

The Gaze of Eros: Thoughts on the Recovery of Beauty

Dr. Robert M. Frazier

Professor of Philosophy

Ours is a day of disunity and fracture. And this is experienced in so many ways that it makes one wonder whether there is the possibility of realizing what Michael Polanyi calls conviviality, a kind of shared esteem for the public welfare and the common good of all. Polanyi likens conviviality to deep and sustaining friendships forged in the rituals of shared life, language, and community-sustaining passions that enhance and benefit humanity: the focus of learning and college. But currently conviviality is not our lot. For example, the ecclesiastical realm has its own share of animus, with clerics and Facebook inhabitants alike engaging in a continual stream of *ad hominem*s against all not of their ilk. This kind of language stream discounts the sacredness of the other, reducing those unlike them to ridicule and disdain. So much for Jesus' order to eradicate *raca* language from one's vocabulary. One sees this fracture in the political realm as well, where leaders paint pictures of their opponents in and through advertisement, leaflet, and speech caricaturing them in ways that bear no resemblance to what the person at all stands for and believes. Straw men are easily set aflame. Far too many believe, in their pseudo-indictments, that if one states falsehoods again and again it makes them true.

These examples of division are principally concerned with individuals and the ways in which, in ecclesiastical or political settings, malice and disdain prevail against the public spirit, the loss of which Polanyi calls "nihilism." These overt manifestations of prevailing animus might mask a deeper, more encompassing collection of beliefs in thick structures, often unrecognizable to those who hold them. These collections shaped and molded over the centuries and decades by questionable supporting structures, long forgotten yet still maintained, shield societies and individuals within them from central, controlling beliefs they hold and that they foster with

others. These manifest themselves in edifices of bigotry, of hatred, of racism, and of the false sense of superiority over others not like themselves. It helps to create multiple cultures that cling to disdain and express ridicule for others.

The absence of conviviality, so clearly evident in the various realms of the society, shows itself in education as well, sometimes because of similar reasons and sometimes because of other deep structural forms that fracture. Wendell Berry laments the absence of a unity of concern in the life of higher education in his article, "The Loss of the University." Expanding the themes present in Snow's "two cultures" (the scientific and the humanities), Berry locates the loss of the "uni" of higher education in the proliferation of specialty languages known and understood by only a few experts in a given discipline. This balkanizes disciplines in such a way that interchange and dialogue is futile; no one understands the other. There is no common engagement, no shared language, and no understanding of work done by those outside one's field of study. Berry points out that along with specialization within disciplines there has been a shift in the goal of education. The long-held end of forming humanity in virtue has been replaced by the dominant utilitarian concern for an occupation that provides sufficiently for one's quest for pleasure wherever it might be found. Berry provides us with a precis about the current state of college and university life that accounts for the fracture within and without higher learning. (Just think of the common student who wonders why one should study things outside their major on the grounds that these are probably not useful.)

But I have claimed that it has taken years and years to shape the current malaise in university and college life. Faulty epistemologies, barren metaphysical theories, the growth of anxiety because of human time boundedness that leads to the extinction of the person are all explanations advanced to account for this state of affairs. John Donne gave an early modern

assessment and prophecy of the coming disaster that now seems to be ours. In the *Anatomie of the World*, Donne claims,

And new philosophy calls all in doubt,
The element of fire is quite put out;
The Sun is lost, and the earth, and no mans wit
Can well direct him where to looke for it.
And freely men confesse that this world's spent,
when in the planets and the firmament
They seeke so many new; they see that this
Is crumbled out againe to his atomies.
Tis all in peeces, all coherence gone;
All just supply, and all relation:
Prince, subject, Father, sonne, are things forgot,
For every man alone thinkes he hath got
To be a Phoenix, and that then can bee
None of that kinde, of which he is, but he.

His suggestion is that the new epistemology rooted in the assertion of doubt coupled with the elevation of the individual will strip all things of coherence including the university. Hans Boersma offers another suggestion. He sees this rooted in the radical shift in metaphysics that occurred in the late middle ages with the rise of nominalism and the dismissal of what we called a participatory ontology: Everything that exists is in some way subsistent on God. These diagnoses have much to commend them to us. But we still must ask whether the university can reclaim the conditions that would contribute to the wholeness and unity it has lost, the reverberations of which are felt in society at large.

I feebly and humbly would offer a suggestion of my own that might serve to address the plight of the modern university and its counterpart in the non-convivial society. The suggestion I make, though, is not my own. Mine is merely an attempt to recover—or, as Lewis would say, to rehabilitate—an idea from an age long past. But I warn you that the idea itself might undoubtedly seem odd at best to many of you.

Before I reveal this notion for your consideration, let me recall one of the sources of the position I advocate. Plato in *The Republic* sets out to establish the conditions and structures required for humans to fulfill their basic orientation of living together in a just society that serves the common good from top to bottom. He contends that much attention must be spent on *paideic* formation: cultural production that results from education. As he moves to the conclusion of his discussion on cultural production, Plato makes a striking claim that one must consider. He believed that the cohesive that makes possible the drive toward the education that produces the good society is love pursuing union with the beautiful and the ontological reality she reveals. “Eros rightfully directed toward beauty”—and not the mere experience of pleasure so often associated with eros—is what keys society toward its proper end of conviviality and communion, of harmony and the common good.

So, I wish to contend for *eros*, for love, as an antidote for our current plight of quarrelsomeness and schism. I wish for us to recover what I will call the gaze of eros, as eros peers into and ruminates on the beauty that attends us all, even if we are blinded to its magnificence. I am not advocating viewing eros/love in the kind of pornographic way that both ancients and moderns have presented. Indeed, it is more than your favorite love movie or the most titillating song. These are simply charged ways of construing something of great benefit to the malformed self, the result of decades of what Robert Bellah and his colleagues called expressive individualism and emotivism.

Long before the exploitive presentations of love today, eros suffered from a trivialization, in the words of Josef Pieper, of its substance and importance. As D.C. Schindler suggests, we view love as a personal experience divorced from any sense of reality. It is your experience, the modern word contends, that is important, and this is somewhat similar to the way Lewis

describes the vacuity of statements of value in the *Abolition of Man*. Lewis claims that in the world of objectivity a statement like *This waterfall is sublime* is simply a statement about the person who utters it and not the reality of the waterfall. Eros is about you the lover and not about the object loved. A chorus of detractors in the modern period led to this trivialization of eros. Descartes cataloged eros as a passion of gratification. Montaigne viewed it as contrary to reason, sharing no part at all in rationality. Rousseau saw eros as contrary to and condemning toward the real, a kind of romantic elevation of the self over nature. And so eros came to be understood as a feeling of satisfaction, a culmination of one's desire for gratification, a statement about the self and not the beautiful and good. The fragmentation examined earlier becomes more visible in the demise of eros.

A few statements from Augustine's *Confessions* might help us unpack the tradition on eros I seek to reclaim. In book IV, Augustine ponders what he sees beauty in lower things. He says to his friends, "Do we love anything except the beautiful? What then is the beautiful and what is beauty? What is it that attracts us and wins our affection for things we love? For unless there was grace and beauty in them, they would not attract us to them." The source of our attraction is the love that one has for the beauty of the realities seen. As Augustine grew in his awareness that there were not many gods but rather one Incorruptible God, he bursts out, "I was swept away to you by your own beauty." After his conversion, Augustine raises the important question, "what do I love (eros) when I love you?" In a wonderfully rhapsodic passage that follows this question, he claims that it is the melody of God's brilliance, the effulgence of God's being, and the light of God's existence that carries him away, and enables him to gaze upon other beauties that participate in the beauty that God is. Augustine's continual puzzlements culminate in his ejaculation, "Late I have loved thee, beauty so ancient and new." He acknowledges that

although he has distorted and vitiated the beauty that abides in all things because of their participation in general beauty, as Edwards would later claim, the eros he now recognizes was the that beauty wooing and yearning for Augustine as well.

These passages suggest to us that eros is drawn to the beauty that is albeit inadequately perceived, yet perceived nonetheless. Beauty calls out in the revelation of her very being to lovers who deeply possess the inclination to love the beautiful, the good, and the true. Augustine in the riddle of his own existence is shaken by the travesty of the ancient beauty skewed by distorted eros, the privation of its goodness. Notice a number of things involved in these descriptions. Eros is directed to the beautiful and good. There is something melodious about the realization of the encounter of eros with the beautiful; it makes your heart sing and your feet dance. One realizes that its overtures have been there all along, new and old at once.

But what really is happening in this encounter of eros and beauty? David Bentley Hart offers this suggestion. “It may be that love’s appetite, excited by the beauty, sublimity, or simple existence of things, is uniquely able to press on to the well-spring, the supereminent plentitude of the transcendentals, where unity, beauty, goodness, truth, and knowledge are convertible with one another.” In place of the fragmentation that identifies the modern university, eros hungers for and perceives the interconnectedness of the true, and good, and beautiful. A few passages later Hart clarifies what he has in mind. He writes, “The gaze of love seeks the being of things in the abiding source in which they participate; it is a way of seeing that is acquainted with the moments of enchantment, which awakens it.” “This gaze of love (eros) sees as an infinite font of manifestations, showing itself in the existence and essences of things.” These pour out so that they might be perceived by eros itself. Dionysius claims that the yearning of eros involved in the pouring out of being and beauty produces a yearning for beauty itself.

In light of these observations, I make a few assertions. First, it seems that there are three aspects of Eros as it gazes on things. Eros is an appetite for the good and beautiful. It is a longing and yearning to unite with these. When one gazes on the beautiful, it stimulates a deep desire for oneness with the beautiful and the hope that it might transform the lover into beauty itself. A second aspect of eros is that prior to appetite that attempts union is an apprehension on the part of the lover that serves as the source of the appetite for union with the beautiful. Aquinas calls eros-as-apprehension the principle of the appetite for beauty, and I concur. To gaze implies a kind of seeing of things, a meditative and contemplative quietness that rests in the object known. Eros-as-apprehension arrests the brilliance of the beautiful with some measure of appreciation and understanding while recognizing the limitations of the lover. Schindler contends that beauty is the revelation of the essence of a thing, substance, or being. So, when beauty calls to the lover, she is manifesting what a being is. Given that all that exists moves and lives in the Being, eros gazes through the beautiful to the being that rests and subsists in the Triune God. Appetite and apprehension are the first two movements of the gaze of eros. I suggest a third as well. Following Plato, I would contend that a kind of attunement occurs as well between lover and beauty. Attunement is being in tune with something, a commensurability to the reality of something. The gaze of eros that yearns for the beauty that is apprehended finds its fulfillment in aligning, attuning, being in harmony with the being that reveals. This attuning brings about a kind of ecstatic transformation of the lover. These movements in the gaze of eros enable one to see more clearly the union and convertibility of all things as they subsist in God. The indivisibility of God, the one who grants beauty, goodness, and being, unites all of these in the moment of God's existence. There is union, then, that results because of this subsistence.

But the gaze of eros loves the particularity of things and longs for their plentitude and fulfillment. The union is granted, but those things that exist by subsistence, nonetheless exist and God has called them the good and beautiful. God has poured His beauty into them. And God invites us through the community of inquirers not separated and fragmented by deprivation of the good, to gaze in eros on the amazing goodness and beauty of the pear, of the song, of the movie, of the book, of the leaf—and countless other things—as one’s perception of these transforms persons into the human agents they were designed to be. Because Eros demands union and harmony, it woos lovers to gaze together, to convivially ponder the magnificence of beauty, and she invites those to whom she presents herself to apprehend her essence and active existence. In the end, erotic gazes occur in community, which unabashedly enjoying the marvel of the insights of friends graced by mercy and truth.