John D. Dadosky


In the Italian version of his encyclical on the environment, *Laudato Si’*, Pope Francis uses the terms “beauty” and “beautiful” forty-seven times. Beauty, as he says, is a value that should be included in our discourse about the environment. Even apart from environmental concerns, beauty has become an increasingly frequent focus of religious and theological works. Recent years have seen a spate of books attempting to explicate the connections between aesthetics (understandings of beauty and art) and religion, faith, and theology. Many have been inspired by the works of Hans Urs von Balthasar, although his own “aesthetics” has little to say about beauty in the normal understandings of the word, and even less about art. Dadosky’s approach to beauty also begins with Balthasar—specifically with his premise that beauty has been “lost” in the modern world, and must be recovered for the sake of an adequate religious and theological stance not only on ecology, but on life itself.

Dadosky’s brief but excellent summary of Balthasar’s effort to establish beauty as a “transcendental” leads to a recognition of the need for a more critically-grounded approach. Instead of looking exclusively backward to Aquinas, Dadosky proposes a recovery of beauty that relies on Bernard Lonergan’s retrieval of Thomistic metaphysics. He thus hopes to improve and expand upon Balthasar’s concern for theological aesthetics. Lonergan’s philosophy of intentional consciousness (which is adeptly summarized) avoids the “subjectivist” and “idealist” dangers that Balthasar so feared (rightly or wrongly) in post-Kantian approaches like Karl Rahner’s. Lonergan also allows us—so Dadosky hopes—to overcome the “aesthetic relativism” and subjectivism exemplified by David Hume’s paradigmatic statement: “Beauty is no quality in things themselves. It exists merely in the mind which contemplates them; and each mind perceives a different beauty” (4). Dadosky’s very ambitious goal, then, is not only to recover the “transcendental” status of beauty in metaphysics, but also to provide a foundation, through Lonergan, for articulating aesthetic judgments “just as we do when we make judgments of fact and judgments of value” (14). Since Lonergan made few explicit statements regarding either beauty or the arts, such a project requires some expansion and revision to his work.

On the way to articulating his agreement with St. Bonaventure’s and Jacques Maritain’s idea of beauty as a kind of “summary” of all the transcendents, Dadosky gives a very competent overview of the major Scholastic and neo-Scholastic views on the topic. Like Balthasar, he depends largely on
the work of Franz Kovach to locate the somewhat unclear position of Aquinas. The more difficult task is to relate beauty as a “transcendental” quality of all beings to a specifically “aesthetic” beauty, and to art. If we say that every being is beautiful (insofar as it “has” being), what is the specific meaning of “aesthetic” beauty? Clearly it must be being or goodness of a particular kind, just as every judgment is about a truth or a good or a being of a particular kind and in a particular context. But what kind? What context? With regard to art, the problem becomes even more complex, since art (as Dadosky admits) does not always seek beauty. These questions occupy most of the second half of the book.

Before confronting them, however, Dadosky engages in a lengthy excursus on the aesthetics of Friedrich Nietzsche and Søren Kierkegaard. Following René Girard's critique, he sees a “perpetuation of violence that is related to the loss of beauty through its displacement and distortion” (55), as is seen in Nietzsche’s “Dionysian” aesthetics. Kierkegaard is criticized by Balthasar for a somewhat similar reason: he appears to separate the ethical from the aesthetic “stage” of existence, and both from faith. Dadosky agrees with Girard about Nietzsche but distances himself from Balthasar’s misconstrual of Kierkegaard. Part of the problem with Balthasar’s critique is semantic: “There are obviously different senses of the aesthetic, and not all of them include beauty” (78). And aside from ontological beauty, there is the beauty of art, aesthetics as an existential stage, and so on. Dadosky sees a resolution to the real limitations of Nietzsche’s aesthetics and the apparent limitations of Kierkegaard’s in Lonergan’s notion of differentiations of consciousness and corresponding “patterns of experience.” In the existential subject seeking authenticity, the world of immediacy (here, the “aesthetic”) can be “subsumed” (Lonergan refers to Georg Hegel’s idea of Aufhebung) and integrated into the world of meanings and values, leaving behind its limitations but preserving its positive aspects.

Presuming that beauty exists, Dadosky attempts to explain how it can be construed at each of Lonergan's four levels of intentionality: experience, understanding, judgment, decision. This move is intended to imitate Lonergan's method in Insight (New York: Philosophical Library, 1957), where he presumes the occurrence and the recognition of the act of knowing in the reader, and can call for the self-appropriation of one's activity. But is there a parallel progression of activities in the aesthetic realm? One may wonder whether Insight’s phenomenology, based as it is on the ideal of scientific knowing, is entirely appropriate to describe the way we arrive at apprehensions of beauty, and hence whether the “levels” of the process of making judgments of fact are a coherent way of asking about what beauty means.