

BERDYAEV ON BEAUTY

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According to Berdyaev, “beauty is a characteristic of the highest qualitative state of being, of the highest attainment of existence; it is not a separate side of existence.” It is both an aesthetic and metaphysical category. What is perceived by man integrally, is beauty. Everything harmonious in life is beauty. In every appearance of congruence among different entities is an element of beauty (DH 139).¹ It appears that Berdyaev beauty in terms of harmony, in terms of orderly connections between entities, entities of the natural world and spiritual world, but harmony itself does not seem to be a positive characteristic since the world harmony is said to be a false and enslaving idea (SF 88).

1 Harmony

Harmony refers to different levels of reality in Berdyaev’s universe and depending on which level it is, it can be positive or negative. For Berdyaev, there is a spiritual realm that was created directly by God and a material realm of the natural world. The natural world is the result of objectification, which, in turn, is the result of sin, of the fall. Spirits created by God rebelled by severing ties with God,

¹ The following abbreviations of Berdyaev’s works will be used:

BE – *The beginning and the end*, New York: Harper & Row 1957.

DH – *The divine and the human*, London: Bles 1949.

DM – *The destiny of man*, New York: Harper & Row 1960.

FiSv – *Философия свободы*, in Н. Бердяев, *Судьба России*, Москва: ЭКСМО-Пресс 2000, 27-264.

FS – *Freedom and the spirit*, London: Bles 1948.

KI – *Кризис искусства*, Москва: Леман и Сахаров 1918 [reprint, Москва: СП Интерпринт 1990].

MCA – *The meaning of the creative act*, New York: Collier Books 1962.

RSRC – *The realm of spirit and the realm of Caesar*, New York: Harper 1952 [reprint, Westport: Greenwood Press 1975].

SF – *Slavery and freedom*, New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons 1944.

SR – *Spirit and reality*, London: Bles 1946.

by turning to themselves alone, by separating themselves from the source of their existence. The primal unity of the universe was shattered. The universe was fragmented and as a result, the natural world was created, the world of objects, the world of separation. This world is a realm of natural laws, of physical determinism, of natural order. Natural laws impose certain order in the world, but they do so at a high price, namely by imposing a restriction of freedom onto living beings. In the spiritual world, freedom reigns supreme. Any spiritual act is an act of a free agent, of a free subject. In the physical world, freedom is restricted by natural laws, by social norms, by tradition, by personal habits, by fashion, etc. Therefore, these laws, norms, etc., are a negative element of reality, the result of sin. As stated by Berdyaev, the world order and the world harmony were not created by God (SF 87). The natural laws make nature a well-oiled machinery that runs smoothly, but which crushes everything in its way. Berdyaev cannot accept it. To him, the world order and harmony to which personal freedom is sacrificed is insufferable (DM 288). His thought expresses a rebellion of human personality against an illusory and oppressing objective "world harmony" and objective social order, against any sanctified objective world order (BE vii).

However, harmony is desirable, but not the harmony of our world. According to Berdyaev, only the Kingdom of God, the Kingdom of Spirit can be perfect and harmonious. A perfect and harmonious order in the Kingdom of the Spirit will also be the kingdom of freedom. Perfect and harmonious order in the kingdom of Caesar will always be the destruction of freedom (RSRC 177). This world is not God's world; God's harmony is absent from it. God's world only breaks into it (BE 155). Therefore, "the world and world harmony must be brought to an end" because within the confines of the world and history the problem of personality cannot be solved and because "the world harmony in this aeon of the world is a mockery of the tragic fate of man" (BE 137).

Harmony in the natural world is not comprehensive. It can be detected in parts of the world, but the world as a whole is not harmonious. Therefore, in Berdyaev's view, the idea of world harmony is inapplicable to this world; the idea is false and hides evil and untruth. World harmony is the coming Kingdom of God (BE 148), which is an entirely spiritual realm, in which each spiritual being is a microcosm, in which all actions are free and separation is nonexistent.

The natural world is a second-hand reality which did not exist before the fall and will be dissolved when the end of times comes. Natural reality is but a symbol of spiritual reality. And so it is with harmony. The natural harmony of the physical world is a symbol of spiritual harmony of the world of the spirit, the divine world. Spiritual harmony is complete, perfect, total; natural harmony is partial, fragmentary, unstable. By its nature, natural harmony spells limitation to human freedom,

but rebellion to it is not easy. Therefore, as Berdyaev sees it, the violation of integrity and harmony with the world leads to suffering (DH 70). There can be people who are in harmony with the world because of their spiritual slumber, and people in the state of disharmony with the world because of their spiritual awakening (DM 71). Spiritual awareness is thus awareness of the inadequacy of the natural world and as such, it is the state of suffering. Not an enviable prospect for the ones spiritually awakened. A harmonious state, i.e., the state of finding closeness and of communion, is opposed to suffering (DH 71). But true communion of spirits is unachievable in this world. Therefore, the harmonious orderliness of this world is not a cure against suffering; that is, changes in the social order will not permanently alleviate social and individual ills. The solution belongs to the religious realm.

What seems to be common to natural harmony and spiritual harmony in Berdyaev's universe is unity. Natural harmony refers to separate spatial and temporal objects and so unity has a spatial and temporal character: causal laws, spatial arrangements, temporal succession of events. Nonharmonious arrangements spell conflict, chaos, discord, hate. However, even natural harmony is not the most desirable state since submission to harmonious arrangements means the loss of freedom. In the natural world this is very often a welcome tradeoff, but for spiritual development it is not. And hence the expectation of the world to come – a restored spiritual world in which harmony means a true union, a true communion of spirits, of subjects, nonexistence of object, disappearance of time and space, disappearance of physicality and matter. In spiritual world, interpenetration of spirits allows for such a perfect union, for such perfect harmony.

2 Beauty

As with the use of world harmony, so with the use of "beauty" – there is a constant ambiguity in Berdyaev's writings. Beauty is positive and desirable or negative, even evil. There is natural beauty, the beauty to be found in this world, and the spiritual beauty in the divine world.

It is clear that spiritual beauty is meant when we read that beauty is another world beyond this world (DR 220); that spirit is truth, beauty, purpose, and freedom (SR 39); that truth, beauty, goodness, creativity, and imagination are spiritual realities (SR 18); that "God is present and acts only in freedom"; that He "reveals Himself in the prophets, in His Son," in goodness, and beauty (BE 152). But when Berdyaev says that sin can positively be conquered by looking toward beauty (SR 75), does he mean beauty of this world or the otherworldly beauty? The latter is more likely, but the former is not out of the question.

In one place, Berdyaev makes a clear distinction between beautifulness (красивость) and beauty (красота): beautifulness is false beauty and "it relates to the phenomenal world only; in beauty, on the other hand, there is a noumenal principle" (DH 139). However, the terminological distinction is hardly ever used.²

To confuse things even more, there are contradictory statements about natural beauty. On the one hand, we read that paradise "is preserved in its beauty of nature, in the sunlight," in the stars twinkling at night, in the blue sky, etc. (DM 284). On the other hand, we hear that the objectified world order knows no beauty (SF 242; MCA 209), that "beauty in the world is a creative act, not objective reality."³ Beauty is not an inherent property of the natural world but nothing is: the natural world is the result of the fall; it is a secondary, fallen reality and has, as it were, lesser existence than the spiritual world. If there is harmony and order in the natural world, and thus natural beauty, it is because it was objectified, alienated, separated from the spiritual world. The natural world is a work, even if not entirely intended; of the spiritual world, and true spirits are free, and as active entities they act freely, that is, they are creative. The results of their creative acts are what we see in the world. As Berdyaev states it, through beauty, a breaking into the transfigured world takes place. "This breakthrough takes place in every creative act of art and in every artistic reception of that creative act" (SF 241). Because of the imperfect, or even outright evil nature of this world, the results of creative acts are never perfect and very often harmful. Dualism of the spiritual and natural worlds in Berdyaev's universe and the secondary status of the natural world as the result of the fall have to be constantly kept in mind when disambiguating many of Berdyaev's statements.

It is God who is the supreme value, the supreme Good, Truth, and Beauty (BE 28). And so, the union with God is the union with beauty. The world which is transformed by Christ, the world in which chaos is conquered, is beauty; and so the Church, a mystical Church, is true existential beauty. Beauty is the goal of the life of the world; it is deification of the world. In a word, as Berdyaev repeats Dostoevsky's oft-quoted statement, beauty saves the world.⁴ The attainment of beauty means the salvation of the world (FS 332). Only transformation and illu-

² In DH 147 the term is used only three times (translated as prettiness) and only in the definition quoted above, and once its opposite, некрасивость (translated as unsightliness), is used. Berdyaev also uses the term twice in *Leontiev*, Orono: Academic International 1968, 148-149 (translated as picturesqueness), once in SF 238 (translated as attractiveness), and некрасивость is used once in DR 281 (translated as ugly).

³ N. Berdyaev, *Truth and revelation*, New York: Collier Books 1962, 78-79.

⁴ The saying is not unlike George Sand's adage, "may beauty be the queen of the world" (*André*, ch. 3).

mination of human nature is a real attainment of beauty (DM 247). Actualization of beauty is deification of creation, of man (DM 248).

The Kingdom of God can only be the kingdom of beauty, says Berdyaev. Transformation of the world is the emergence of beauty. "All beauty in the world is either a memory of paradise or a prophecy of the transfigured world. The experience of every harmonious state is an experience of beauty." Beauty is the final ideal emptied from any disharmony, any deformity, any meanness (DH 139). Experience of beauty in this world has thus a religious significance: it is a symbol of primal existence in paradise and future existence in the paradise restored by Christ.

However, we should be constantly on our guard when assessing something as beautiful in the natural and social world. This world is the world of sin, of the rule of sin. Natural beauty is a symbol of spiritual beauty, but because the natural world is the world of separation, natural beauty may be misused, may be used in a context which is not really beautiful. As Berdyaev expresses it, beauty can be a cover for ugliness. Beauty can become demonic not because of its essence, not because it exists; it is only that it can be used in the battle of opposing forces (DH 140). Art and beauty can set us free, but they can also enslave us (SF 242). Beauty of evil is an illusion, a deceit (DH 139); or rather, the beauty of evil is not its own. It is borrowed beauty, an enticement which may allure us, because in this world beauty is not goodness. Only God is Beauty and Goodness at the same time. Beauty used by evil is a symbol of true, spiritual beauty, but because of its nefarious use, it may mislead us and actually lead us further away from the spiritual beauty.

In Berdyaev's universe, beauty is harmony. Natural beauty is natural harmony, a harmonious arrangement of objects, colors, sounds, events. And so, beauty can be found everywhere, in nature and in society, in the lives of individuals and nations. This beauty, however, is under the shadow of slavery, because true freedom in the natural world simply does not exist. Spiritual harmony is harmony in the spiritual world, in the world surpassing the natural boundaries of the physical universe. This is a beauty in the awaited world, for whose coming the entire universe is groaning in suffering. Now, only God is perfect Beauty.

3 Art

Beauty, as mentioned, has not only metaphysical, but also an aesthetic meaning. What is the connection between beauty and art? Beauty can potentially be found everywhere in nature. What makes art different if there is any beauty in it? And is art always marked by the presence of beauty?

For Berdyaev, the meaning of art lies in the fact that it anticipates the transformation of the world (SF 241; DH 144), transformation accomplished by Christ, transformation of the natural world into a purely spiritual world. Art, thus, has an eschatological meaning pointing to the end of the physical world and to a return to the state when there is only a spiritual world: the world of perfect harmony, which is the union and communion of all, perfect beauty and goodness, in a word, the Kingdom of God.

In art, Berdyaev says, there are only symbols anticipating the real transformation. Art is full of symbols of another world. Any attainment of beauty is the beginning of the transformation of the world. Within the confines of art, this transformation is not achieved (DH 144). But what does it really mean? What makes art such an anticipation as compared with science, technology, and religious practices?

Science, by its nature, is bound to this world and purposely avoids any references to the spiritual world. No explanation in terms of the nonphysical world is admissible in science. And so, it is apparently easy to see that science cannot anticipate the world to come. Can't it? Science strives for establishing regularities of events in the natural world; it tries to find laws to which specific phenomena can be subsumed. That is, science assumes that the world is harmonious, regular, predictable, and if some explanation cannot be given, it is considered a temporary setback. Science assumes that the world is regular, harmonious, and tries to make this harmony explicit, capture it in the conceptual web of natural laws and theories. If so, science splendidly symbolizes the harmony of the world to come, even if it denies the existence of this world, or at least it makes no references to it. So, science shows that harmony is out there, and in that sense it can be seen as an expectation of the transformation of the world, in which harmony will be complete.

Technology is possible if order is imposed on a collection of objects so that they work in unison, harmoniously. An engine is an embodiment of harmony, each machine is an image of orderliness. Therefore, technology is an area of beauty. And yet, Berdyaev states the opposite. To him, the age of technology leaves no room for beauty (DH 147); the embodied beauty, characteristic for previous epochs that did not know such technological progress and such power of the machine over life as we do today, is being destroyed. Technology brings death to beauty (DM 227). In this, Berdyaev seems to be unwilling to accept the fact that this may be undesirable beauty, undesirable orderliness of society and nature, but an order and harmony it is, and thus, it is beauty.

So what makes art different from science and technology? Not the attainment of beauty, because if beauty is defined in terms of harmony then science and technology attain this beauty just as well. Besides, art may have nothing to do with beauty, according to Berdyaev.

Painting, he says, was associated with solidity of the physical world and stability of matter and its form. This painting was the embodiment of spirit. Cubism and futurism show the phenomenon of dematerialization and disembodiment of painting; this painting is the dematerialization of matter in that people penetrate objects, objects penetrate people, "all levels of being are mixed up" (KI 8-9). This can be observed in Picasso whose intention was, in Berdyaev's opinion, to reach the deepest levels of reality. However, the last layer of material world reached by Picasso was illusory. Picasso exposed the illusory character of embodied, materially synthesized beauty. Beneath human beauty he saw the horror of decay and atomization (KI 30). There is no beauty in Picasso's paintings (KI 34). This is similarly so in Andrei Bely's novel *Peterburg*, considered by Berdyaev to be cubist and futurist. In this novel, old beauty perishes and a new world emerges in which there is no beauty yet (KI 41-42). "His art is his own being, his chaos, his stormy movement, his cosmic feeling" (KI 46).

And so we have art as an expression of chaos, the opposite of harmony, of beauty.⁵ But in this way, the borders of art are extended beyond recognition. It would be enough to express one's own being and one's own cosmic feeling to become an artist. Berdyaev probably would not agree with that, but he is of no help in delimiting the borderlines of art.

It is unclear why Berdyaev considers Picasso as the one who reveals that material reality has illusory underpinnings. In Picasso's pictures, as Berdyaev himself indicates, objects penetrate objects and interpenetration is the primary characteristic of the spiritual world, the true world. Berdyaev could claim that what Picasso shows is the non-illusory character of the foundation of reality, this foundation being the spiritual world. In paintings, to be sure, there are but symbols of the spiritual world, and so Picasso can paint interpenetrating objects, which cannot happen in material world (well, the Stoics thought otherwise). But the fact of interpenetration is there. Maybe because of that, beauty is missing from Picasso's painting, because of the incongruity between interpenetration, which is from spiritual level, and relations between objects, which are from natural level. It would

⁵ Which belies identification of art and beauty as suggested in the statement that "a fiction is a work of art, in Berdyaev's doctrine a thing of beauty," David B. Richardson, *Berdyaev's philosophy of history. An existentialist theory of social creativity and eschatology*, The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff 1968, 92.

appear then that this lack of beauty brings us closer to the foundation of reality, to the nature of the spiritual world imperfectly reflected in relations between physical entities. What would be the next step? A new art: "New art will create not images of physical body, but images of other, more subtle body, it will cross from material bodies to spiritual bodies" (KI 21). Confusedly, Berdyaev calls new symbolism, represented also by Picasso, a new art which will be followed by the age of theurgy (MCA 225). Theurgy is "activity together with God" (MCA 118), when an object is identified with a subject (FiSv 105), "the ultimate limit of human creativity." In fact, theurgic creativity goes beyond art as the area of culture and enters the creativity of being itself, life itself (KI 20). To that end, we need to wait for the new world to come.

Apparently, the more creative art is, the more theurgic it becomes. Classical art, the art which relies on canons of beauty, is, for Berdyaev, earth-bound and inferior to romantic art, which is imperfect, but directed toward another world.⁶ The paradigm of classical art is Greek art, and Christian art is romantic art (MCA 211-213). However, the opposition between canonical art and Christian art proposed by Berdyaev is not quite admissible, considering iconography.

It is rather remarkable that Berdyaev has so much to say about Western art and Western artists, but Russian iconography is hardly ever mentioned by him. He mentions in passing the fact that in the fourteenth century, there was in Russia a classically perfect iconography.⁷ He says that "rich culture, beautiful and creative culture has a blood relation with Christian mysticism and symbolism, with the cult, with the spirit which created the icon" (FiSv 261), whereby he seems to positively recognize iconography, but he does not include Eastern art in his discussion at all.

Iconography is traditionally defined by a meticulously specified set of rules that specify not only what can be depicted and in what matter, but also, how paints and the frame should be prepared, even how the iconographer should prepare himself to his task. Iconography is at least as much canonical as Greek art, if not more. In Berdyaev's classification, it would not count as Christian art, and maybe Berdyaev himself would reconsider it when it would have been called to

⁶ Curiously, Pushkin is a representative of classical art (KI 42), whose poetic art is neither Christian nor pagan, but paradisiacal (DM 287); but he is also considered to be "the greatest phenomenon of Russian culture" (Н. Бердяев, *Философия неравенства*, in his *Судьба России*, Москва: ЭКСМО-Пресс 2000, 487), constitutes with the Alexandrian age "the peak of Russian culture" (*The meaning of history*, London: Bles 1936, 223), and said the most noteworthy things about creativity (DM 130; BE 178).

⁷ N. Berdyaev, *The origin of Russian communism*, Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press 1960, 8.

his attention. Creativity is not ruled out from iconography and Rublev's icons are clearly superior to most other icons (Rublev's name is never mentioned by Berdyaev). The prescribed rules are spelled out not to be mindlessly followed by the iconographer, but they are the expression of the fact that iconography strives for creating a space of contact between the viewer and the divine world. That is, following canons is compatible with artistic expression and with the Christian character of art, notwithstanding Berdyaev's claims to the contrary.

In conclusion, Berdyaev speaks about the metaphysical and aesthetic aspect of beauty, but he devotes his attention almost solely to the metaphysical aspect. He speaks about beauty rather traditionally as an expression of harmony, natural harmony and spiritual harmony. In the case of the aesthetic aspect of beauty, his remarks are very unilluminating. He says that art can be associated with beauty, but does not have to be. What is art, then? Not just creativity, because creativity for Berdyaev should characterize any activity. The statement that art anticipates the transformation of the world is of metaphysical nature rather than aesthetic and so is the statement that "art seeks to express the bitter truth about man" and this truth is not beautiful (DH 147), regardless of the fact that the two definitions are not quite compatible. If the essence of art is specified, then its role in anticipating the world to come also becomes unclear. In what does art anticipate this future spiritual world? Not in beauty, if beauty can be absent from art. In expressing the bitter truth about man? Which truth? Aren't ethics, sociology, all of the humanities trying to express it? Unfortunately, Berdyaev does not provide answers to these questions whereby he fails to establish a connection between metaphysical beauty and aesthetic beauty.

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