

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Beauty

William Clark · Thursday, February 16th, 2012

“Here were two men discussing “beauty”
seriously and with dignity as if they and the topic
were as normal as normal topics of discussion
between men such as soybean prices or why
the commodities market was a sucker’s game...

– B. H. Fairchild, *Beauty*

As far as I can remember, I only heard the word *beauty* spoken a handful of times during some twenty-two years of formal education, most likely in connection with lectures on art or music. And even then, only in its secondary, adjectival form. Beauty as a noun, attended by its own adjectives, never appeared in any of the curricula I can recall. Or in any of the conversations that still clutter my mind. It made a somewhat belated, but forceful, entry into my consciousness in its nominative form through a prose poem entitled – simply – *Beauty*, by the poet B.H. Fairchild in his slim volume, *The Art of The Lathe*. Few written works have moved or disturbed me more.

The only use of the nominative form of the word beauty that came onto my radar screen before then was against the background of mathematics and physics. Mathematicians and physicists ordinarily hold themselves to the highest standards of rigorous, un-negotiable hard data in determining that something is real, and therefore, just possibly, true. But since venturing into the unsettling realm of quantum physics, where almost everything is counter-intuitive – to say the least – one of the words they often use to justify their belief in its validity is *beauty*. This is not a word physicists and mathematicians use lightly; they feel it is impossible that something so powerful in its predictive power, so rationally pure, could be other than the very embodiment of beauty.

Whether or not physicists care to admit it, beauty is an emotional, not a rational term. Mathematicians prefer to say they discovered mathematics, they didn’t invent it. They claim that the mathematics underlying not only quantum physics, but all of the physical universe, exists independently of the human mind. So why delve into the emotional corners of the human mind to find a word to define it?

Why isn’t beauty a noun in our educational system? What could be more important in understanding who we are as humans? Can beauty be taught? Should it be taught? What would a class in beauty be like; what would it cover? Therein lies the rub. How can any meaningful definition of beauty encompass both art and quantum mechanics? But that’s exactly what makes beauty so important and interesting and exciting.

It is hard to imagine beauty being incorporated into a school curriculum in these days of teaching to the test. There is nothing in beauty to assimilate – only the fleeting suggestion of something to synthesize, each mind for itself. Still, imagine that somewhere during your education you were asked simply to think seriously about beauty. Not told what beauty is; just asked what you thought beauty is. How would you recognize it? Which portion of your brain would be mobilized – the rational part or the emotional?

Make no mistake about it: it is only in the mind – in the human brain – that beauty is ultimately defined. This places a certain constraint on conjoining beauty with mathematics, but so be it. We have some idea which portions of the brain are activated by beauty in response to art. (Two recent articles I've enjoyed, and pondered, are *The Golden Beauty: Brain Response to Classical and Renaissance Sculptures* and *Beauty and the Brain*.)

Wouldn't it be intriguing to compare functional magnetic resonance images of the brain of a physicist pondering the deeper realms of quantum mechanics with the images produced by an artist looking at a great work of art, with the images you generate simply thinking about your private vision of beauty. What if they lit up the same regions of the brain in each situation? What would that tell you about you? About us? About *beauty*?

B. H. Fairchild's poem, "Beauty," appears in The Art Of The Lathe, London, Waywiser Press, 2002.

Image: This is a Plate from the series WORKS VII (Feelings) by Yoel Tordjman.

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