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# Beauty and Error: Re-Visions of God from the Poetic Site

ASHLEY GAY

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## **THE BEAUTY OF ASYMMETRY: JUSTICE *EN ROUTE* TO LOVE**

In her meditation, *On Beauty and Being Just*, Elaine Scarry suggests that aesthetic encounters are inseparable from ethical concerns.<sup>1</sup> The errors that beauty exposes, the desire to replicate that it sets in motion, and the schemas it opens through “perceptual acuity”—she argues that all serve as primers for enacting justice.<sup>2</sup> In transposing Scarry’s text into theological aesthetics, then, we cannot neglect the concerns of human suffering. Therefore, this paper will pursue her observations through Biblical poetry—the texts hung taut between theophany (beholding God) and theodicy (holding God in contempt).

First, I will expose the “error of beauty” inherent in the ethical symmetry of retributive justice. Second, with the insights of liberation theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez’s *On Job*, and Iain Matthews’ *Soundings from St. John of the Cross*, I will suggest God’s sublimity as the asymmetry that exposes this error.<sup>3</sup> From the asymmetrical site of sublime theophany, I will then re-enter Scarry’s text as an apologia of love. This will require reading against Scarry’s concept of ethical symmetry, focusing instead on her own asymmetrical sites of beauty: the object, the event and the replication. I will conclude by sketching love’s aesthetic as asymmetrical beauty, exemplified in two theo-poetic sites: the Creator’s incarnation and the created’s sacramentality.<sup>4</sup>

## **THE ERROR OF SYMMETRY: EXPLORATION UNTO *EKSTASIS***

We will begin this “exploration” with two intentions: in the popular sense of *examining* (French, *explorer*) and in the etymological origin of *out-cry* (Latin, *ex-plorare*). This, then, is the move: from courtroom *examination* of a God as symmetry (order, balance), into the *out-crying* of the psalmist who suffers, then sees.

The psalmist’s outcry enters the threshold of prayer in search of a God, an Other asymmetrical to the “order” or chaos that has slighted him. This move toward God will require something of an ecstatic transfer. I employ *ekstasis* here in the philosophical sense: displacement of self, rapt by an alluring other.<sup>5</sup> While dissymmetrical circumstances (injustice) displace, and reliance on symmetry (retributive justice) stalemates,

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

2. *Ibid.*, 62.

3. I have chosen the aesthetic concept of asymmetry to signify an unbalance, a disorder that trembles one’s notion of order. Asymmetry jars anticipation by suggesting movement, change, difference, or a lack of balance between incommensurable sides. For a concise account of symmetry compared to asymmetry, see I. C. McManus, “Symmetry and asymmetry in aesthetics and the arts,” *European Review* 13, no. 2 (2005): 157–180.

4. I write theo-poetic under the sway of George Steiner’s *Real Presences*, which links sacramentality and aesthetics in the incarnational rhetoric of *poiesis*—“meaning made form.” *Real Presences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 187.

5. The term also holds a dual aesthetic meaning, as Angela Dalle Vache summarizes in *The Visual Turn*. She relays *ekstasis* as employed by film theorists: both in an “expulsion of meaning” and an “expressive conversion from the visual to the audible.” *The Visual Turn: Classic Film Theory and Art History* (Piscataway: Rutgers University Press, 2003), 20–21.

the asymmetrical God calls from some distance, his voice and vision making a way. This God wrests people from prisons (of false expectations, of pain, of injustice) only by helping the trapped break through in desire's reach.

What might this shift look like in scripture—from the clamor of words that de-center, to the clarity of insight that overwhelms? It would require an exposition of false expectations, or an evacuation of prior meanings that one might see or hear anew. We think of Elijah who experienced the clamor, only to be claimed by a disproportionately subtle whisper. We witness this disproportion amplified and reversed in a more startling scene: the servant whom God is pleased to crush under the dissymmetry of undeserved affliction.<sup>6</sup> Is it so that even this innocent servant, “after he has suffered . . . will see the light of life and be satisfied” (Isa 53.11)?

The psalmist corroborates this turn. “O my God, I cry by day, but thou dost not answer,” gives way to profession:

For he has not despised or abhorred  
the affliction of the afflicted;  
and he has not hidden his face from him,  
but has heard, when he cried to him . . . (Ps 22.24)<sup>7</sup>

Though the servant may be satisfied, and also the psalmist, how might we glimpse this turn to our own satisfaction? It may be impossible to explicate in text what can only be experienced in life. On the one hand, we cannot deny the biblical testimonies of God's transfiguring self-revelation. On the other, if we cannot, should not, trap God's glory in theological reasoning, a more realistic question would be: What might we make of these post-glory turns? *What happens in the center of the volta, that space between “Where are you?” and “I will yet praise you!”* Between the question and the praise, some light has broken in to change despair to desire, and desire to hope.

One might find it unsatisfying to absolve God's pleased violence or negligence with one stroke of vision. However, what if the light of God overflows our very sense of justice as symmetry, of innocent suffering as dissymmetry? What if God's beauty basks every error in light, exposing even our own errant ways of assessing the dark?

A holy light from elsewhere (God's self-revelation) requires a God asymmetrical to experience.<sup>8</sup> This is a God felt as distant and different (transcendent), and yet radically interior (immanent): a light bound by the darkness of our deepest unknowing, a presence marked by absence. Job experiences this paradoxical proximity. Working from the pathos of God's absence to *ekstasis* in God's presence, he confesses, “I once knew you only by hearsay, now my eyes have seen you.”<sup>9</sup> We are reminded of Isaiah who prophesies the same in poetic anticipation, “The people walking in darkness have seen a great light . . . a light has dawned” (Isa 9.2 NIV).

The desirous reach for dawn, for the “Father of lights . . . who pours himself out abundantly, without partiality, wherever he finds space” implies an opening to receive.<sup>10</sup> It is this break of schemas that one

6. I am using dissymmetry in contrast to asymmetry. Dissymmetry is the jarring circumstance that limits us (injustice, undue suffering, devastation). Asymmetry is God's response that he initiates freely, a granted abundance (grace, or a jarring action that exceeds our schemas concerning God).

7. I prefer here the translation of Gustavo Gutiérrez, *On Job: God-Talk and the Suffering of the Innocent*, trans. Matthew J. O'Connell (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2009), 98–99.

8. God's light hovers, like spirit over the surface of the deep, casting from above into darkness. The separation is its means of operation, of being near enough to illuminate, but not so near as to blind. As in Job's early faith stance, “He reveals the deep things of darkness and brings utter darkness into the light” (Job 12.22).

9. Gutiérrez, *On Job*, 83.

10. Iain Matthew, *The Impact of God* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1995), 34.



perceives in prophetic poetry. But before the heightening of poetic profession, the humbling night. It is this cracking open of hardened theologies that one may feel with some violence. As Iain Matthews describes John of the Cross' "dark night of the soul":

'Night' presents suffering, not as the only place, but as a privileged place of God's inflow. In it, love not only comes; love also opens a space for its coming. That is the God-content of pain: it has power to unlock us at the point we cannot unlock ourselves. This accounts though for a second conviction: that healing comes particularly in situations that take us out of our own control, in the kind of pain which is bewildering.<sup>11</sup>

Psalms 22 reveals this process, oscillating (Yet . . . But . . . Yet . . . But . . . But, you, O Lord . . . ) between stanzas of suffering and glimpses of glory, between fear and trust, complaint and praise. Ultimately, the psalmist lands on a vision that exceeds the competing symmetry: a vision of abundance asymmetrical to prior possibilities. If this psalm were to stretch out its shifts so as to cover a lifetime, we might perceive its patterns in our own journeys, or even Job's "unlocking." In the psalmist's turns, we feel Job's bewildering shift from accusation to praise, to a vision of cosmic proportions. Something has happened to effect this alteration. Some error in Job's assessment of God's justice, God's beauty, has come to light. God's wounding has in some way healed Job; and strangely, both have been exonerated, forgiven perhaps, by one another.

Gustavo Gutiérrez takes a closer look at this healing wound by reading anew the theophanic encounter. It is not simply that God's sublimity has chastened Job or the psalmist into sniveling apologies. Rather, the divine encounter is so sublime that it ruptures the capacity to complain. In the case of Job, Gutiérrez explains that "*naham* . . . used with '*al* [means] 'to change one's mind' 'to reverse an opinion.'"<sup>12</sup> Therefore, the text suggests that Job changes his mind about "dust and ashes." Because of God's disproportionate glory, Job's horizon has expanded through and in spite of suffering. The encounter causes him to exchange lamentation for "renewed trust"—or as Jeremiah envisions, "mourning for dancing" (Jer 31.13).

Scarry speaks similarly of beauty—how it exposes our errors by startling our schemas. She articulates two "errors in beauty." The first mistake is one that she calls "over-crediting" the phenomena of our desire. Over-crediting begins in perceptual generosity. Its gratuity gives way to erring, exposed suddenly when "something formerly held to be beautiful no longer deserves to be so regarded."<sup>13</sup> In this overgenerous assessment of beauty, the desired object (or person) is sure to disappoint the value we instill in it. At the moment of dissipation, the beholder experiences a beauty "newly gone"<sup>14</sup> —dramatized perhaps in the psalmist's cry, "Oh God, why have you rejected us forever? . . . We are given no signs from God" (Ps 74.1, 9).

This error might occur when one only sees God through the eyes of "covenant as contract" and its symmetry: I give, God gives; I am good, therefore God *must* be good to me. Symmetry sets in motion an economy of obligation in which God's gifts are expected, owed, and therefore not truly gifts at all. While the righteous may hope for prosperity and trust in the God of providence, the exposure of this first "error of beauty" reminds that God's love is beyond economics. Even the wicked flourish (Ps 37). This is the error that Satan presses in his trial of Job. Does Job believe that God's love manifests solely as deserved bounty?

If Satan wishes to expose this first error in beauty, perhaps God plans to enforce the second error. Scarry's second error addresses a beauty late arrived. In the case of "under-crediting" what we perceive, Scarry speaks of the new vision that disrupts our old modes of seeing, making us open to a re-vision. In this error, beauty is what breaks us, overtakes (*surprises*) us in some way, in order to correct how we had been

11. Ibid., 78.

12. Gutiérrez, *On Job*, 86.

13. Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just*, 14.

14. Ibid., 16.



mistaken. She describes beauty's moment of instruction: "the force and pressure of the revision is exactly as though it is happening one-quarter inch from your eyes."<sup>15</sup> The force gives way to restlessness, a renewing desire that seeks beauty, even as its difficulties remake. She writes, "Beautiful things have a forward momentum . . . incit[ing] desire . . . hurtling us forward and back, requiring us to break new ground, but obliging us also to look back."<sup>16</sup> Theologically transposed, the forceful revelation of another view incites the turn of repentance. In this paradigm shift, we reflect on our former claims, their errors, and progress with grace into new ground.

If we appropriate this language in assessment of God's beauty, the second error provides a reading of Job's encounter, and of the psalmist's turn. In the first error, suffering breaks our theological lenses that regard God's justice as symmetry. However, in the second error, God's theophany ruptures with a wound that heals. The theophany puts scales on the eyes that would claim retributive justice ("an eye for an eye"). It then opens the eyes to blindness, through and beyond darkness: desirous groping, the soul's eyes like hands, more reaching and receptive in their desperation. Until, like John of the Cross, Job encounters "a presence that emerges from within, from behind; as if one entered a dark room, and sat there on one's own . . . then, after some minutes, yes there is someone there, has always been, a silhouette becoming clear."<sup>17</sup> The re-vision arrives as a correction of clarity, as if the soul's eyes, adjusting to the dark, learn it is not alone, and never was.

#### THE AESTHETICS OF LOVE: BIBLICAL SITES OF ASYMMETRY

To speak of symmetry in this moment would be to deny the dark silhouette, the excess of the resurrection's third day, or the Lord who blesses "the latter part of Job's life more than the former part" (Job 42.12). We must therefore reclaim beauty as love's asymmetry in order to counterbalance and ultimately outweigh suffered injustice (dissymmetry). We will begin with a biblical account suitable to Scarry's notions of beauty as "sacred," "unprecedented" and "life-saving."<sup>18</sup> Thus equipped, we will return to the "dis-ease" of Job and the disinheritance of Christ.

The wise Solomon once adjudicated between two prostitutes. Both claimed the living child; neither accepted the dead. Their claims would seem symmetrical. Between the two women there initially stands no perceptible difference—except for the assumption that one is lying. The laws of non-contradiction are in play, so Solomon's litigation strikes a poor mitigation. An unsatisfactory verdict: cut the child in half, and each woman takes one half (1 Kings 3.25). He exposes the lie through the woman's outcry, "Please, my lord!" The one who would rather let live the whole is the one whose asymmetrical love stands above—and for Solomon, breaks—the symmetrical claims.

Elaine Scarry points to this "unself-interested" stance as one that gratuitous beauty engenders.<sup>19</sup> The beautiful person, artifact, or behavior arises without or even against precedent. It causes us to gape for a moment, to suspend our thoughts, to lose ourselves, and then search for a means to assimilate or understand the occurrence. Scarry confirms this pattern as it arises in three sites of beauty: the *object* of our halted gaze (i.e., a sunset, a vibrant flower, a lover's smile); the *event* that makes us blissfully adjacent (charitable deeds, prayer, praise); and the *replication* that strives to then beget beauty (continuing service, creating art, birthing children). These three sites have in common an experience of some singularity that animates us. And she claims that the animation is mutually giving: we instill in the surfaces of the beautiful a sort of vivacity, and in turn we are stirred to life. We enter into a "life-granting pact."<sup>20</sup> Beauty then becomes the convention for

15. Ibid., 15.

16. Ibid., 46.

17. Matthew, *The Impact of God*, 12.

18. These attributes of beauty arise in Scarry's section "On Beauty and Being Wrong," *On Beauty and Being Just*, 23–25.

19. Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just*, 87.

20. Ibid., 69.



care, for desiring and protecting the life of the other.

She echoes Iris Murdoch, who believes that beauty “connects us to virtue” insofar as it “alters consciousness in the direction of unselfishness.”<sup>21</sup> Before a beautiful object or person, we are caught up, taken out of ourselves in an “unselfing.” This ecstasy is not a self-forgetting, but an “adjacency that is pleasure-bearing.” Vulnerable to the beautiful, we take “delight in [our] own lateralness.”<sup>22</sup> Scarry explains, “the space formerly in the service of protecting, guarding, advancing the self is now free to be in the service of something else.”<sup>23</sup> She assumes that this adjacency then assists in “an *ethical fairness* which requires ‘a symmetry of one’s relations.’”<sup>24</sup>

At this move from aesthetics to ethics, three impediments arise. Just as one painting a beautiful flower does not simply recreate the flower, but produces an interpretation—the translation of the beautiful into the ethical requires more than mimesis. Love asks more than symmetry if beautiful action is to be a perpetuation (and not simply retributive oscillation).

First, as even Scarry observes, “injustice calls on us to create without itself guiding us, through pleasure, to our destination.” Whereas beauty woos us to behold and beget, to see and replicate acts of creation with joy, Scarry frames justice as the *duty* to create. What can help us make this arduous move from compelling beauty to compulsory justice? As she distinguishes, beauty may be natural, but justice is “artificial,” requiring “human hands to bring it into being.”<sup>25</sup> It requires embodiment, a living hermeneutic. Justice calls us to a different kind of beauty, one that Pope John Paul names as the “difficult beauty” of charity.<sup>26</sup> Plato too would urge us to “move from ‘eros,’ in which we are seized by the beauty of one person, to ‘caritas,’ in which our care is extended to all people.”<sup>27</sup>

The book of Psalms constructs this correlation—delighting in God’s creation as in his law. Psalm 19 speaks of the effusive “glory,” the “pour[ing] forth” of creation that overflows speech and silence. It speaks similarly of the law that is “radiant,” dripping its sweetness like honey from the comb. Here we approach the second difficulty of translating beauty into justice. Beauty as gratuitousness is amputated when brought into an ethics of symmetrical obligation. An economy of duty and desert shortchanges beauty’s generosity.<sup>28</sup> The very aspect of beauty that has one rapt is its *difference* from static reality—the way it stands above, “stands out,” is altogether unprecedented and somehow asymmetrical to experience.<sup>29</sup> Like the sacred, beauty seems a call of something “wholly Other” and “ever greater.”<sup>30</sup> It de-centers all notions of equality because it exceeds and precedes every response, interpretation, or replication that it begets.<sup>31</sup> When beauty woos in all its excess, it ideally begets its own train of beautiful actions. When ethics attempt to respond to this surplus, gratitude sets in motion an ethics of incongruence. If entitlement fosters checklist ethics, an ethics prompted by beauty would more resemble Christ’s asymmetry:

You have heard that it was said, “Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.” But I tell you . . . If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also. And if anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, hand over your coat as well. (Matt 5.38–40)

Christ’s beauty resides in its irrationality. We claim Christ’s words as true, but not in the categories of logic or in economies of the same. Justice proves necessary but insufficient. The cross as the cancelling out

21. Ibid., 112.

22. Ibid., 114.

23. Ibid., 113.

24. Ibid., 114.

25. Ibid., 115.

26. Karol Wojtyła, “Our God’s Brother,” *The Collected Plays and Writings on Theater*, trans. Boleslaw Taborski (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 227.

27. Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just*, 81.

28. For example, see the parable of the workers in the vineyard in Matthew 20.1–16.

29. Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just*, 22–24.

30. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theodrama: The Last Act* (San Francisco: St. Ignatius Press, 1998), 84.

31. Jean-Louis Chrétien, *Call and Response*, trans. Anne A. Davenport (New York: Fordham University Press, 2004).

of debts is not enough; ethics similarly beg a third day. The beautiful action exceeds obligation. This excess does not always imply profligate action so much as sacramentality: mustard seed deeds that impart more than they would seem to contain. In this way we can take our lessons from art, whose formal properties do not constrain meaning so much as widen its reach to endless replications. Similarly, in ethical action, small incongruities can lead to the enlargement of the other, expanded by grace. If art's formal constraints make meaning mobile, a beautiful choice is an actuality that opens up possibilities.

This brings us before the third difficulty of beauty's translation into justice. The ineffable otherness of beauty convicts us of some "true" experience we cannot readily articulate.<sup>32</sup> This criterion seems also a description for terror. Poets and prophets know this troubling reality: the Holy is both beautiful and terrible.<sup>33</sup> So how do we determine an ethic of beauty and not of violence? Scarry's encounter of beauty is not the only site of un-selfing. Death and torture threaten, not unlike beauty, to disinherit. Though she claims that the beautiful de-centers us, welcoming us even as it wounds us—there are other wounds where even beauty seems an ineffectual salve. What is the difference between the wounds of violence and those of beauty? Scarry's ethic, as an aesthetic appeal to symmetry, must go one step further.<sup>34</sup>

The poetry of the Book of Job has long served as a site for this dual interrogation of symmetry. Here the impediments to an easy relation of ethics and aesthetics profoundly unsettle us. Known story, but no less disruptive: Satan questions Job's faith as one of convenience. He accuses Job of a faith isometric to the pleasures of God's providence: "Does Job fear God for nothing?" In his question we hear the accusation: "Job can remain faithful because God's faithfulness is attractive." But when the aesthetics of abundance dissolve into the aesthetics of decay, Job in turn interrogates God's justice and his friends' theology of symmetry.

The fragility of conceptual symmetry breaks under the weight of suffering. Job erupts into poetry, an outcry wildly overflowing:

If only my misery could be weighed,  
and all my ills be put together on the scales!  
But they outweigh the sands of the seas:  
what wonder then if my words are wild? . . .<sup>35</sup>

Job's faith is apparently unmet by God's faithfulness. Eventually Job calls for a court trial and defense attorney. And while his court jester friends carry on, insisting upon the doctrine of retributive justice, Job's plea goes unsatisfied. God's beauty and his justice as "symmetry" prove unsatisfactory claims. The dueling claims of Job's theologians enact the very deficiency of this symmetry. Their claims of "evil done, evil received" assuage no better than the one who would suggest, "suffering acknowledged, suffering relieved." As it turns out, neither beauty nor healing lie in symmetry, but in the arrival of an asymmetrical Divine, who sweeps Job into another vantage. Carried from his own destruction and his friend's ongoing dispute, he beholds creation anew as if from God's "holy mountain, beautiful in [its] loftiness" (Ps 48.1–2).

So what theological sites might we point toward as holy mountains, locations of beauty's gratuitous disproportion, of love's asymmetry? I began by suggesting the incarnation of Christ and the sacramentality

32. Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just*, 31.

33. See, for example Yeat's description, "a terrible beauty is born." William Butler Yeats, "Easter, 1916" and *Other Poems* (Mineola: Dover Press, 1993). Or, Rilke's offering, "Let everything happen to you: / the beautiful and the terrible. / One must always fare forth: no feeling is beyond us." Rainer Maria Rilke, *Vom mönchischen Leben*, from *Das Stunden-Buch*, in *Sämtliche Werke*, vol. 1 (Frankfurt am Main: Insel Verlag, 1955), 294–295.

34. In *On Beauty and Being Just*, Scarry's main conversation partners are Rawls and Aristotle as proponents of symmetry in distributive justice (94–97). I would argue that she comes closer to justice when she explores Augustine's aesthetic value of proportion (98–99).

35. Gutiérrez, *On Job*, 23.



of creation. Both are predicated on “God with us”: transcendence residing in the immanent, the infinity of love constraining itself to the finitudes of form, in order to make grace mobile. Grace’s mobility, its arrival into perception, requires that truth sheer itself, concealing even as it reveals, confessing to some even as it confounds others.

Therefore, these sites reveal that beauty is as much a function of “giving up” (*kenosis*) as it is a “giving forth” (*epiphany*). Insofar as Scarry’s text leads us to this conclusion, it serves as an apologia of love. Like her vision of the beautiful, a vision of God’s asymmetrical love humbles us even as it heightens us. God’s beauty presents itself even as it breaks free from the reductive representations. So what representations might then be fitting responses to God? How might we engage God’s beauty without reducing it to our errors of perception? How do we acknowledge God’s love as wounding our categories, while granting God’s capacity to perpetuate our desire? Essentially, how to speak to or sing of God from Job’s mountain view?

If incarnation is the infinite inhabiting the finite in order to call upon us in love, it may be that our response requires a similar move: expressions that employ the finitude of words while evoking our desire to participate in the infinite. Speech that humbles us even as it heightens us: we find this paradox in the poetic terrains of prayer and praise. The Psalms provide a site from which the poet and the psalmist marvel at the glories of creation, and humanity’s place within it:

When I consider your heavens,  
the work of your fingers,  
the moon and the stars,  
which you have set in place,  
what is mankind that you are mindful of them,  
human beings that you care for them?  
You have made them a little lower than the angels  
and crowned them with glory and honor. (Ps 8.1–5)

Like the Serbian proverb, the psalmist reminds, “Be humble for you are made of dirt; be noble, for you are made of stars.” It is this de-centering disproportion that the psalmist’s prayer enacts—the paradox’s kiss between the wide heavens and the less-than-angels. It is from the psalmist’s song that we acknowledge our dust and our glory. And with what eyes can we hold both in view? With what eyes do we then behold the God the psalmist claims? This is a God of “steadfast love” (Ps 136) and “unchanging faithfulness” (Pss 100.5, 108.4, 119.90.)—who is yet addressed, in Jobean accusation: “But you have rejected, you have spurned . . . your anointed one” (Ps 89.38).

The psalmist’s prayer locates our capacities to praise nature’s beauty while lamenting human suffering. From the poetic site of the psalm, the speaker correlates praise with God’s immanent presence and lament with God’s troubling absence. Bound by God’s “steadfast love” on all sides, the psalmist no less questions deeply God’s justice. Perhaps we keep returning to the Psalms because of these tensions, these imperfections that expose the livingness of a God who asks our desire, not our heedless certainties.

The Psalms present a paradoxical glory, rather than an ossified claim to what is orthodox. The poetic site shirks neither the fullness of praise nor the emptiness of God’s abandonment. As Jacques Derrida claims, “The signature of a poem, like that of any text, is a wound. What opens, what does not heal, the hiatus, is indeed a mouth that speaks there where it is wounded.”<sup>36</sup> In other words, poetic texts best archive the wounds of injustice and beauty because they display the ruptures that time will not close. If the Psalms are “timeless”—returned to again and again—it is because they expose the fault lines that systematic theology might close or erase. Systems of justice might attempt to hide the wounds of human suffering or theophanic sublimity. Poetry, like prayer and praise, lets these wounds speak. The poetic site gives lips to desire, to keep it from becoming

36. Jacques Derrida, *Sovereignties in Question: The Poetics of Paul Celan* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 166.



unheeded despair or prematurely filled hope. The poetic site reminds that as God's *poiema*, humanity exists in the gap of Christ's resurrection wounds.<sup>37</sup> Like *Eros* born to *Poros* (Plenty) and *Penia* (Lack) in Diotima's tale, to exist because of Christ's wounds is to be in communion with *kenosis* and *ekstasis*, emptying and abundance. Desire becomes that which moves us beyond a mere "economy of the same" in ethics. Desire also equips us to see God anew (*re-vise*), as more than an idol of human making. Desire is what makes possible prayer, the poetic site par excellence, where we appear before God in order to be changed.<sup>38</sup>

Read through the lenses of Scarry's "errors in beauty," our errors in assessing God remind that "the problem lies in our desiring too little, and growing means expanding our expectations; or rather, making [God's] generosity, not our poverty, the measure of our expectations."<sup>39</sup> It is not that God is equated with our notions of richness, and thereby obligated to gift us with the signs of presence we expect. Neither is God bound by our experiences of poverty. Rather, God's beauty arises in between these corrections, in our capacity to desire. Beauty can only be sustained in unrelieved desire. Likewise, faithfulness to God resides in our capacity to desire his righteousness and love—even when appearing in the one who has "no form or majesty that we should look at him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him" (Isa 52.2).

At stake in Scarry's "revisionary moment," as in our own re-visioning of God, is the disintegration of former standards. Reason and symmetry prove more resting places than destinations. If God's love is the destination of desire, our understanding of God may resemble an ever-receding horizon. To come close to God is to adjust our site/sight, in favor of an ever-desiring (ever faithful) re-envisioning on our part. The paradox is that this ever-receding, infinite horizon of God's love is also remarkably interior.<sup>40</sup> Depending on our position of vision, we might feel the infinite as the Whole that eludes the fragment, or the fragment overwhelmed by the Whole. From either position, the exchange is one of beauty, of love's gratuity as it engages desire's thirst. From the position of suffered absence, God's love is unexpected and therefore received with true gratitude. From the position of overwhelming presence, God's love is extravagant and therefore received as gratuitous. Both positions must occupy one another in shared desire, so that God is not simply the fulfillment of a contract.

The beauty of Job's encounter and the psalmist's turn occur through something like a "perceptual slap or slam," an "abrasive crash," a "radical alteration." It "breaks apart," "disintegrates" with its "striking sensory event."<sup>41</sup> These perceptual wounds function as poet-philosopher Jean-Louis Chrétien suggests:

to strike [us] with a wound of love that eternity itself could not close again . . . This annunciation of God to memory does not at all signify that we do not have to seek God, to desire God, and to tend towards God, for it is only if God manifests himself to us, precedes us, and foresees us that a desire for him is possible.<sup>42</sup>

Faith lives on these corrections that cultivate right desire. Pure desire, as such, is always under re-vision, never settled, always reaching. This restless yearning, unsettled upon a definitive representation of God's beauty, prevents us from worshiping an idol or simulacrum of God. In other words, we are wounded each

37. As Roberto Goizueta aptly reminds, "Yes, the resurrection will indeed ensure that our hope is not in vain, but not even the resurrection can erase the wounds; the resurrected, glorified body of Jesus Christ still bore (and bears) the wounds of companionship, compassion, solidarity . . . and betrayal and abandonment." Roberto Goizueta, *Christ Our Companion: Toward a Theological Aesthetics of Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2009), 12.

38. Augustine, *Sermon LXXX*, 7. "Desire still prays even when the tongue holds silent. Desire which is never slaked is a perpetual prayer. When does prayer sleep? When desire languishes." This is a translation shared by Jean-Louis Chrétien in "The Wounded Word." *Phenomenology and the "Theological Turn": The French Debate* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000), 163.

39. Matthew, *The Impact of God*, 33.

40. As St. Augustine reminds: "So learn to recognize what constitutes the most perfect harmony: do not go out of yourself, but enter into yourself; truth lives in your inner self . . ." *De vera religione* 39, 72, trans. Bruno Forte, *The Portal of Beauty: Towards a Theology of Aesthetics* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2008), 7.

41. Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just*, 12–13.

42. Jean-Louis Chrétien, *The Unforgettable and Unhoped For*, trans. Jeffrey Bloechl (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002), 88–89.

time we realize that we cannot make God in our own image. But these wounds heal us. Divine beauty, as a wound that heals, suggests an unsettling paradox. God's form is his unchanging faithfulness to be sure. However, *our* faithfulness, as right desire, is predicated on change: renewal of spirit and of sight.

Scarry claims that beauty corrects us through our perception of "particulars," in our resistance of false synthesis through the personal.<sup>43</sup> Here Christ becomes crucial—as the particular and personal, the Beloved whom we behold in faith. We claim Christ as representative of this God made flesh, spirit made sight. However, this confession does not mean that our attempts to replicate Christ *replace* him, or *move us past a desire* for God. In order to remain in relation to the "still point" of God's steadfast love, we ever orbit it with a pliancy made possible in beholding God, even as his Vision recreates us.<sup>44</sup> Gazing upon Christ, who exhibits the cross' death and the coming life, we are held in desire. We behold the difficult beauty of the Psalms: addressing grave injustices even as we seek God's asymmetrical love.

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43. Scarry. *On Beauty and Being Just*, 18–19.

44. I summon here T.S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*, where the still point is the love perpetually beyond desire, but around which desire no less revolves in a dance of constant re-vision. T.S. Eliot, *Four Quartets* (Orlando: Harcourt, 1971).