

Introduction

In “Field Notes for an Aesthetic of Storms,” Kathleen Moore ponders the reason why she has chased after storms since childhood, finding them irresistible even as they are frightening. She describes, for example, playing in a lightning storm as a child with her sisters, reaching out their hands toward rocks and watching the rocks buzz more intensely, the closer the girls came. “We skipped and spun mindlessly in the electric charges, creating music with our bodies, the way children dance in fountains and make music with splashing light. Certainly this was stupid, but it was also irresistible.”¹ As an adult Moore finds herself still searching out the wildness of storms, flirting with the edge of them, and wondering why. She considers and then dismisses several possible reasons, from whether the excitement of a storm might be some kind of physiological or cellular “high” to whether the joy of a storm is to be found in the fact that one survived or even

1. Kathleen Dean Moore, “Field Notes for an Aesthetic of Storms,” 53–63 in her *Holdfast: At Home in the Natural World* (New York: Lyons Press, 1999), 55.

that one has been purged in some way of strong emotion, as Aristotle would describe the experience of watching a Greek tragedy. Finally she arrives at the idea that, despite their destructiveness, storms might attract because there is something *beautiful* about them.

To examine this theory Moore invokes the memory of a particularly harsh storm experienced during a camping trip. She found the storm beautiful, even though there were terrifying moments. In the midst of it she experienced a heightened excitement, a close focus, an intensity close to fear. This was, she believed, an experience of sublimity: “the blow-to-the-gut awareness of chaotic forces unleashed and uncontrolled, the terror—and finally the awe. To experience the sublime is to understand, with an insight so fierce and sudden it makes you duck, that there is power and possibility in the universe greater than anyone can imagine. The sublime blows out the boundaries of human experience. Is this, finally, what we crave?”²

I am intrigued by Moore’s question. I, too, have suspected that the experience of awe in the natural world is something we crave, precisely as the experience “blows out the boundaries” and we find ourselves suddenly engaged in a radically expanded or comprehensive insight of some kind. What is the nature of this insight? How does the beauty of creation, much less an experience of the “sublime,” lead to such an insight? And, perhaps most importantly, how are we changed as a result of this kind of encounter with the

2. *Ibid.*, 62.

beautiful? In chasing after storms, Moore has touched on a profoundly theological set of questions.

In light of the devastating complexity of the environmental crisis, to speak of experiencing natural beauty seems a very small thing. As a touch point for theological reflection, beauty at its strongest seems fragile, fleeting, and potentially to be found only a single step above romanticism or sentimentalism. At worst it may seem distracting or elitist to speak of natural beauty, or perhaps even an escapist turning from the difficult work at hand, of creating economic and political changes that are key to more ecologically sound living across the globe. Despite these challenges, if Fyodor Dostoevsky was right that beauty will save the world,³ then speaking of beauty, particularly beauty in the natural world, is now a necessity. Further, an examination of the experience of natural beauty has the potential to illumine the environmental crisis as a spiritual crisis.

If Moore is correct that we crave experiences of awe and sublimity in nature, why are we destroying what we fundamentally crave? We seem to be shattering the very context that makes us fully human in a created order that, by divine design, includes beauty. This is the nature of the spiritual crisis: how can our craving for natural beauty be reconciled with human destruction of the natural world? This spiritual crisis is one born of the short-sightedness of human appetites for consumption and unsustainable patterns of living, and one of disconnectedness from beauty.

3. A phrase widely quoted from *The Idiot*, first published in English in 1887.

Solving environmental threats and disasters, and now global climate change, is what Thomas Berry has called the Great Work facing humankind. Never before in our history have we faced such a complex challenge, the solution to which requires engagement by every kind of human ingenuity and creativity. One small piece of this great work is answering the spiritual crisis named above. Such an answer can come from natural beauty as a source of religious insight.

American philosopher Josiah Royce suggested that religious insights shed light on the knowledge of the need and way of salvation. He believed that salvation is guidance toward understanding and accomplishing the highest aims of human life, which we are ever in danger of missing. That guidance, Royce suggested, must come from outside ourselves, from a source of insight. Beauty, he claimed, is one such source, though he remained largely silent on the subject. This project explores natural beauty as a source of religious insight, an insight that is critical to answering the spiritual crisis we face.

The consideration of natural beauty is now a theological imperative in two senses: how does beauty save, and how do we save beauty? What is the connection between ecological salvation (saving beauty) and human salvation (beauty saving)? My aim in this project is not to attempt an exhaustive statement about the nature of human salvation or Christology in light of the environmental crisis but to consider the relationship between the experience of natural beauty and insight into the need for human salvation. What does beauty have to say to our souls, particularly at a time when it seems

that the beauty of creation is slipping away with ever-increasing environmental degradation? What insight can we achieve in those experiences that might help us to deepen our understanding of the highest aims and goals of human life? And further, how might the story of our salvation be linked to the salvation of beauty that is all around us?

In this book I will examine the experience of natural beauty as a source of religious insight and develop a theological aesthetics of nature. The project's motivation is my conviction that a necessary ingredient of ecological redemption is the role that natural beauty can play in illuminating the need and way of human salvation. Three areas of inquiry will constitute the foundation of this work. The first is a historical overview of theological aesthetics with particular attention to the relationship between natural beauty and soteriology in the writings of representative figures in the history of Christian thought. Second, I will draw upon the philosophy of American pragmatist Josiah Royce (1855–1916), exploring his understanding of the nature of religious insight into the way and need of salvation, as well as his view of the ways in which beauty and art are sources of such insight. The third aspect of this work is an engagement with the works of British environmental artist Andy Goldsworthy (b. 1956), whose art reveals natural beauty in such profoundly different ways that with theological reflection we are able to experience natural beauty as a source of religious insight. He uses found objects in nature to blur the boundaries between human aesthetics and natural beauty, thus raising critical philosophical

questions about the nature of beauty and the nature of “nature” in relationship to humanity. His art suggests a connection between human art and natural beauty, rejecting a dualism between culture and landscape. This connection is a source of religious insight in the Roycean sense, one that opens up the possibility of a theological aesthetics of nature. Such an insight reveals an integral view of redemption that includes both the human and the natural world.

In Chapter One, I will undertake a brief theological history of natural beauty, exploring the various roles it has inhabited in understandings of human redemption. For centuries before the scientific revolution, theologians spoke of God in a world that was alive, organically filled with the Good, the True, and the Beautiful. Beauty as natural revelation or reflection of God was at their fingertips. With the rise of modern science and economics and a radically readjusted worldview and theology, theologians began to speak less of beauty in the now mechanistic universe. Further, sixteenth-century Christian reform movements planted seeds of a fiercely tenacious iconoclasm, the fruits of which remain with us in the struggle to determine a right relationship with nature (now depraved) and in a tragic suspicion about whether beauty has anything to teach. Since the Enlightenment the perception of beauty, or the experience of the beautiful, has been relegated to the subjective realm and to matters of taste. Speaking of beauty today in the development of a theological aesthetics is thus a great challenge. Yet, despite modern obstacles, a trajectory can be found throughout the history of Christian thought in which the experience of natural beauty

has been understood as significant to human redemption, and this is what I trace in the first chapter.

In describing the work of the second chapter I should first say that the term “theological aesthetics” has proven difficult to define. I draw upon the definition offered by Alejandro García-Rivera, who took Alexander Baumgarten’s eighteenth-century definition of aesthetics as the philosophy and science of the beautiful, or the science of sensory cognition, and recast it into theological terms, looking at the science of what moves the human heart. This “brings us closer to the mysterious experience of the truly beautiful . . . an experience that holds the most persuasive claim to being what has become an *aporia* in our day, the real universal Theological aesthetics recognizes in the experience of the truly beautiful a religious dimension.”⁴ In casting aesthetics in this light and drawing on the pre-modern tradition of transcendentals, García-Rivera opened the door of aesthetic theory to a profound question about the experience of the beautiful.

A theological aesthetics seeks to affirm the human capacity to know and love God as Beauty through experiences of the beautiful. Further, a theological aesthetics suggests that there is a religious aspect to the experience of the beautiful that is revelatory and redemptive. As Hans Urs von Balthasar suggests, we know God through our senses. Thus the experience of earthly beauty can deepen our knowledge of the divine. A premise of theological aesthetics is that the

4. From Alejandro García-Rivera, *The Community of the Beautiful: A Theological Aesthetics* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1999), 9.

experience of the beautiful is redemptive; the task is to explore how. For this I turn in Chapter Two to the interpretive theory of Josiah Royce.

Though he did not have an explicit theory of aesthetics, Royce developed a philosophy of religious insight that is central to this project. In *Sources of Religious Insight* he begins with insight in general, defining it as “knowledge that makes us aware of the unity of many facts in one whole, and that at the same time brings us into intimate personal contact with these facts and with the whole wherein they are united.”⁵ There are three marks of an insight: breadth of range, coherence and unity of view, and closeness of personal touch. Further, according to Royce, an insight is religious when its object is religious, and a religious insight is essentially redemptive. In short, religious insight is knowledge of the need and way of salvation.

Royce offered seven sources of religious insight, including personal experience, social experience, reason, will, dedicated loyalty, the religious mission of sorrow, and finally the Unity of the Spirit and the Invisible Church. Taken together and integrated, they represent a process of illumination open to all, beginning with individual experience and culminating in corporate experience. Though he hesitated to speak formally of beauty, he understood clearly that art and natural beauty are also sources that can yield insight into the need and way of salvation and ultimately draw one who experiences beauty redemptively into community. One aim of this project is

5. Josiah Royce, *Sources of Religious Insight* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2001), 5–6.

to develop Royce's idea that natural beauty is a source of religious insight.

Chapter Three is an exploration of the art of Andy Goldsworthy, whose work with found objects in nature reveals nature itself to us in ways we would not otherwise notice. His creations brilliantly blur the boundaries between human works of art and natural beauty, raising critical philosophical questions about the nature of beauty and the nature of "nature" in relationship to humanity. His works also illustrate the themes of time and decay or transience, a fascinating tension between human and divine creation, and the cyclical notion of creation and destruction, all of which are fruitful themes for ecological theology. I consider the origins and landscapes of land art, form, and process used in Goldsworthy's work, on which critiques are deeply divided, and finally propose a reconceptualization: that nature and culture are not dualistic but both contained in the idea of "landscape." I explore these issues to illumine my broader aim, which is to demonstrate a continuum between aesthetics and natural beauty. This connection is a source of religious insight in the Roycean sense, one that opens up the possibility of a theological aesthetics of nature, which is developed as the central theme in Chapter Four. Such an insight reveals an integral view of redemption that includes both the human and the natural world, a view critically needed for our time.

My intent in this work is to suggest that we can no longer consider soteriological questions in isolation from our environment and to show that there is a connection between beauty in creation and insight into the human need for

salvation. I hope to provide understanding about this connection and to demonstrate theologically the ways in which we need beauty. I hope that this work also addresses what moves us to respond to ecological devastation. As suggested above, with many others I believe that the environmental crisis is, at heart, a spiritual crisis⁶ and that this is one aspect among many that needs to be addressed within and by religious communities. I believe there is a place and a need for beauty in the conversation.

In the conclusion I will explore the role of beauty in what “geologian” Thomas Berry often calls our ecological age. He suggests that beauty holds a key to what moves us to address the issues at hand:

We should be clear about what happens when we destroy the living forms of this planet. The first consequence is that we destroy modes of divine presence. If we have a wonderful sense of the divine, it is because we live amid such awesome magnificence. If we have refinement of emotion and sensitivity, it is because of the delicacy, the fragrance, and the indescribable beauty of song and music and rhythmic movement in the world about us If we lived on the moon, our mind and emotions,

6. In “An Open Letter to the Religious Community,” scientists (many of whom are avowed atheists) appealed to the world religious community to engage the environmental crisis. “Problems of such magnitude, and solutions demanding so broad a perspective, must be recognized as having a religious as well as a scientific dimension. Mindful of our common responsibility, we scientists, many of us long engaged in combating the environmental crisis, urgently appeal to the world religious community to commit, in word and deed, and as boldly as is required, to preserve the environment of the Earth. . . . As scientists, many of us have had profound experiences of awe and reverence before the universe. We understand that what is regarded as sacred is more likely to be treated with care and respect. . . .” (Carl Sagan, et al., “An Open Letter to the Religious Community,” January 1990. Available at http://earthrenewal.org/Open_letter_to_the_religious_.htm).

our speech, our imagination, our sense of the divine would all reflect the desolation of the lunar landscape.⁷

Beauty has something to do with our understandings of the divine, of ourselves, and of the relationship of both to the natural world. And there is growing intuition that beauty has something to do with human redemption and our ability to see those divine modes of presence and achieve that “wonderful sense of the divine.” Such intuition, or insight, hints that the experience of the beautiful in creation has something to say to our souls, and the message is of great importance not only for our knowledge of God but also for how we ought to live. In short, we crave beauty, we destroy beauty, and we can achieve religious insight from beauty before it is too late. The contribution of beauty to ecological theology, I believe, needs to be fully explored.

7. Thomas Berry, *The Dream of the Earth* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1988), 11.