as “they really are in themselves”; rather, beauty is experienced with a kind of sense knowledge in a way “that belongs to things created” (ST. I Q.39 Art.2). The distinction between created and uncreated here (a distinction that Aquinas is making in response to Pseudo-Dionysius’ *Divine Names*) serves as an explanation for the knowledge appropriate to humans and for the human experience of beauty. As created beings ourselves, the full intellectual grasp of essences and forms is unavailable to us, but by Aquinas’ definition of beauty as species it is even due to this limitation—as we are limited from knowing essences to instead perceiving things through species—that we have access to beauty. Embedded in Aquinas’ concept of our experience of beauty here are the human workings of the senses, the image’s sacred connection to essence, and the mystery of creation that allows for the possibility of beauty.

Aquinas arrives at his definition of beauty as species by analogy to the Trinity, in which the Son uniquely serves as God’s “species,” the visually perceptible union of divine form with

human matter. By extrapolating upon this analogy, Aquinas more explicitly defines what species or beauty is, and the powers and roles that belong to an image. First, an image possesses integrity, just as the Son “has in Himself truly and perfectly the nature of the Father” (ST I Q.39 Art.8). Images are not mere shadowy symbols or distant signifiers for a more intensely real and alive world of forms, but have in themselves a “supreme and primal life” by virtue of their integrity. Our experience of sacred art must hone in on this life in the particular image we are viewing, rather than on any universal life or sense of being as in Plotinus (where images give wisdom only because they express an aspect of the One). This is why Robert Sokolowski and Etienne Gilson both argue that non-representational or abstract art cannot truly be beautiful as such; beauty in art must be found in a particular thing. For Sokolowski, we do not want to “overshoot” the “individual object,” because what is “in question” in our experience of beauty “is proper to (...) this individual painting; it is not cosmic or universal” (Sokolowski 350). Images cannot simply be; they must also represent, and represent particular things. Not only do images have integrity—having whatever is real truly and perfectly embedded in their very nature—but images expressly represent things as well.

Images must then possess proportion, just as the Son is in a perfect proportion to God, “the express image of the Father,” an “image includes the idea of similitude” (Aquinas ST I Q.35 Art.1). That an image can have this proportion, expressly representing or being proportional to a thing, is something beautiful in itself; for, as Aquinas adds, “an image is said to be beautiful, [even] if it perfectly represents even an ugly thing” (ST I Q.39 Art.8). Aquinas’ analogy between the image and the Son here implies that the beauty—the pleasing experience of an image’s similitude—is intimately connected to the Divine, but like the Son is made possible only through the Incarnation. St. John of Damascus argues similarly, defending the use of icons on the basis of

the Incarnation. St. John vividly describes our experience of icons, emphasizing that they are never taken at face value. “How can we not record in images,” writes St. John, “the saving pains and miracles of Christ our Lord” in response to the question his child posed of an image, ““What is this?”” (Damascene). Something about an image inevitably prompts this question for St. John, and he seems to share with Aquinas the idea that images—like the Son—force us to sense the invisible in the visible and to desire to apprehend them together. When we sense the invisible in the visible within an image in this way, we are sensing a lively and “reciprocal interplay,” according to John Milbank; “the visible abandons (...) to the invisible, and yet the invisible returns to the visible its form and elevates this form in an eminent fashion” (Milbank 6). This interaction between invisible and visible reflects the mystery of Creation, where God maintains a deeply intimate relationship with his creation, securing its very existence, essence and createdness, while creation neither adds nor takes away from God. It is a flux that we closely feel in Aquinas’ concept of contemplation; as we explore a sacred icon, we are elevated away from the icon’s immediacy, particularity and materiality—plumbing its depth of symbolism and meaning—in a curious way that actually makes its immediacy, particularity and materiality “redoubled and intensified” (Milbank 7).

Finally, images also have clarity; we apprehend them and they communicate something to our intellect, and due to this fact they have something analogically, like Christ, of “the Word [of God], which is the light and splendor of the intellect” (ST I Q.39 Art.8). By virtue of integrity, which gives an image its own inner reality and life, images have proportion; a representation of whatever is real outside of it. By virtue of both this integrity and proportion, images then have clarity. Images not only *expressly are*, as integral things in themselves, but

they *expressly represent*, or are proportional expressions of other things—and finally, they clearly *express* (to us).

This triad of properties—integrity, proportion, and clarity—apply here in Aquinas’ text, by analogy to Christ, to the role that beautiful objects are meant to play in God’s creation; they are things that, similarly to Christ, have a special nature in themselves, are meant to signify higher, invisible things, and that are meant to speak to our minds. Elsewhere Aquinas applies the triad of properties, rather than to the beautiful object’s role in creation, to the beautiful object’s form—detailing the formal properties of beauty—and to our own perception of beauty, detailing beauty’s anthropic or psychological properties. Only when each of the three applications of the triad is taken together can we have a full understanding of beauty. A formal discussion of what beauty objectively consists of in itself must be tempered with an empirical investigation of how beauty occurs under our human perception. Both of these for Aquinas, made clear from his analogy to Christ, must also always be raised to the spiritual level of man’s final end, by combining them with an argument for how beautiful images are meant to function for us in the spiritual world, mainly via the contemplation of sacred art.

Firstly, for Aquinas, beauty is grounded in form. Every property of beauty has a correlate to every property of form, or the principles that make an object what it is. Form “is determined by its dimension or quantity (...) and thus by proportion”; form “assigns a thing to its species, in accordance with (...) its constituent elements in their concretion”; and form “directs a thing to its proper end, the one (...) to which it inclines by its weight” (Eco, “Art and Beauty” 26). Seen under the properties of beauty, then, form has proportion—determining an object “by its dimension or quantity”—as well as integrity, uniting the “constituent elements” of a thing into one single species. We can see how formal proportion plays an important role in beauty, as “one

type” of the proportion form provides is “the appropriateness of matter to form,” the cohesion of a statue in the mind of the sculptor with the actual stone itself, the fittingness of a painting to the physical brushstrokes present on the canvas: overall, a “structural grace in things [of art]” (Eco 76). This leads to integrity, as form provides proportion between a thing and its function: “the adequacy of a thing both to its own species and to its own individual nature” (78).

Form also possesses clarity here, but in a uniquely Thomistic fashion. Rather than descending “from above” to diffuse “itself creatively in the world,” as light behaves for the Neo-Platonists, light for Aquinas instead “rises from below, from the heart of things” (Eco 81). Clarity belongs to form almost as though it were the ultimate weight or distension of an object. If form is the determinant of an object, clarity acts as a determinant of form. Form, throughout most of medieval philosophy, was “determined by clarity—not by how it is thought of, but by the splendor which inheres in it” (26). The splendor inhering in an object’s form, according to Eco, makes beauty “an object of knowledge” rather than merely an object of sensation—but this “knowledge is a derivative possibility, not an essential constituent” of clarity (26). Aquinas, however, sees clarity as something “disclosed in relation to a knowing subject” rather than inhering in things “without the help or hindrance of men” (26). Aquinas takes the idea of clarity from what is in an object that makes it known (or makes its form “resplendent”) and turns it into the idea that clarity is what happens “between” the viewer and the object that makes the object known and resplendent only to us. Clarity turns from a property that is a result of formal objectivity—something that inheres in an object independent of our subjective human experience—to a psychological property that has even the basic grounding for all objectivity as its result; clarity concretizes and objectivizes our subjective human experience. Objects fulfill some of the formal properties of beauty (such as proportion and integrity) merely to be objects—

concrete unions of form and matter—but clarity uniquely is what brings an object to our subjective perception. As Etienne Gilson writes, “it is in order to be that an object needs to be whole or perfect” or one, while clarity “is what, in it, holds the eye” (Gilson 31). Clarity “is not apprehended as a relation of being with itself,” but is “in the sentient being itself, the objective basis of one of our relations with it” (31).

Clarity encompasses the other properties of beauty and is what finally transfigures non-art into art; it straddles a curious line between yet apart from both our sensory perception and philosophical, formal knowledge. Because of clarity, our experience of beauty does not use only our senses or only our intellect, but rather makes use of the whole human being. Due in part to this unique notion of clarity, the properties of beauty can be grounded not only formally but also empirically, in human experience and sensation. In beautiful objects, not only is there a formal proportion—between form and matter, essence and existence, object and function—but there is a proportion between objects and their human viewers. Our senses reveal “a quality of connaturality,” that an object both “signifies itself to a subject,” and that we as subjects also make “the ontological structure (...) significative and expressive” (Eco, “The Aesthetics” 93, 119).

The Truth of Art

That our experience of art must involve the whole human being is clear from Aquinas’s idea of the truth of art. In his commentary on Pseudo-Dionysius’ *Divine Names*, Aquinas writes that beauty adds a “cognitive power” to the good (Aquinas, “Cosmic Structure” 363). Both art and truth, then, for humans are acts of intellect. Yet the intellectual act particular to sacred art is unique from other acts of the intellect, such as reasoning. There must be something else occurring when our minds are moved towards an image “insofar as it is the image of something

else,” for instance as we are able to revere an image of Christ not “as a thing” of “carved or painted wood” but as “a rational creature” revering the image “in so far only as it is an image.” Aquinas writes that here, when “in the thing perceived something else be seen at the same time,” then “it is not discursive knowledge” (ST I Q.58 Art. 3). The truth of art seems to escape both discursive truth and propositional truth this way. Our experience of art also manages to affect both the senses as well as the intellect, yet ultimately feels also as though it affects something beyond both.

These are reasons why it is due to a cognitive power innate in human beings as wholes that we are able to experience beauty for Aquinas. Art itself is a kind of medium, like poetry, that only humans can interpret, and like poetic language, we read or interpret art in a complex and unique manner that involves the entire human being and not just our appetites, sense organs or intellects. Art, like the use of poetic language, in some sense can define the essence of a human being. Robert Sokolowski extends this analogy between art and poetry, dividing human speech into three separate faculties or levels.

Firstly, for Sokolowski, there is the “sentential level”; we create sentences by fitting words into a structure, using vocabulary and grammar (Sokolowski 338). Beneath this occurs the “phonemic level,” as for each individual word different sounds are at play, and we form words using these vowels and consonants (338). Finally, human speech has a “prosodic level”; we feel rhythms and beats reverberating within us as we listen to and speak language (338). This last level is what ultimately makes spoken expression meaningful to us. The rhythm of speech stores a kind of primal meaning in language—as we can recognize and interpret sounds as “speech” when its rhythms are heard muffled through a wall, or in a foreign language—and much of

poetry relies on our intuiting a kind of mood or miniature story from the mere rhythm of language.

Analogously, there are three levels involved in our interpretation of art. At a “sentential” level, when viewing a painting, for instance, we are arranging many smaller, separate images “into a larger whole” (338). A ripple in a cloth, a tree, a smile, are all purposefully distributed parts within a painting. Together they are, “like so many subordinate clauses in a sentence (...) one thought,” one image, and “one complex thing being stated” (Sokolowski 339). Beneath this process, at the “phonemic” level, there is at play in each individual image a whole world of interacting colors and lines, just as words are made up of vowels and consonants. Sokolowski elaborates that colors are like vowels, “chthonic and affective,” having a “subrational character”—reverberating deeply in us—while lines are like consonants: they “clip, cut, and trim colors just as consonants define vowels” (339). Finally, there is a “prosodic” level in art, which ultimately gives artworks meaning for us. One example of this is the “rhythm or cadence of a painting” (341). There is “movement” in every painting, for instance the movement by which the colors in the painting enter “into unexpected harmony with one another” (341). The movement of a painting—what is in it that makes it, like language, feel alive and feel meaningful—“underlies and encases both the sensibility and the intelligence in painting” (342). This “movement” straddles the line between the senses and intellect, while reaching beyond both. As we take in this movement—viewing a painting of an event we have actually witnessed, or listening to someone’s narration of a real event—we are re-experiencing something real at a heightened level of reality. It is reality taken and then exemplified, made meaningful, as though the painting or story were “realer” than reality itself.

Part of this heightened reality is personal. Reality is not only felt to be “more real” when it seems to tell a story, but also when it involves us in doing so. Accordingly, for Sokolowski, in art there is something about the image that transfers information from what it is depicting into a kind of self-knowledge for the viewer. An image’s depiction forces a flow-back onto the viewer and then onto that viewer’s everyday reality; “we become able to experience life in the terms the depiction affords us,” e.g, as tragic, comedic, dramatic, or other qualities that we feel as a result of perceiving meta-movements in art (346). An “image does not just present itself to us,” but rather “flows back” on our own lives “and enables us to experience things as articulated wholes” (345). Likewise, language forces us to think and see the world under its own conditions, our consciousness continually forming self-narratives. By seeing pictures, in summary, we then see “in terms of pictures” (345).

The “movement” intuited in our experience of particular artworks, for Sokolowski, is connected to a larger meta-movement that involves the whole human being, forcing each individual instance of art to connect to a “meta-art” that involves and interacts with its viewers. Sokolowski presents this meta-movement as “an essay at beatitude”—every work of art reveals something about and leads towards human happiness (344). Because art and our aesthetic experience are uniquely and wholly human—and because, as per Aristotle, human beings are meant to be happy and are concerned with happiness necessarily—art and the aesthetic experience are concerned with happiness. Accordingly, art can never be merely imitative. An imitative “likeness” of a person, in comparison to a portrait, “is a mere copy,” giving a viewer only “enough [information] to be able to identify the person.” By contrast, a portrait is more; “It presents, poetically, someone’s shot at happiness and self-identity” (344). This applies to the viewer of a portrait as well; “it can become identifiable with the persons who view it, the other

individuals who are also an issue for themselves, who are engaged in beatitude” (344). Josef Pieper presents this meta-movement similarly to Sokolowski yet with a more existential tone, as a shock that leads to wonder. Pieper writes that “any aesthetic encounter (...) as well as prayer, springs from some shock,” which causes man to sense “the non-finality of this world” (Pieper, “Leisure” 73). This shock of “the close proximity of death” critically prompts a realization of the un-necessariness of the universe, leading to wonder (73). We will see that Aquinas’ account of contemplation leads to something similar; there is an initial pleasure which more properly becomes delight, or the resting of desire, and this delight, because it follows reason, becomes joy. This process transcends the finiteness of life; delightness is essentially not in time for Aquinas, because it regards “good already gained”—it is the pleasurable realization of what we already possess, something which in the moment of delight we can neither worry about attaining or losing (Aquinas ST I-II Q. 31 Art. 2).

The analogy Sokolowski draws out between art and language (specifically the “movement” he identifies at the prosodic level, which encompasses the whole experience of art or language) allows us to see our experience of art more closely in the manner that Aquinas does, as something involving—but ultimately beyond—both intellect and sensation, as something that requires the human being as a whole beyond the mere sum of its parts, and as something that elevates us from the real to the more-than-real, from reason to above reason. Understanding the prosodic “movement” of an artwork that makes our experience possible requires us to identify the “movement” occurring proportionally in us, which allows us to interpret it. It is a “movement” involving, yet exceeding, both the intellect and the senses, while transporting us to a reality more real than everyday reality. It is a movement that, because it involves the whole human person, completes the human and fulfills our highest function. Because of these traits, it is

a movement that can be understood under Aquinas' philosophy as a special form of contemplation.

Aesthetic Contemplation

Aquinas makes explicit the connection between contemplation, art and language when he defends against the objection that “words, like other sensible objects, prevent man from ascending to God by contemplation.” Aquinas responds to this by arguing that “words and such like signs (...) help to excite the mind internally,” moving it to devotion; “the human mind is moved as regards apprehension, and consequently also as regards the affections,” and when it is moved by “words signifying some object of devotion” then the mind is lifted up to God (ST II-II Q.83 Art.12). Contemplation also entails a happy medium between excesses of cognition or appetite: while the mind is neither “carried away to certain intelligible objects,” being “drawn away from objects of sense,” nor is “it caught up into some imaginary vision or fanciful apparition” (ST II-II Q.175 Art.3). As defined by Aquinas, contemplation involves both the senses and the intellect while leading us fully beyond them, transporting us—if only for a moment—to a realer-than-real state outside of reason, time, and the everyday. This experience does not escape from the bodily and the sensual, but rather delves further into them, giving depth, relief and splendor to the bodily and sensual; contemplation is an overflow of the “higher power” of the soul to the lower powers, which can even “assuage bodily pain,” allowing “the splendor without [corporeal place]” to “correspond to that which is within [corporeal place]” (ST I Q.66 Art. 3).

For us, the contemplative life takes place in a uniquely human way; Aquinas writes that “between man and angel” there is the crucial difference that, for an angel, the truth is perceived “by simple apprehension,” while for humans, we “arrive at the perception of a simple truth by a

process from several premises” (ST II-II Q. 180 Art. 3). Human contemplation is not angelic and is not animalistic—it is neither an immediate intellectual comprehension of truth nor a mere sensation—but instead uses “phantasms,” or mental images. In our “present state of life,” phantasms are what man must use “to see the intelligible species” of a thing (ST II-II Q. 180 Art. 5). Human contemplation, like art, therefore, is impossible without imagination, and it is this aspect of art that makes art uniquely human.

As humans, we are unable to arrive at contemplation without going through a process. Though contemplative life “has one act wherein it is finally completed, the contemplation of truth (...) and from this act it derives its unity,” it still has “many acts whereby it arrives at this final act” (ST II-II Q. 180 Art. 3). Aquinas details these acts throughout this article of the *Summa*, separating them out into three: cogitation, or the “reception of principles”; meditation, or “deducing from [these] principles”; and lastly, contemplation proper, or the “contemplation itself of the truth.” By analogy, there must be three acts belonging to aesthetic contemplation. There is a cogitation when we perceive beauty—a reception of beauty’s principles, of integrity, proportion, and clarity—and a meditation, by which we “deduce” what the beautiful is from these principles. Finally, there is a “contemplation itself” of beauty. This analogy would fit well with a Platonic idea of aesthetic contemplation, in line with Diotima’s ascent, for example, as we begin by “cogitating” principles from particulars and then abstracting until we reach a contemplation of beauty itself. It also seems to be the interpretation of Aquinas expressed by Umberto Eco.

When elaborating further on each of the acts proper to contemplation, however, Aquinas complicates this analogy, challenging the idea that our experience of beauty is merely a cycle of abstraction and judgment, a continual intellectual comparison of particular artworks with

universal beauty. Firstly, Aquinas writes of cogitation that it “would seem to regard the consideration of the many things from which a person intends to gather one simple truth.” This is not a reasoning out of the principles of beauty, so much as it is comparable to the act of viewing a painting at what Sokolowski would call a sentential level, as we use the “perceptions of the senses” to gather many images into one; it is the “mind’s glance which is prone to wander,” as we scan different aspects of a painting while building a single image from them (ST II-II Q. 180 Art. 3). Meditation, meanwhile, is described by Aquinas here as “the survey of the mind while occupied in searching for the truth.” Aquinas reduces this act to the verb *speculo*, or “beholding,” clarifying that meditation is the kind of act involved in seeing something in a mirror, rather than the kind of act involved in seeing something from afar, such as from a “watch-tower.” This must mean that meditation involves seeing “a cause in [the] effect” of whatever we are looking at, just as when we see something in a mirror we know we are seeing a reflected likeness. Likewise, in our experience of art, this must entail our seeing an image as kind of effect belonging to a cause. To meditate upon an image is to see its causal creative act implied in it, to see an image uniquely as a creation, and to dwell in part upon the mystery of creation. Meanwhile, the final act belonging to contemplation is not a comprehension of the One or a union of our essence with Beauty, as it is for the Neo-Platonists, but merely “regards the simple act of gazing on the truth.” It is “the soul’s clear and free dwelling upon the object of its gaze,” and for our experience of beauty, this is the aesthetic *visio* (ST II-II Q. 180 Art. 3).

Josef Pieper touches upon this aesthetic *visio* when he writes that, at the moment we gaze upon something beautiful, “our soul is passive and receptive,” drawing a crucial distinction between observation and contemplation (Pieper, “Leisure” 30). While observation “is a tense activity,” a straining and focusing of our attention, contemplation is merely “to open one’s eyes

receptively to whatever offers itself to one's vision." Just as an object's clarity draws in our sight and gives an objective foundation to our perception without requiring us to intellectually grasp its formal properties, and just as an image gives us a representation of an object without requiring us to intellectually grasp that object's essence, so for the overall act of contemplation do "things seen enter into us" without requiring us to exert "any effort or strain (...) to possess them." The aesthetic *visio* is passive, receptive, and non-possessive—and radically so, even to the point of non-linearity and non-temporality. Pieper endeavors to explain Aquinas by writing that the aesthetic *visio* is our link to the angelic or super-human; "non-discursive vision (...) apprehend(s) the spiritual" and fulfills "the highest promise in man." The effect of this contemplation is like sleep, Pieper writes; when we allow our minds to "rest contemplatively on a rose in bud, on a child at play, [or] on a divine mystery" for example, "we are rested and quickened" (51). Aesthetic contemplation's radically passive nature does not detract in any way from the fact that it is still an activity; it is merely an activity of leisure, which is not reducible to either "non-activity" or "inward tranquility." Pieper compares it to "the tranquil silence of lovers," who abide "in concord" with each other and derive their strength from this concord. Similarly, clarity—or the concord between viewer and object—gives the contemplation of beauty its strength and quietude.

The processes within the single act of contemplation are considered "movements" by Aquinas. "Since," Aristotle writes, "it is through sensible objects that we come to the knowledge of intelligible things, and since sensible operations do not take place without movement, the result is that even intelligible operations are described as movements" (Aquinas ST II-II Q. 180 Art. 6). This allows Aquinas to give the intelligible operations of cogitation, meditation, and contemplation analogous spatial movements; a "'circular' movement, by which a thing moves

uniformly round one point as center,” a “‘straight’ movement, by which a thing goes from one point to another,” and finally an “‘oblique’” movement, consisting of the other two movements in combination (ST II-II Q.180 Art. 6).

Aesthetic contemplation is particularly analogous to the circular movement. Aesthetic contemplation is not a discourse of reason from “sensible to intelligible objects”—it has a kind of “immobility,” which Aquinas explains “belongs to the circular movement” (ST II-II Q.180 Art.6). In the act of aesthetic contemplation we are transfixed by a painting; we do not merely take sensory evidence from a painting, abstract these into general properties, and then theorize generally about Beauty itself, in a temporal, linear ascent. There is one uniform act of beholding in our experience of beauty, unlike an argument proceeding from premises to conclusion. However, there are sub-parts within our beholding, in which by compiling one image from many, for instance, we make use of the movements that belong to art as an analogy to human language. Sokolowski writes accordingly that art “calls for intelligence (...) and not reasoning,” as we “engage not in inference but in articulated identification” when we see a painting (Sokolowski 348). We experience artworks rather than solve them, and in doing so come to understand “something about the kind of actuality we call happiness” (348).

Aesthetic Experience

For Plato and the Neo-Platonists, this experience of beauty begins with ordinary experience but ends in philosophical contemplation, a grasping of form or inner form. Experiencing beauty is an inevitable result of philosophically contemplating, but is far from encompassing it. Using Aquinas’ terminology, an aesthetic experience for Plotinus would belong dispositively and not essentially to the act of philosophical contemplation. Philosophical contemplation applied to beauty can reach only for an aesthetic knowledge—the knowledge of

what beauty is, as a form, and the judgment of particular instances of beauty by this standard—and has little bearing upon our experience of this beauty, which involves aesthetic contemplation. This makes necessary an account of aesthetic contemplation in itself, something Aquinas’ theory can help provide. This is evident from what Umberto Eco writes of Aquinas, that for Aquinas, “aesthetic pleasure (...) is connected with a cessation of the efforts of abstraction and judgment,” rather than being connected dispositively to those efforts. In aesthetic experience, “that discoursing” of the reason “must be laid aside and the soul’s gaze fixed on the contemplation of the one simple truth” (ST II-II Q. 180 Art. 6). Like the angels, we arrive at “uniformity” in aesthetic contemplation without rationally discoursing, rejecting Platonic dialectic. However, because aesthetic contemplation is a uniquely human task, unlike the angel we cannot have the soul simply intuit intelligibles while “withdraw[ing],” completely, “from externals” and from sense objects (ST II-II Q. 180 Art. 6). Instead it is appropriate to the act of aesthetic contemplation, even at its highest fulfillment, to remain somewhat embedded in the external object—the artwork—we are viewing. We must always imagine the simple uniformity of an artwork, for instance, from a variety of particular external things.

In aesthetic experience, for Aquinas, there is a three-fold uniformity. Not only is there the uniformity of an artwork, but there must be a uniform act of contemplation, and finally there must be a uniformity of soul in order to engage in this act of contemplation. Achieving uniformity in the soul is done, Aquinas writes, “by directing all the soul’s operations to the simple contemplation of the intelligible truth” (ST II-II Q. 180 Art. 6). Aesthetic contemplation does not require us to acquire truth “by a certain discoursing of the reason,” a quality we share with angelic beings—but it requires us to acquire “intelligible truth from sensible objects” via species, a task appropriate to the human condition, and to make use of “all the soul’s operations,”

involving the entire human being as a spiritual whole that is greater than the mere sum of its parts and powers (ST II-II Q. 180 Art. 6). Aesthetic contemplation is somewhat half-human, half-angelic this way; the utmost limit of what the human mind is able to achieve. For Aquinas, this inherent mixture does not diminish our capacity to experience beauty in any way, but rather advances it; as C.S Lewis writes, this uniquely human way of acquiring truth is “why we know something about God which they [angels] don’t,” because “there are particular aspects (...) which can be communicated to a created being only by sensuous experience” (Lewis 216). Our materiality, particularity, and process- or movement-driven contemplation do not hide beauty behind a veil, but rather bring it to light.

In regards to contemplation, Aquinas writes that “bodily vision gives pleasure”; pleasure both from the act of seeing itself, and pleasure from seeing “a person whom one loves” (Aquinas ST. II-II Q. 180 Art. 7). The experience of beauty occurs somewhat in between being pleased by the mere act of seeing, and being pleased by seeing someone whom one loves; it occurs when we see something pleasing. It is neither the pleasure of using our sight nor the pleasure of seeing something we already hold dear, but is instead a love that newly sprouts up from apprehending a beautiful object. Aquinas writes further on the difference between apprehension and love. While love “demands some apprehension” of what is loved, the full apprehension that is requisite for “the perfection of knowledge” is not requisite for “the perfection of love,” allowing for the possibility “that a thing is loved more than it is known”; love can be perfected without perfect knowledge (ST I-II Q. 27 Art. 2). Our experience of beauty involves a loving apprehension rather than a full apprehension leading to a perfect knowledge. Beauty straddles the middle road between the two kinds of pleasure—the one of seeing, the other of seeing an object one loves as it is in itself—and is somewhat unique, adding a cognitive element to the mainly appetitive

faculty of contemplation. While “the term also and the end of the contemplative life has its being in the appetite,” aesthetic contemplation must have its term—though not end—in the cognitive, because the “love” is first generated cognitively through our senses and imagination and not in the same way in which we love a person (ST. II-II Q.180 Art.7). Since “the cognitive power moves the appetite, by presenting its object to it,” Aquinas writes, there arises “in the appetite various movements according to various aspects of the apprehended object”—or the movements belonging to aesthetic contemplation (ST I-II Q.40 Art.2). In our contemplation of beauty, we can trace a broad movement that begins in the senses and flows into imagination (as our faculty of imagination is necessary to perceive images from sensory information, and is a motion “caused by the sense in act” ST I Q.111 Art.3). In one continuous process of experiencing beauty, then, beauty is known imperfectly in the cognition, via sensation and then images, while simultaneously beauty (or our love of these images and sensations) is perfected within the appetite via aesthetic contemplation.

Umberto Eco writes that the “*visio*” involved in aesthetic contemplation “has nothing to do with the ecstasies of mystical love, nor with sensuous responses to sense stimuli”—but is rather “an intellectual type of cognition, which produces a disinterested type of pleasure.” The cognitive side of our experience of beauty is not, however, to be exaggerated over the appetitive. Etienne Gilson critiques the mainstream scholastic perspective on art when he writes that “the great Scholastics (...) defined art as the correct rule to follow in matters of production,” despite the fact that “whatever the intellect contributes to the making of a work of art is initiated (...) by the artist’s love for the being of the work to be born” (Gilson *The Arts* 61). Scholastics, for Gilson, wrongly over-emphasized intellect in matters of art, while from Gilson’s perspective “whatever there is of cognition in art belongs in an order other than that of knowledge,” and is

tied to the being of the artwork itself rather than knowledge of beauty or art-making skill in general. Though this critique is from the artist's perspective, not the viewer's, it can be applied to aesthetic contemplation. The aesthetic experience is more than just a discursive reasoning and knowledge; "Deeply involved in the order of factivity and at its service it [art's] terminal point is not a proposition, but a being, namely that of the work to be done" (61). Our "speculative knowledge has the general as its object," while "the artist's cognitive activity always takes him to a concrete object." For Gilson as for Aquinas, the cognitive side of aesthetic experience must culminate in love for being, as opposed to love for knowledge, and makes necessary the involvement of delight rather than pleasure. Aquinas extrapolates upon this, while arguing that the contemplative life has its being "in the appetite" in Question 180 of his *Summa*, that the act of aesthetic contemplation consists ultimately of loving God: "inasmuch as through loving God we are aflame to gaze on His beauty" (ST II-II Q. 180 Art. 1). Because "everyone delights when he obtains what he loves, it follows that the contemplative life terminates in delight (...) the result being that love also becomes more intense" (ST II-II Q. 180 Art. 1). The end state of aesthetic contemplation, then, is one of delight.

Umberto Eco's writing on medieval art helps to clarify the characteristics of this delight. Art in the medieval world, according to Umberto Eco, required a non-causal understanding of things, in what Eco calls "a kind of 'short circuit' of the mind." The "short-circuiting" of the mind—or a lapse in the mind's discursive reasoning and temporal narration—brought a hyper-reality to life (Eco *Art and Beauty* 54-55). What was supremely "real" was determined by overlapping and meshing inside a web of symbols; reality is exemplified and made "more real" as more interconnection between symbols was made. While Eco discounts the medieval understanding of art as ultimately imitative of nature, the concepts he identifies of the mind's

short-circuiting, the exemplified reality caused by symbols or images, and the overall experience of beauty leading to hope in God's order are all crucial parts of aesthetic contemplation for Aquinas, and all become a part of what Aquinas means when he refers to delight.

Aquinas writes that whatever “terminates the movement of the appetite in the form of rest in the thing desired, is called the pleasant” (ST I Q. 5 Art. 6). We are more than merely “pleased,” however, when contemplating art. Beauty is experienced because it affects both our intellect and our affections, involving the whole person and not simply an emotion or intellectually grasped form. While delight taken merely as a form of pleasure is not unique to human beings—as all animals can experience pleasure—Aquinas distinguishes delight from pleasure by connecting it to joy. Joy is something unique to human beings, because it is something that occurs only—as must happen in our contemplation of sacred art, in the veneration of something rational—“when delight follows reason” (ST I-II Q. 31 Art. 3). Because the contemplation of an image requires veneration, it is partly intellectual, and not just merely the pleasure of putting our sense organs or imagination to use—and so as Aquinas writes it is “in the mind” where we must find the “spiritual joy” in which aesthetic contemplation should culminate (ST II-II Q. 82 Art. 4). At the same time, joy takes us beyond the limits of the human mind by transporting us to the eternal; aesthetic contemplation does not entail mental effort, but its final cessation. Aquinas expands on how delight allows for this eternity when he writes that delight is essentially not in time, as a resting of desire (ST I-II Q. 31 Art. 2).

Though joy transports us from the finiteness of life, when we experience joy in viewing art, we are never taken out of our actual interaction with the artwork, as though we were ripped away into the heavenly realm or a world of pure form. Our apprehension “by going ahead, not only keeps its eye on the good which man intends to get, but also on the thing by whose power

he hopes to get it” (ST I-II Q. 40 Art. 2). We are seeing two things at once, the invisible in the visible, the infinite in the finite, Christ in a sacred icon, at once and together. Aquinas uses this formulation to define hope and separate it from other passions. Aesthetic pleasure, as with all pleasure, is caused by the presence of something that we perceive, either in two ways: “first,” Aquinas writes, “in knowledge,” as we know something only “by its likeness” in our minds, and secondly, “in reality,” as “one thing is in real conjunction” with us. With “the pleasure of hope,” Aquinas writes—as with the perception of images—we find both ways together: in hope “there is pleasurable conjunction, not only in respect of apprehension, but also in respect of the faculty or power of obtaining the pleasurable object” (ST I-II Q. 32 Art. 3). In experiencing sacred art, precisely this conjunction is at play—a conjunction between an icon of Christ and Christ’s real presence, a conjunction between the viewer’s passive perception and his active prayer—and this conjunction is the full flowering of our contemplation of beauty. Aesthetic contemplation, then, finally ends in hope—a joy that, while taking us out of ourselves, does not take us out of the particular image—and by deepening, rather than abstracting from, the particular, allows man to “reckon something possible, which before his experience he looked upon as impossible” (ST I-II Q. 40 Art. 5).

Appendix: Thomistic Meditation on an Aesthetic Experience



The above are two photos of a painting found in Thomas Aquinas' cell at a monastery in France. The painting portrays Jesus' crucifixion, with Mary to his left, and a figure who is probably St. John to his right. Here I will try to put a Thomistic theory of aesthetic contemplation into action, in a way Aquinas himself might have, meditating upon this icon in his cell.

We come across this painting, not in a museum, but early in the morning after an unsatisfying sleep following a hard day's work. The various images we, at first groggily and then more clearly, see here—the luminous halos, distinguished from the gilded background and the darkness of the cross and ground; the scarlet red cloth worn by Mary and John; Jesus' emaciated

arms; his twisted posture, loincloth and sinewy legs—combine together in our “cogitation” into one image. Jesus’ arms seem to stretch out so wide they almost frame the painting, both seeming to petition God, and to reach out to hold the image together as a whole. As part of this grasping of the unified image, we begin to meditate upon the implied causes; Jesus’ posture is dramatically twisted, which both orients his body closer to Mary and contrasts his strangely dimensioned figure with the perfectly, proportionally dimensioned monolith of the cross. Mary and John are not simply looking towards Jesus—they are lamenting, their hands wiping tears and supporting their heads, as their eyes glance upward towards Jesus’ downcast eyes. The upward arc of Jesus’ arms and his outstretched hands, meanwhile, show a moment of perfect resignation.

We must then allow our eyes to rest in the painting, as we accept what it gives. This is not a representation of Jesus’ suffering—he is suffering now, within the painting, as his broken body leans pathetically against the immaculately solid form of the cross. His posture in the painting is fulfilling a dual role, both of resigning to God with a desperate question, and of lifting the viewer’s mind upward. In Jesus’ posture—as happens philosophically, in pondering the mystery of Jesus’ mysterious nature—we feel we are meeting God. The mystery of Jesus’ nature and the impossibility, yet actuality of an Incarnation come to our minds as a shock that prompts wonder: divine essence meeting human flesh; the flesh then adding and taking away nothing yet still participating all the same; the depth of this new flesh from its relationship to the divine, a depth that leads us away from the darkness of the flesh and into the light of the divine; a journey into the depth of the flesh towards divine light, away from the dark surface of the flesh, at the end of which suddenly reveals the flesh again, a hundred times more flesh-like, even more particular and more material than before.

This is all an experience that would only sputter away, were we to take our eyes away from the painting for even a second. Something about the contrasting interplay of the colors, the dramatic postures that give each figure a realistic integrity, the proportions of the figures and the cross, both their individual parts together and themselves together—the entirety of every sensual detail—is absolutely inseparable from and even necessary for our mind’s reeling into the mystery. It is even as though each were fueling each other. This prompts, firstly, a pleasure: it is almost physically delicious to feel an interlocking between sense and intellect; it is almost, like jumping off of a cliff, a physical, bodily thrill to let our mental agency go and give ourselves up into what we are seeing; and it is almost something like the peace we imagine close to birth and death to feel ourselves so “conjoined to the enunciations” of the image (Aquinas 279). Secondly, almost simultaneously, there is a delight. We are feeling these nearly physical and tactile sensations because we are charmed by the union of, the merging of, the invisible with the visible in front of our eyes. This delight is a pleasure that does not feel mentally self-produced, that does not seem to come from any part of us whatsoever but rather from ourselves as a great whole, and that does not falter. It is a pleasure that does not seem as though it had ever been something we did not truly have, and does not seem as something we could ever truly lose. It is outside time, and we are free and outside time for a moment. We realize now that we have never been simply seeing, but also praying. We feel, in addition to the mystery of the Incarnation, the mystery of Creation—what it must mean, as something from nothing, as a possibility allowing for us and for the image we are experiencing, and how this both infinitely expands and collapses our distance from God—and, at last straining our comprehension, we feel as though gravity has reversed, and that we are falling back into immediacy. As we slowly return this way to time and earth—our eyes fixed steadily on the image all the while, even focused more closely on each detail than we

were before—we feel bodily relief, like waking from sleep, and a great sense of hope: that our selves, and the things around us, as they were, are not really as they are, and do not have to be.

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