

RESTLESSNESS AS AN IMAGE OF GOD

• D. C. Schindler •

“God, in Jesus, assumes the world’s restless desire for God, so that the world can come to share in God’s restless desire for the world.”

1. *Lessing’s choice*

According to Aquinas, the creature desires God implicitly in everything that it desires.¹ Desire, moreover, is not simply one among the variety of the creature’s operations, but represents the essence of the creature, for, as Aristotle affirms, nature is a principle of motion,² and motion—understood here in the broadest sense as including all varieties of change—is intelligible only as ordered to an end, which means, as an analogous appetite. If nature founds the intelligibility of things, if it is what identifies them as the things they are, then all things are ultimately defined by their desire: on the one hand, *explicite*, by that which specifically actualizes them as the beings they are, and on the other hand, *implicite*, by the God who is the perfection of all their perfections, and the end of all their ends. For the classical mind, the world is intelligible as a whole *precisely* because

¹Aquinas, *De veritate*, 22.2: “All things tend to God implicitly, but not explicitly . . . [B]ecause God is the last end, he is sought in every end.”

²Aristotle *Physics* 2.1.192b10–25.

it is shot through with desire (God moves *all* things—again: this includes every single change that occurs in the universe—by being the universal object of desire [τὸ ὄρεκτόν]³), and only because this desire has a single destination (“Our hearts are restless until they rest in you”⁴), which gathers its multiplicity into unity.

But does desire, in fact, seek a final destination; does the heart ultimately want to *rest*? This question can be put in a number of ways, as we will see, and it has received a variety of responses, depending on one’s understanding of nature, of God, and of the meaning of life. In the eighteenth century, at the outset of a bitter polemic against a Lutheran pastor, the German Enlightenment thinker Gotthold Ephraim Lessing imagined a choice that bears directly on this question:

What determines the value of a man is not the truth that he possesses, or claims to possess, but rather the sincere efforts he applies to acquiring it. For he develops his powers not by possession of the truth but by the pursuit of it, and his ever-growing perfection lies alone therein. Possession makes one passive, indolent, and proud.

If God were to hold all truth enclosed in his right hand, and in his left hand only the constant drive for truth, albeit with the provision that I would never cease to err, and said to me: choose! I would with all humility take his left hand and say: give this to me, Father! The pure truth belongs to you alone!⁵

This passage not only offers an extraordinary glimpse into the ambiguous soul of the modern age—is the choice Lessing makes a reflection of pious modesty, or is he leaving to God nothing but what he just dismissed as the cause of passivity and indolence?—but it serves to set into relief a set of questions relevant to any age. On the one hand, if possession were not in some sense *good*, it would be absurd to strive after it (and, indeed, even if we were to say that striving *in itself* is a good thing, we make the “possession of striving,” as it were, an end to strive after, or else we simply remain lifelessly still). On the other hand, to make all striving come to a definitive

³Aristotle *Metaphysics* 12.7.1072a25.

⁴Augustine, *Confessions*, 1.1.

⁵Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Eine Duplik*, in *Werke*, vol. 8 (Munich: Carl Hanser Verlag, 1979), 32–33.

end in possession would seem to imply quantifiable limits to the human heart, which would be offensive both to human dignity and to the unfathomable mystery of the object of the heart's desire. Is the world, in fact, so small?

These questions become even sharper in the present age. Postmodern thought has objected to the classical view sketched above because it appears to present an ultimately "closed" system. The classical view seems to force all change and movement in a *single* direction—"all roads lead to Rome"—presumably in order to make the world make sense. From this perspective, desire, which seeks rest, thus seeks "totality," which means that it springs from a problematic need to master and control. The Christian will also necessarily object to an ultimately closed system—if this is what we indeed have in the classical worldview—to the extent that such a system excludes both human and divine freedom. The question, however, is whether the objection to the "closed system" requires the rejection of possession and the subsequent absolutizing of restless striving, such as we encounter it in some contemporary thought. In the essay that follows, we will discuss the relation between rest and restlessness, satiety and desire, in terms of classical beauty, the post-modern sublime, and Christian glory. The theme obviously exceeds what a brief essay can accomplish, but we hope there is nevertheless some merit in sketching out in even a rudimentary way some of the basic features of the theme and the important issues it raises. The aim is thus to set these features into relief through a broad historical overview rather than an in-depth analysis of any single aspect.

2. *Beauty as ecstatic contemplation*

Plato refers to the "divine mania" of love as God's greatest gift to man.⁶ There is some irony in this, because the picture he paints of the recipient of this gift is not obviously attractive: he is desperate and distracted; his eyes are wild and he goes about shoeless and in rags, driven by a single care, namely, to remain as close as he can to his beloved.⁷ To feel the sting of this irony, we have to recall that Plato is in a certain sense boldly setting this hapless character

⁶*Phaedrus* 249e.

⁷*Phaedrus* 252a; *Symposium* 203c–d.

before his audience in the place of the Homeric hero.⁸ Poverty, which is usually considered an affliction, nevertheless represents the keynote of Plato's view of love, because the desire he takes to be identical to love is unintelligible without some sort of lack.⁹ One cannot desire what one possesses except, as it were, *sub specie absentiae*: if one does desire what one already has, in other words, it is only for the future possession that does not yet, in this moment, belong to one. Desire always implies that something is missing, and thus sets in motion the effort to remedy this deficiency. In order to avoid a common misinterpretation, however, it is important to note that lack does not suffice on its own to explain desire, such as Plato understands it. Rather, desire arises from the lack of what one knows to be good, of what one is made for, and thus of what *belongs* already in some sense to one. For Plato, love is the child of *both* Poros (plenty) and Penia (poverty), *both* presence and absence: pure absence (ignorance) and pure presence (wisdom), he says, are equally static and fruitless.¹⁰ The drama that characterizes love requires the space between these two poles.¹¹

Now, this simultaneity of presence and absence is necessary if we are to be able to see the lover as a hero and thus restless desire precisely as a *gift*, but this simultaneity, in turn, presupposes the existence of a radically transcendent order. It is not an accident that, in the *Phaedrus*, the dramatic reversal by which love is transformed from being a scourge (first speech) into a blessing (second speech) turns on the introduction of a vantage that breaks open the immanent horizon of the sensible realm into the eternal dimension of what Plato calls the "really real reality." Socrates starts his second speech about love in the *Phaedrus* with a proof of the immortality of

⁸At the same time, we have to keep in mind that the Homeric hero resembles the Platonic *erastes* more than might initially appear to be the case: Homer sometimes associates the greatest glory with humble supplication. Consider, for example, Priam's begging the return of Hector's remains from Achilles, who is moved more by this act than by his own thoughts of either victory or revenge, in what is arguably the *Iliad's* climax. See Seth Benardete's concluding observation that the greatest transformation to occur in this epic is that from hero to man: *Achilles and Hector: The Homeric Hero* (South Bend, Ind.: St. Augustine's Press, 2005).

⁹*Symposium* 200a–e.

¹⁰*Symposium* 204a.

¹¹Cf. William Desmond, *Being and the Between* (New York: SUNY Press, 1995).

the soul, which, in comparison to the presuppositions governing the first speech, ushers in a radically new anthropology as the reference point for everything he will go on to say about desire and its object.¹² The new reference point, that of a reality that transcends in some respect what is immediately and phenomenally apparent, is crucial for understanding how Plato characterizes *eros*. Considered merely horizontally, as it were, presence and absence are mutually exclusive: a thing is either there or it is not. In this case, the absence of a desirable thing is bad, while the possession of it is good. But the “beautiful and good,” which for Plato is the sole object of love, lies in the “beyond.”¹³ To say that this transcendent reality is, in some respect, absent does not mean that it is not “here,” for the category of spatial or temporal location simply does not apply in this case. By the same token, the beautiful and good cannot be “present” in the manner of a “thing” juxtaposed to other “things.” There is no simple opposition, in other words, between the transcendence of beauty and its immanence, between its absence and presence. Beauty has a special status, in fact, for Plato: it is, he says, so radiant that, unlike the other transcendent forms, it can be *physically* seen.¹⁴ The desire it provokes likewise has a unique character, for even though its object is transcendent, the desire for it is felt in one’s physical being. Thus, in this case, one has a physical desire that cannot be physically fulfilled. Sexual desire, for Plato, is in truth a desire for the (essentially non-corporeal) beautiful *in* a body, and the intrinsic fruitfulness of this desire is a restless image, as it were, of the transcendence of beauty, its “endless”

¹²After an introduction, the very first point Socrates makes in describing the nature of *eros* is a proof of the immortality of the soul: 245c ff.

¹³In the *Symposium*, Plato affirms that the good is the sole object of desire (205e–206a), but he had just substituted it for the beautiful in Diotima’s speech, without any explanation (204e), as if the two were, for present purposes at least, convertible. While the formal distinction between beauty and goodness is important in relation to certain philosophical problems, we may treat them as a unity in the present discussion. For the Greek mind, the association between the two was so close that it warranted their being yoked together in a single, fairly common, word: *kalokagathia*.

¹⁴*Phaedrus* 250d–e: “But now beauty alone has this privilege, to be the most clearly visible and the most loved.” These two features are, in fact, necessarily connected: *Because* beauty bridges the distinction between the transcendent and the immanent realms, it is the object of *love*, which likewise bridges them (see *Symposium* 202d–203a).

reality.¹⁵ In a word, beauty for Plato is an essentially transcendent reality that becomes present only by way of an absence that is different from an immanent lack, or, more specifically, different from the lack of an immanent object. One could say that, with respect to a transcendent reality considered from within the immanent sphere, presence and absence are in a certain respect the same. Hence the paradox, for Plato, of specifically erotic poverty: its lack is not a simple negation, a deficiency, but is a positive presence; it is a window by which one becomes transparent to what lies beyond, and which thereby makes the transcendent reality immanently available. Alcibiades is constantly surprised to discover the divine abundance “inside” Socrates, which contrasts sharply with what turns out in fact to be its precondition, namely, his impoverished exterior.¹⁶

It is the nature of love, as Plato interprets it, to point beyond itself; indeed, its very being is this pointing. We could thus say that Plato has a thoroughly “ecstatic” notion of love: it is a self-transcending movement that takes its bearings, not first from the “self” that transcends, but from the beautiful and good on which it is set and to which it aspires.¹⁷ Love is not, in other words, ultimately defined relative to the lover, but relative to what is absolute, namely, the beautiful *in itself*.¹⁸ The essentially non-relative character of love’s object, however, means in principle that the movement of this transcendence has no definite end, that love’s ecstasy is not simply possession. In the *Symposium*, the so-called “ladder of love” arrives not at a simple conclusion, but at a boundless ocean of beauty in itself, which (non-statically) calls forth an ongoing abundance of fruits.¹⁹ In the *Phaedrus*, it is one and the same beauty that inspires the lover’s pursuit, his attempt to take possession of his object, *and* his reverential “letting be,” which allows his object to remain in some sense greater than he.²⁰ In the *Republic*, the good that represents

¹⁵*Symposium* 206c–207a.

¹⁶*Symposium* 216d–217a.

¹⁷For a more thorough treatment of this subject, see D. C. Schindler, “Plato and the Problem of Love: On the Nature of Eros in the *Symposium*,” *Apeiron* (forthcoming).

¹⁸*Symposium* 211a–b.

¹⁹*Symposium* 210d–e; 212a–b.

²⁰*Phaedrus* 254b–e.

that which all people desire implicitly in everything they desire never appears as an immanent object to put an end to that desire.²¹ A certain restlessness lies at the heart of Platonic love, and this restlessness is a sign, first and foremost, of the grandeur of its object.

At the same time, however, it would be wrong to think that Plato has in mind the “endless striving” that Lessing chose. Lessing opted for the pursuit *instead* of the object of striving, the perpetual absence *instead* of the presence, as if the two were simply opposed. This opposition implies the assumption that the “truth” one pursues is a merely immanent object; it rests on the denial, that is, of a genuinely transcendent order, which was, as we saw, the necessary condition for Plato’s paradoxical assertions about beauty’s provenance from poverty and plenty. Levinas seems to make the same assumption as Lessing when he claims that the desire Plato describes in the *Symposium* is ultimately not a desire for fulfillment, but a desire to desire, and therefore one that indefinitely postpones satisfaction.²² But this is quite different from what Plato actually says. Desire, Plato insists, is for nothing other than the good: a desire to desire makes no sense unless desire itself were an image of the good that is sought—which would mean, then, that the desire makes the good in some respect present, and so *actually* delights in the good. For Plato, the relation between the goal and the search is much more complex than it is for Lessing. There is a kind of frustration, a vain, vicious infinity in the striving one finds in modern German philosophy, a heaviness that Nietzsche regularly lamented, while Plato’s is quite palpably suffused with a playful joy. The difference between the two requires, as we will see, a change in the conception of both nature and God. Plato’s desire is full, without being static, and it is open, without being empty, without being blind and aimless. The striving is not end-less, in other words, but end-full, insofar as the (transcendent) end is present in every moment to the extent that the moment is lived ecstatically, in erotic poverty, in open desire for the good—and thus as an ever-new beginning. In knowing nothing,

²¹For the good as that for the sake of which one desires whatever one desires, see *Republic* 505d–e; for the ultimate transcendence of the good, see 509b.

²²See, for example, E. Levinas, “Philosophy and the Idea of the Infinite,” reprinted as chapter four of Adriaan Peperzak, *To the Other: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas* (Ashland, Oh.: Purdue, 2005), 114.

Socrates possesses in fact a deep wisdom. The restlessness of Platonic *eros* is somehow coincident with a contemplative rest, which is itself a reflection of the paradoxical simultaneity of lack and completion that we saw above.

Classical Neoplatonism in its best representatives does not betray this Platonic insight, but deepens it by making it a more comprehensive principle. Plotinus extends Plato's *eros* beyond the human soul, discovering it as a fundamental quality of being in general. For him, to exist means to live in what we could call a contemplative ecstasy. He describes the realm of being, which is in fact the realm of beauty, as neither static nor simply "on the move," but rather as always desiring and always being satisfied.²³ The articulate order of reality implies the analogous "movement" of difference, but in the eternity of being, this difference is coincident with perfect unity.²⁴ Rest and change are thus, in one respect at least, one and the same.²⁵ Indeed, for Plotinus, nature itself is contemplative down to the very core of its being,²⁶ which means for him that it receives its reality through participation in the coincidence of unity and difference in being in a manner appropriate to it, that is, within the limits of time and space. But this means that nature itself has a restlessness "built into it," as it were, a restlessness that is not simply the pursuit of its own truth, but at the same time is the fruit of its contemplative rest. For Plotinus, all being is restless, because being is "overfull" of joy: if the good and beautiful is the ultimate cause of reality, then being is ecstatic to the very end.

Or at least very close to the end. There remains an ambiguity in Platonism regarding the status of restless desire. Though it is undoubtedly the primary quality of the Platonic hero, Socrates, restlessness cannot be considered a perfection *simpliciter*. Perfection,

²³For Plotinus, being is not simply "static" identity, which would stand in dialectical opposition to the difference of becoming, but is the simultaneity of identity and difference (*Ennead* VI.7.13); it is "full" of the good and in this sense "satisfied" (*Ennead* VI.7.16), but because the good is essentially transcendent, it restlessly points beyond itself in its satisfaction (*Ennead* VI.7.22).

²⁴Which nevertheless remains distinct from the absolute simplicity of the One.

²⁵Plotinus identifies motion and rest in relation to Intellect, and therefore also in relation to being, which is identical with it: *Ennead* II.2.3.

²⁶*Ennead* III.8 (especially sections 3–5).

Plato affirms, can know no desire: the gods rest eternally; they are not ecstatic and have nothing to seek.²⁷ It is interesting to see that Plato hesitates to deny movement of God altogether—for, as he asks in the *Sophist*, is it possible that the divine not be alive and intelligent, and do not these imply movement of some sort?²⁸—but this hesitation is apparently overwhelmed in the end by the conviction that goodness in itself has nothing to seek.²⁹ In any event, if there is some hesitation in Platonism regarding the perfection of restlessness, that hesitation tends to disappear in the classical philosophy that is handed down through the Western tradition. The ambiguity regarding restlessness that accompanies an ecstatic conception of being is eliminated in the classical philosophies that do not have beauty as an organizing principle and for that reason lack a transcendent dimension: however differently they may present it, Epicureanism, Stoicism, and Skepticism share a similar goal, namely, *apatheia*: the serenity, the utter absence of any “restlessness,” which in these philosophies the human life that most closely resembles the divine.³⁰

3. *The tragic sublime*

It has often been remarked that the beauty that stood at the center of classical philosophy has lost its place in contemporary aesthetics, and that this place has been taken by the sublime. It is not possible in the present context to explore with any thoroughness the reasons for this shift, but, taking for granted that the observation has some merit, it sets the horizon for our reflection. What accounts for

²⁷*Symposium* 204a. Cf. *Metaphysics* 12.7.1072b, in which Aristotle calls *possession* rather than *receptivity* the “divine element” in thought, which is the highest perfection God exhibits.

²⁸*Sophist* 248e–249b. He concludes in this context that the highest reality must be “both” changing and unchanging.

²⁹*Republic* II, 380d–383a. At 381c, Socrates says “Then it’s impossible for a god to want to alter himself, but since, as it seems each of them is as fair and as good as possible, he remains forever simply in his own shape” (Bloom’s translation).

³⁰It is beyond the scope of the present paper to explore the question, but one wonders whether the *apatheia* one finds in the Fathers is a residue of Platonism, as typically claimed, or more often a sign of the influence of later Hellenistic philosophies.

the decline in the philosophical significance of beauty, and what is at stake in this decline?

Although the first sustained treatise on the sublime is quite old,³¹ the concept entered into mainstream philosophical reflection only in the seventeenth century—with Nicholas Boileau’s translation of that ancient treatise into French, and the subsequent use made of it by Edmund Burke and, most significantly perhaps, by Kant. According to Kant, the sublime is distinguished from the beautiful above all by its infinite character: while the beautiful can be grasped by the imagination (if not by the understanding), the sublime infinitely exceeds that grasp, either by magnitude or by power.³² In this respect, since it is actually disproportionate to the perceptive faculty by which we encounter the world, it cannot strictly speaking be experienced, but only suggested to our reason.³³ This is in fact why it generates a *negative* sentiment, that of fear, awe, and repulsion, in direct contrast to the positive feeling of (disinterested) pleasure produced by beauty. Kant describes it specifically as an “*agitation*,” which he opposes to the “*restful* contemplation” produced by beauty.³⁴

This difference accounts for the importance the sublime has for Kant, for it presents to him most vividly the source of human dignity: the greatness of the human being lies in his reason, the basis of his moral autonomy, i.e., his freedom. One of the most problematic challenges to autonomy, Kant believes, comes not from external authorities but from the inclination of one’s own nature. The beautiful is a symbol of morality; it bridges the gap, as it were, between nature and freedom by providing a kind of satisfaction to nature even while lifting it beyond its selfish inclinations. In this respect, it “trains” our nature for freedom. But the sublime sets into stark relief the discontinuity between freedom and nature: nature receives no satisfaction whatsoever from the sublime; it is simply eclipsed, disregarded. If we nevertheless seek out an “experience” of the sublime, it is because the sublime recalls man to his lordship.

³¹It is thought that the treatise *On the Sublime* was written in the third century A.D. by Longinus, but there is no conclusive evidence regarding the author.

³²Kant, *Critique of Pure Judgment* (=CPJ), trans. Werner Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987), 103–106, 119–123.

³³Thus, Kant says, “true sublimity must be sought only in the mind of the judging person” (ibid., 113).

³⁴Ibid., 115. Emphasis in the original.

A necessary condition for the rise of the sublime in Kant, and in the philosophies in his wake, appears to be the trivialization of nature that took place with the origins of modern thought. The causes of this trivialization are complex, to be sure, but there are certain watershed moments we can discern. It is essential, first of all, that we consider the difficult problem in the ongoing Christian appropriation of the classical tradition. The splendor of the soul's restless ascent to its origin, which is the hallmark of pagan philosophy at its best, is indispensable for a full understanding of the meaning of life. Nevertheless, from a Christian perspective, this ascent cannot be supreme, for it is Jesus Christ who ultimately reveals that meaning; and, as Scripture attests, he understands his life not in the first place as an ascent *to* the Father, but rather as a being sent *by* the Father to communicate the Father's love for the world. Moreover, the classical ascent depends essentially on the energy of nature, that is, on its intrinsic motion, as the governing principle; it takes place within a well-ordered cosmos, a *beautiful* and eternal whole, whose order depends on the limits set by nature.³⁵ According to the Christian vision of reality, however, the order of nature can only ever be *relatively* ultimate—relative, that is, to God's free and personal involvement in the world. Of course, in affirming this it is crucial that we not fall into the Enlightenment dualism between nature and grace whereby the “miraculous” intrudes upon, and so supplants, the constancy of nature, as if they were two opposing principles competing against each other within the same order. No, the absoluteness of grace must include within itself, and so do full justice to, the relative autonomy of nature. Nevertheless, it remains “above” nature. Even if nature in the ancient world is lived not as a closed system but as radically open to the transcendent, divine order, and thus as expectant, it still cannot finally comprehend within itself the Creator of this whole. Prior to God's free entry into history, there is no way to understand the principle of the world except from within that world, as a possibility projected on the basis of nature.³⁶ But—even though it is essential to avoid both a dualistic

³⁵The word “cosmos,” related to the word “cosmetic,” originally meant “ornament” or beautifully ordered whole. This order requires the limit (πέρας) implied by perfection.

³⁶There is analogy between this criticism and Heidegger's criticism of what he takes to be the essential limitation of metaphysics, namely, that it conceives being

opposition and a facile, extrinsic relation between the two orders—in the end God is not simply a possibility of nature.

Because of the importance of the Christian distinction, it is not surprising to find, in the late Middle Ages, a temptation to “close” nature precisely in order to protect God’s freedom, and then in turn to “burst” that system open in the name of the very freedom for the sake of which it was closed. In Platonic metaphysics, properly interpreted, transcendence is not simply opposed to immanent presence, so that we can never set the two orders against one another. But in Christianity, the relation becomes much more complex, insofar as the orders are now understood as analogous freedoms that face each other in a personal way. The difference, then, becomes more radical; but at the same time, precisely because it is personal, the intimacy becomes more profound. It is just this intimacy, however, that tends to slip from view, because it is, by definition, implicit. The radical novelty of Christian personal freedom—especially if “person” is understood, as it generally was in the Middle Ages, according to the Boethian definition as an “individual substance of a rational nature,” one of the primary characteristics of which was incommunicability—tended to eclipse the metaphysical intimacy of participation. As the conceptual sophistications began to exceed the original inspiration at the end of the Middle Ages, we thus have a logical hardening of the analogy of being in part in order to safeguard the difference between God and the world. On the one hand, then, with its absolutizing of the positivity of individuals as a reflection of the singularity of God’s action in the world, the metaphysics of nominalism emptied natural being of its inner depth. On the other hand, lacking the mediation of the *analogia entis*, late medieval mysticism began to embrace an intimacy without genuine difference. In both cases, nature ceased to have a positive, ontological significance in the relation between God and the world.

The most decisive moments in the trivializing of nature, made possible by this development in metaphysics, are two events that share a metaphysical kinship, whatever their historical relation may be: the scientific revolution and the Protestant Reformation.³⁷

on the basis of beings, and so from within the ontological difference.

³⁷In his study of German intellectual history, Ernst Cassirer proposes that Luther’s radical individualism and elimination of any objective mediation in the believer’s

One of the enabling causes of the scientific revolution, according to Pierre Duhem's classic thesis, was the Church's condemnation of the Aristotelian theses (1277), which, by "chastening" natural reason, as it were, liberated scientific research from the tradition that, while binding it, also kept its roots deep. The result of the revolution—which reached its climax in the scientist whom Kant regarded as authoritative, namely, Isaac Newton—is what we might call a strictly "empirical" sense of nature, without a qualitatively hierarchical structure, and therefore without the intrinsic philosophical or theological meaning it possessed in the classical worldview. Similarly, the Protestant condemnation of nature as "totally depraved," and thus without a positive role to play in redemption—without, that is, an inner order that is beautiful and good in an intrinsic and ultimate sense—transformed nature into an object of indifference or even contempt in relation to ultimate concerns. It is important to recognize that such indifference can coexist with a celebration of the beauty of creation as God's handiwork: one can cherish a poem because a friend wrote it, even though one would never bother to read that same poem if it had been written anonymously. However that may be, as modern thought emerges, a metaphysically grounded *philosophy of nature* begins to fade: its place is taken by science on the one hand and by theology on the other.³⁸ Schelling observed repeatedly in the nineteenth century that the lack of a philosophy of nature was the one thing common to the whole of modern thought.³⁹

relation to God was the seed of the tendency toward "endless striving" in late modern German philosophy. The rejection of an objective guarantee of salvation in faith leads in philosophy to the need for self-justification through the mastery of one's origin—i.e., the internal justification of one's presuppositions: "The energies here at work do not ultimately seek to prove or represent themselves in any objective work, but instead strive after the goal of achieving clarity regarding themselves, their origin, and their justifying ground. This is the turn that Luther's notion of justification undergoes in the realm of worldly culture" (*Freiheit und Form: Studien zur deutschen Geistesgeschichte*, vol. 7 of Ernst Cassirer, *Gesammelte Werke*, ed. Reinold Schmuecker [Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 2001], 24).

³⁸It is interesting to note in this regard that contemporary discussions revolve almost exclusively around the relation between "science and religion": we rarely hear the issue put as concerning the relation between "science, metaphysics, and religion."

³⁹See chapter one of Iain Hamilton Grant's book, *Philosophies of Nature after Schelling* (New York: Continuum, 2006). Hans Jonas, in a similar vein, claims that,

The trivializing of nature leads, then, to a trivializing of beauty, and with it, a loss of the philosophical and theological meaning of desire. This trivializing is shared, in fact, by both sides of the major debate in early modern thought. For the rationalists, such as Descartes, beauty becomes wholly “teleological” in an extrinsicist sense, and the correlative desire gets reduced to biological appetite. A piece of fruit is more beautiful than a flower because one can eat it, and a member of the opposite sex is still more beautiful.⁴⁰ One wonders how Descartes would make sense of the classic example of overwhelming beauty, the vision of the starry night sky. In any event, as one would expect, beauty becomes for Descartes reductively objective. By contrast, among empiricist thinkers, beauty becomes reductively subjective. For Hume, beauty is “no quality in things themselves,” for it describes merely the subjective feeling of pleasure that is produced in different individuals for different reasons.⁴¹ If beauty is wholly “purposeful” in rationalism, it surrenders all claims to purpose for Hume: beauty becomes simply a source of pleasure without significance because it lacks reference to anything beyond itself; it ceases to be of its essence a sign of the inner depth of being.

What is important here is to see that beauty is no longer, in either case, a revelation of the intrinsic meaning of things; and for that reason the desire that it inspires likewise ceases to be a disclosure of the meaning of human existence, a restless but joyful reception of, and ever deeper entry into, the gift of being. On the one hand, desire is utilitarian, on the other, it is simply effete. Neither version of the desire provoked by beauty is genuinely restless in any

in the modern period, a split occurred in philosophy between spirit and world. One of the reasons for his own investigations into the nature of the organism, then, was “that philosophy’s retreat into the mental half of the dichotomy—which left all of ‘nature’ to victorious science and substituted epistemology of natural science for the philosophy of nature whose very idea had been renounced—not only was a scandal of philosophy in itself, but also vitiated its work in the residual field of its choice (or captivity).” He discovered that his explorations into the philosophy of nature were an entry into “almost virgin soil!” (Hans Jonas, *Philosophical Essays: From Ancient Creed to Technological Man* [Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1974], xiii).

⁴⁰René Descartes, *Passions of the Soul*, trans. Stephen Voss (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1989), 67–69.

⁴¹David Hume, “On the Standard of Taste,” in *English Essays: Sidney to Macaulay* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Classics, 1909–1914), 7.

significant sense. Kant's attempt to reconcile the division between rationalism and empiricism through his view of beauty as presenting "purposiveness without purpose,"⁴² represents, as one might expect, just another version of the division, since it ends up wholly serving the subjective end of the reciprocal play of the faculties.⁴³ Other attempts at a more profound recovery of the significance of beauty—Shaftesbury in England, and Schiller in Germany, for example⁴⁴—have remained side currents in the philosophical tradition.

It is not a surprise, then, that the more profound post-Kantian thinkers should turn away from beauty and the apparently bourgeois self-satisfaction it implies, whether that be utilitarian or effete, and seek a more dramatic source of human meaning. According to Dieter Henrich, drama becomes the paradigm of beauty in this late modern period.⁴⁵ The stale forms of neo-classical art begin to yield to the infinite yearnings that the Romantics sought, not to "capture," for strictly speaking the infinite lay beyond words or concepts, but at least to evoke. The awareness of the mind's inability to capture what is highest and most meaningful leads in this era to various experiments in philosophical style, so that thinkers begin to write in fragments.⁴⁶ The (sublime) truth, it is believed, cannot be contained in finite forms, so these forms can present the truth only, as it were, indirectly through their self-destruction. What underlies this experiment is the assumption that nature, being essentially finite, is not adequate to what is most real, which is a striking assumption when we compare it to the ancient view of nature as the very definition of the highest reality. According

⁴²Kant, *CPJ*, 66; 84.

⁴³*Ibid.*, 61–64.

⁴⁴Cf. Schiller, *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man* (Mineola, N.Y.: Dover, 2004); Anthony Ashley Cooper Shaftesbury, *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times* (Montana: Kessinger Publishing, 2004). Both Schiller and, even more obviously, Shaftesbury attempted to recover a more Platonic view of beauty in contrast to contemporary theories.

⁴⁵Dieter Henrich, "Beauty and Freedom: Schiller's Struggle with Kant's Aesthetics," in *Essays in Kant's Aesthetics*, ed. Ted Cohen and Paul Guyer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 237–57, here: 256.

⁴⁶One thinks here of the most self-conscious use of the "fragment" form in Friedrich Schlegel and in Kierkegaard, for example, but the use of aphorisms becomes widespread in this period: Novalis, Schelling, Baader, Nietzsche, and so forth.

to Hegel, the movement to the Romantic infinite represents the culmination of the aesthetic, the first stage of spirit's development *qua* spirit, insofar as, here, spirit enters into its proper medium *precisely because* it moves away from (material) nature.⁴⁷

At this point, an unmistakably tragic note enters philosophical thought: from Rousseau to Schiller to Hegel to Schopenhauer to Kierkegaard to Nietzsche, and eventually on to the postmodern philosophers. In the tragic, the depth of the human soul is revealed precisely *in* the incapacity to find satisfaction, and in the rejection of rest. Contradiction and impossibility are celebrated, in some supremely paradoxical sense, as salvific. There remains in late modernity a dream, if not a hope, of genuine resolution—Hegel's spirit undergoes the labor of the negative for the sake of an ultimate freedom; in his early work Nietzsche spoke gratefully of tragedy as a blessing and in his late work sealed the circle of the eternal return with an all-affirming, all-redeeming love of fate; even Marx anticipated a general emancipation in history, while Freud sought to *heal*—but it is clear that such a dream turns more and more into a heroic gesture, the point of which, as Camus will eventually say, is the heroism itself.

It is interesting to consider one of the pictures of God that emerges in late modernity, namely, the God of German Idealism who has so to speak internalized the disjunction between freedom and nature. Thus, since God represents the perfection of all perfections, and since contradiction becomes an expression of perfection, this God stands as the paradigm of tragic restlessness. An ancient gnostic theme returns here, insofar as God is viewed, for example by Jacob Boehme, as containing within himself a deep, opaque darkness. Schelling claims that this internal darkness is necessary for God's freedom: God shows his sovereignty most definitively by *overcoming* himself and thereby revealing the triumph of freedom over nature. For Hegel, who follows a similar path, negativity becomes the essential element of spirit; without negativity, spirit would be inert like matter. An inert spirit, however, could hardly claim divinity when compared to the thunderous stirrings of human spirit in history. Thus, the fullness of spirit, *concrete* spirit, cannot but include within itself contradiction in its supreme form, namely, the

⁴⁷Cf. Hegel, *On Art, Religion, Philosophy*, ed. J. Glenn Gray (New York: Harper Torchbook, 1970), 114–117; 125–127.

contradiction of complete self-alienation, i.e., of hell. One wonders what relationship Hegel's God has to that of Luther, who likewise shows his divinity by embracing, and so reconciling, within himself pure contradiction: *simul justus et peccator*. However that may be, Hegel envisions God in precisely the terms in which Goethe describes the devil: *der verneinende Geist*, the spirit that *negates*.⁴⁸ The replacement of beauty by the sublime entails a God who "proves" his divinity by refusing to be at rest.

What characterizes the postmodern thought that follows is above all just this collapse, which rests in restlessness alone and makes the endless its end. In the place of late modern drama, we have a "perpetual rehearsal," in which meaning is endlessly deferred.⁴⁹ It does not seem accidental that postmodern philosophy coincides with a movement in (sophisticated) art toward the wholly non-representational—unnatural—and the tendency to replace beauty by the sublime. Popular art, by contrast, has little of the sublime's *gravitas*: it becomes wholly "beautiful," or perhaps better, "pretty," in the sense of offering immediate gratification; in this respect, it becomes a simple token of capitalist exchange, which earns still more contempt for beauty. Because nature is not viewed in its depths as metaphysical desire for what is genuinely transcendent, we are left in the end to choose between the trivial and the tragic. In postmodern philosophy (of the Continental variety at least) we are scarcely given a choice, since the desire for clear sense, for reliable meaning, and for access to "truth" is pathologized as an infantile fetish and dismissed under the name of a "metaphysics of presence." It is claimed that behind this metaphysics lies a totalizing desire to *master*, and that this desire itself arises from a deep-seated insecurity. Nature has, indeed, begun to seem wholly depraved.

In reaction to this tendency to totalize, desire gets wholly detached from any determinate object, which then gives it a

⁴⁸See *Faust*, I.1, line 338. Even in Goethe, the devil's negativity becomes an essential means by which God accomplishes what is good. Tellingly, Faust, as he translates the Bible, rejects the phrase "In the beginning was the Word" as too passive (i.e., "restful"), and writes instead, "In the beginning was the Deed (*Tat*)."

⁴⁹Ben Quash, inspired here by Foucault, proposes such a view as what it means truly to get beyond modernity, by which he means a pathological need for closure and therefore a constant preoccupation with ends: "Drama and the Ends of Modernity," in *Balthasar at the End of Modernity*, by Lucy Gardner et al. (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1999), 139–171, here: 140.

mysterious infinity that provides an *Ersatz* for the ancient, “determinate” infinity of God. Desire can in this regard become its own object, because it takes on an essentially religious quality, even though it remains wholly without any content (religion without religion).⁵⁰ Many of the prominent philosophies of the twentieth century, however significantly they may differ among themselves, are easily recognizable as a reaction to the desire for gratification and the *ressentiment*-driven aspiration toward mastery that characterizes the bourgeois soul: there is Heidegger’s *Abbau* of the metaphysics he reads as culminating in technology and the Will to Power, Strauss’s making an ultimate and endlessly problematizing skepticism the prerequisite for magnanimity, Lyotard’s idolizing of the sublime, Derrida’s absolutizing of *différance*, Lacan’s necessary tragedy of the rejection of the Father(’s law), Levinas’s wholly negative encounter with the wholly other, Marion’s celebration of the essential *impossibility* of agape, and so forth. Tragedy or contradiction of one form or another becomes the final word here, which assigns restlessness its character: desire collapses either into immediate, definite gratification or ever-mediated, in-definite deferral. In either case, it is without any significance in itself. Because it no longer has any relation to metaphysical *eros*, it is reduced to silence about the meaning of life.

4. Herrlichkeit: *The Glory of the Lord*

It would be tempting to dismiss the modern and postmodern sublime as a fruitless detour in the Western tradition and simply call for a recovery of the fullness of beauty, a rediscovery of the infinite amplitude “contained” within it, learning to see beauty once again as holding out the possibility of preserving God’s perfect distance without surrendering his proximity. This is one of the aims of the recent book by David Bentley Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite*,⁵¹ which

⁵⁰Denis de Rougemont offers a fascinating description of the way endless desire tends to divinize itself, and thus become its own end, in his classic book *L’amour et l’occident* (Paris: Editions 10/18, 2001). Though his historical account has been discredited, it remains a compelling psychological and sociological insight.

⁵¹David Bentley Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2003).

has deservedly received much attention. In the book, Hart brilliantly shows that a trinitarian theology of creation and the Incarnation entails a much more radical challenge to the various failings of modern Western thought than dreamed of in postmodern philosophy: the Fathers of the Church (Gregory of Nyssa above all) and the theologians of the Middle Ages far exceed the nineteenth- and twentieth-century French and German thinkers in this regard.

For all of the insight in Hart's important book, one may nevertheless raise the question whether the classical notion of *beauty* on its own is sufficient to receive and communicate the full scope of the Christian difference, the full reality of the Christian form, or whether it does not threaten to burst with this event. In other words, one may ask whether the rise of the sublime in late modernity was *simply* the result of a fall in thought, or was not possibly, at least in some respect, one of the outcomes of the complex encounter between the classical tradition and the Christianity that exceeds that tradition. This is a subtle point, because the beautiful is essential, and can in principle accommodate an infinite distance, the vast mystery of God's transcendence, as Hart's book compellingly demonstrates. Even so, it remains the case that Christian transcendence is not simply identical to the transcendence of the good in Neoplatonism, that the Incarnation is not simply the revelation of the reconciliation of infinity and determinate form, and as such the paradigm of all aesthetics,⁵² but is in fact also a deed on our behalf, which discloses its full sense only through the engagement of dramatic encounter.⁵³ To put the question starkly, how does the Cross fit into classical aesthetics?⁵⁴ It does not seem accidental in light of this issue that Hart both begins and ends with the aesthetic (and so, for example, does

⁵²Hart cites Bonaventure's description of Christ as the "*perpulchrum*," the epitome of beauty (320).

⁵³We are not claiming that Hart fails to acknowledge this, but only that the moment of drama does not represent a decisive and indispensable aspect of Christianity as he presents it here. Instead, because "beauty" is both the first and final word, there is a certain exclusiveness in his interpretation of salvation under the aspect of *form*. The emphasis on form is no doubt crucial in relation to the various modern and postmodern reductions, but one must also be careful to avoid, in reaction, a reduction to the aesthetic.

⁵⁴Ratzinger discussed just this question in a lecture he gave to the members of Communion and Liberation in Rimini, 24–30 August 2002: "The Beauty and the Truth of Christ." See www.ewtn.com/library/Theology/RATZBEAU.htm.

not mark out space for drama) and that he does not stress the distinction between glory and beauty.⁵⁵ The title of the book indicates his aim to show that there is nothing that the postmodern sublime does that cannot be done better by beauty. But pursuing this aim can dull the sting of discontinuity that glory represents, even as it salves the gash left by the sublime. We run the danger, in this case, of “aestheticizing” God, insofar as beauty, for all of its rapture, does not seem to be sufficiently “expropriative,” as it were, to do full justice to God’s sovereignty, which includes God’s free entry into history through the saving deed of Jesus’ death and resurrection: God is the Lord of beauty; he is, in short, the Lord (*der Herr*); he is glorious (*herrlich*).

The distinction between glory and beauty is crucial if we are to maintain a distinction—always within unity, of course—between grace and nature, theology and philosophy, faith and reason, and Christianity and the classical tradition. At the same time, it is crucial to distinguish this distinction from that between beauty and the sublime. The modern and postmodern traditions view these, in general, as dialectical opposites: if beauty concerns determinate form and therefore finitude, the sublime expresses infinity; if beauty is natural, the sublime does violence, it disrupts and de-centers nature either as spirit or as freedom; if beauty presents pure continuity with desire, the sublime represents discontinuity and so frustrates, thwarts, and commands desire. From within this opposition, we get—contrary both to the classical and the Christian tradition—rest without transcendence or rapture in beauty, and inexorable and inhuman restlessness in the sublime.

From the Catholic perspective, however, for all of its discontinuity, grace always retains an analogy to nature, and therefore glory always retains an analogy to beauty.⁵⁶ A Catholic

⁵⁵When Hart explicitly mentions the Christian notion of glory in this book, he explains that his concern is nevertheless to interpret it in terms of beauty. For example, he speaks of “receiving the glory of God’s work under the aspect of beauty” and describes glory, not as it were “in itself” but as it is interpreted through beauty: “where glory bestows itself as beauty,” and so forth (18).

⁵⁶If we were to flesh out this analogy, one of the most fruitful points of contact with the classical tradition would no doubt be found at the peak of Neoplatonic aesthetics. For Plotinus, the “beauty” of the One is discontinuous, in a certain respect, with all worldly beauty; it is both infinite and “formless” (not as lacking form, like matter, but as being the source of all form), and so represents what

understanding demands, in other words, a radically non-trivial view of nature, which thus sees it as *naturally* open from within to what lies beyond it (i.e., as created by and for God), and so sees beauty as inherently restless in its rest, both in the sense that it provokes self-transcending rapture in the one who beholds it, and also that it seeks fulfillment in the radiant self-disclosure and self-gift of God. By the same token, glory possesses, for the Catholic mind, a serenity and joy that is absent in the sublime, even while it affirms the dramatic discontinuity that this concept implies. Though both glory and the sublime imply an infinite transcendence of nature, glory retains an essentially receptive dimension, like beauty, since in the Christian understanding it never falls outside the reciprocity that characterizes personal love, while the (modern and postmodern) sublime excludes all reciprocity precisely to the extent that it rejects any determinate object in which it might come to rest.

The mysterious “content” of glorious self-disclosure and self-gift is, in fact, a Person, and indeed one who calls us in some sense even before we seek him (cf. 1 Jn 4:10).⁵⁷ What this means is that, according to the proper interpretation of analogy, the restlessness of the human heart, the groaning of nature, cannot present the ultimate measure for God’s self-gift, even while, at the same time, its finite nature, its reluctant, lukewarm and often complacent desire, is not simply obliterated by something foreign to that desire. It *is*, in fact, only a restless heart—i.e., a heart that desires and so is inwardly self-transcending—that can be transformed in such a way that it can learn to seek what it would not have anticipated on the basis of its own nature. As Marc Ouellet wrote several years ago, God does not simply fulfill his creature’s desire, but pours *his own desire* into the creature.⁵⁸ This is an event of glory (Jn 1:14), which is “greater than” beauty.

Plotinus calls “beauty beyond beauty” (*Ennead* VI.7.32–33). Here we see an extraordinary “natural” analogy to Christian glory.

⁵⁷The synoptic gospels begin, not with the human search, but rather with Jesus’ search: he surprises the first disciples in their daily business, and beckons them to follow him: Mt 4:18–22; Mk 1:16–20; Lk 5:1–11.

⁵⁸“[God’s] unfathomable love seeks not only to quench the thirst of its creature. It seeks to put its own thirst into the creature, to fill it with its own life of exchange” (Marc Ouellet, “Paradox and/or Supernatural Existential,” *Communio: International Catholic Review* 18 [Summer 1991]: 178).

But what can it mean to speak of God's "own desire"? At the center of Christian revelation lies a mystery that offers an endlessly nourishing surprise to human reason: the Trinity. For pagan philosophy, desire is simply incompatible with the nature of what is highest, i.e., with God. But beauty, because of the inner transcendence, the "ever greater" character that is essential to it, cannot be perceived or apprehended except through desire. It therefore follows that, while God can be beautiful for the human soul, and indeed for all things in the cosmos, he cannot be *essentially* beautiful, because he cannot be beautiful "for" himself. It is arguably such a God that implies the wholly closed system, the oppressive "totality," that postmodern thought has sought to open, and the ungodly god that Heidegger rejected under the name of "ontotheology": there is, in the end, no freedom in the *causa sui*, which makes definitive self-determination the final word on reality.

But the sublimely tragic God that late modern and post-modern thought puts in its place is in the end offensive to both faith and reason, since it marginalizes the revelation of God such as the theological tradition has mediated it, and rejects the ultimacy of perfection, i.e., the completeness without which reason ceases to be rational. The postmodern God, too, has no joyful desire, but only tragic longing or impotent confusion. But the trinitarian God, in whom absolute simplicity coincides with infinite difference (i.e., abiding difference between Persons who are, as God, infinite),⁵⁹ which is never to be overcome, because the differences between the Persons are not, pace Hegel, negative limitations but the positive source *and* fruit of unity understood as love; the God, that is, whose Spirit is *donum doni*⁶⁰ and so contains within his perfection the "distance" of generosity and grateful reception, has room, as it were, for his own desire and thus can be said to be, even for himself, beauty—or better, glory. It is in light of this view that Benedict XVI cited with approval Dionysius's startling claim that

⁵⁹According to Aquinas, there is a real, not just notional, difference between the Persons in God (*ST* I.28.1, and 28.3), but this does not complicate the divine simplicity (I.40.2 ad 1: "The persons are the subsisting relations themselves. Hence it is not against the simplicity of the divine persons for them to be distinguished by the relations").

⁶⁰On this, see Antonio López, *Spirit's Gift: The Metaphysical Insight of Claude Bruaire* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America, 2006).

God is *eros*,⁶¹ and that Balthasar could speak of the “Je mehr” [ever greater] as having analogous meaning in God’s relation to himself.⁶²

It is here that we clearly see the most genuine reversal of the classical tradition: as Charles Péguy puts it, God makes the first move; the feeling he expects us to have in his regard, he first has in our regard, namely, a restless desire, an anxiousness on our behalf.⁶³ God, he suggests, not only loves us, but has hope for us, and hope for genuinely free creatures burdened by the stain of sin does not come without a tremor of worry, the tremor that, according to Péguy, every father knows well: The sheep that was lost, the soul that was dead, “caused the very heart of God to tremble / With the shudder of worry and with the shudder of hope.”⁶⁴ Of course, a proper theological interpretation of this worry requires a vigilant attention to the demands of analogy, which would keep us from simplistic anthropomorphizing and attributing to God the finitude and imperfection that is immediately associated with our own experience of worry. Nevertheless, what would forever remain contradictory for a classical philosophical view of God, namely, the

⁶¹See Benedict’s first encyclical, *Deus caritas est*, 9.

⁶²See, for example, Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, vol. 5: *The Last Act* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1998), 77–78: “Man will always be seeking God, even when he has found him—and particularly then; this is not only because of the weakness of man’s finite cognitive powers but also because of the superabundant vitality of infinite love itself. It is characteristic of ‘genuine love’ that it ‘cannot tire of looking at the beloved. . . . Thus the Son, in the Father’s presence, is forever beholding him in a new way,’ and although ‘he knows that, from whatever side he sees him, he attains the whole Father, he is not slow to see him from new sides and, by eternally finding him, to be eternally seeking him’ [von Speyr, *World of Prayer*, 226]. There is no contradiction involved in saying that God’s eternal here-and-now allows him to bestow his infinite riches as he will, displaying aspects that are ever new; otherwise, in his essence, he would not be absolute freedom. This freedom is equally operative in the relationship between the Persons. Thus ‘the Son is both the primal expectation of the Father and his primal fulfillment. This unsurpassable expectation is being continually surpassed in its fulfillment, even though the expectation itself was unsurpassable. . . . This same exuberance is at work in the procession of the Holy Spirit: Father and Son see their reciprocal love surpassed as it proceeds from them as a Third Person’ [*World of Prayer*, 23].”

⁶³Charles Péguy, *The Portal of the Mystery of Hope* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1996), 72–73.

⁶⁴*Ibid.*, 78.

idea that God could not only know individual human beings but be *concerned* about them—and to what an extent! Péguy remarks—becomes not exactly “conceivable” in the sense that the astonishment over the mystery disappears, but quite real, with a God who is Trinity.

One of the implications of this reversal is that restlessness acquires a new aspect. Rather than indicating a simple lack that makes it essentially non-divine, as Plato originally supposed (whatever hesitation he may have had regarding a “static” view of God), it now becomes the positive expression of love. Christian restlessness is not only a desire to receive from the other but at the very same time a desire to give oneself. One may be tempted, here, as C. S. Lewis does in relation to the nature of love, simply to contrast pagan restlessness as acquisitive desire *for* the other with Christian restlessness as generous gift of self *to* the other,⁶⁵ but we must realize that the most radical form of generosity can be to place oneself freely in a position of dependence on, need for, the other, to give oneself in the form of a generous receptivity that allows the other genuinely to give himself. Once again, Péguy offers the insight:

He who loves places himself, by loving,
By that very act, from then on, into dependence,
He who loves becomes the slave of the one who is loved.
It's normal, it's the common lot.
It's inevitable.
He who loves falls into slavery, consigns himself, puts himself
under the yoke of slavery.
He becomes dependent on the one he loves.
And yet it's this very situation, my child, that God made for
himself in loving us.
God has deigned to hope in us, because he wanted to hope for
us, wait for us.⁶⁶

The perfection of God's generosity includes the gift of being able to receive the response of his creature. While Greek philosophy saw the

⁶⁵Cf. his introduction to *The Four Loves* (New York: Harcourt and Brace, 1988), 1–9. Lewis admits that the distinction is overly simplistic, but he ultimately does not leave room for a significant revision.

⁶⁶Péguy, 81. It is essential to emphasize, of course, that God's “dependence” is in no way a subordination to his creature, but an expression of his perfect sovereignty, which can give even this.

whole of the cosmos turned toward the “wholly other” first principle, which itself was turned only to itself and thus only to what was “not other,” for Christians the “wholly other” God is *also* turned in some respect toward what is other. The highest love, in this respect, retains to the very end an analogy to the human experience of love. Contrary, then, to the views of love that always regret in some fashion the satisfaction of desire, and the receptivity this implies—such as we find, variously, in Anders Nygren, Levinas, Derrida, Marion, and so forth—however much glory lies beyond the beautiful, it is *not* its opposite, but its most profound fulfillment. And this means that natural beauty itself already offers a foretaste of the lordliness of God.

From this perspective, we might interpret the Incarnation as just such a gift of self: God so loved the world that he sent his only Son (Jn 3:16), who has in the world no resting place to lay his head (Lk 9:58) as he unceasingly carries out the will of the Father who is always at work (Jn 5:17). Indeed, there is no place in the world for love to come to a definitive rest. We recall the beauty that stirred Augustine’s endless desire, which both drove him into *and* beyond the world:

I asked the heavens, the sun, moon, and stars; and they answered, “Neither are we the God whom you seek.” And I replied to all these things which stand around the door of my flesh: “You have told me about my God, that you are not he. Tell me something about him.” And with a loud voice they all cried out, “He made us.” My question was the attention I directed to them, and their reply was their beauty.⁶⁷

It is beauty that draws Augustine to the things of the world, and it is beauty that sends him endlessly beyond them, just as one and the same beauty, for Plato, drives us to possess things and to let them be in wonderment. The heart is restless, for Augustine, because the very essence of the beauty it seeks above all other things is simultaneously a presence (“He made us”—i.e., the Creator is present in us) and an absence (“We are not he”). The Son of God who takes on human flesh takes on just this restless human heart. But this beautiful desire is at the same time taken up and embraced within the glorious divine love that seeks nothing more than to do the will of the Father, who

⁶⁷Augustine, *Confessions*, 10.6.9.

seeks to reconcile the world to himself. There is a dramatic exchange here, an extraordinary encounter within Jesus' heart between divine and human love, in which each desire is reversed as it is fulfilled, and so in which every end becomes a new beginning.⁶⁸ In other words, as the perfect "image of the glory of God," Christ is the perfect image of the divine restlessness, the love that, by remaining faithful εἰς τέλος, to the end (Jn 13:1), shows that it will stop at nothing in its relentless, desirous pursuit of its errant creation, which in turn has as its ultimate *telos* the greater glory of God. The Son's mission, then, is not simply to satiate the world, but to take up and perfect its own desire, precisely while transforming it. God, in Jesus, assumes the world's restless desire for God, so that the world can come to share in God's restless desire for the world. In the end, while the God of classical philosophy shines forth as ultimate beauty, only the God whose complete perfection includes a "restless" love for the world can be glorious.

In "beholding the glory of the Lord," St. Paul tells us, we are "changed into his likeness from one degree of glory to another" (2 Cor 3:18). Being transformed in Christ means coming to share ever more deeply in both the Son's love for the Father and in God's love for the world. Because of the perfection of Christ's redemptive act, this restless love will always share in the eschatological completion, so that at its heart lies a joy that casts out all fear (1 Jn 4:18). God's love comes, as it were, to an end in us: ἐν ἡμῖν τετελειωμένη (1 Jn 4:12). "And so," Paul explains, "there remains a sabbath rest for the people of God" (Heb 4:9). But this end is not the stillness of death; it is the stillness of wonder at what is ever greater, and so brings ever new life while it calls for ever deeper involvement. The gift that Christ offers to us all in his prayer to the Father on the night before he was handed over is the very encounter of divine and human love that lies at the most intimate center of his being, an encounter that itself rests within the mystery of the unity between the Son and the Father in the Spirit:

⁶⁸To be sure, divine love is "reversed" only in an analogous sense, insofar as its total perfection always already includes and therefore anticipates, as it were, the surprise of this "reversal." Péguy interprets the great value of the "lost sheep" in the parable as being due to the repentant soul's having "[c]aused a feeling, as if it were unknown, to rise, to beat in the very heart of God. As though it were a new heart. As if it were a new God. I understand, I know what it is I'm saying. Of an eternally new God" (79).

The glory which thou hast given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and thou in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that thou hast sent me and hast loved them even as thou hast loved me. Father, I desire that they also, whom thou hast given me, may be with me where I am, to behold my glory which thou hast given me in thy love for me before the foundation of the world. (Jn 17:22–24)

Lessing's dilemma turns out, then, to rest on a false dichotomy, for God does not give to the human heart the endless search for truth without sharing with his creature also the joyful wisdom of contemplative rest, the fruit of his definitive deed of reconciliation—"it is finished." At the same time, he does not keep the truth for himself without also generously partaking of the restless search, which Lessing knew was in some sense the more glorious lot.

As we saw at the outset, Aquinas claimed that creatures desire God implicitly in everything they desire. Because desire always aspires to its object under a particular aspect, and thus desire both presupposes and posits something about the nature of its object, we have to recognize that every desire is an implicit and "existential" claim about the nature of God. It is not only the implicit affirmation of God's goodness and beauty, but however subtly also an interpretation of the nature of that goodness and beauty. The trivializing of beauty that reduces it to the immediate gratification of superficial desire, and the supplanting of beauty, in reaction, by the sublime that contemptuously thwarts desire and renders it absurd, are arguably forms of implicit atheism. For they either wholly immanentize God, by measuring him against the immediacy of our wants and so denying his infinite transcendence, or they limit God to a dialectical otherness by leaving the ultimate simply "open" and so deny the definitiveness of revelation. But a truly transcendent God is at the same time truly immanent, and so an adequate desire must reflect this paradox. Both of these inadequate modes are rejections of the *glory* of God, which, as Ignatius says, is the final end of all things,⁶⁹ and as Scripture reveals, is also God's end.⁷⁰ The inner form of *genuinely* restless desire, as the Catholic mind interprets it, is the praise of God's

⁶⁹Ignatius, *Spiritual Exercises*, 184–85.

⁷⁰See for example Jn 17:1–5.

glory,⁷¹ a restful celebration that remains joyfully restless in its “inability” fully to express either its gratitude or its eagerness to do the Father’s will—“Who is sufficient for these things?” (2 Cor 2:16). In this, it reflects the life of Christ, who is the perfect image of the Father’s glory, and thus of God’s own supremely blessed restlessness. □

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⁷¹“We who first hoped in Christ have been destined and appointed to live for the praise of his glory” (Eph 1:12).