



# Beauty and Life

Exploring  
the anthropology  
behind the fine arts

edited by  
Rafael Jiménez Cataño

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## Introduction

Few things unite the authors of this volume, since their fields of activity and interest are all very different, but those few points of unity are very strong. Faced with the prospect of collaboration, they were all captivated by the idea of exploring, each one in their own artistic field, such ideas as the revelation of the human in the work of art; or the translation of this epiphany into a humanizing process; and hence the educational power of the artistic experience and its relational value, because, while always a good for the individual, it is hard to explain without communion. This sensitivity has characterized from the beginning the activity of Poetics & Christianity (an ongoing seminar of the School of Communication at the Pontifical University of the Holy Cross), which is the humus in which this volume was born.

Among the many formulations of the hermeneutic principle—the revelation of the human in the work of art—Gadamer’s is remarkable. He claims on the artwork that “we learn to understand ourselves in it.”<sup>1</sup> He places at the basis of his thesis a description in which all the co-authors would likely recognize themselves: “inasmuch as we encounter the work of art in the world and a world in the individual work of art, this does not remain a strange universe into which we are magically transported for a time,” but on the contrary, we discover ourselves in it.<sup>2</sup>

So it is not a luxury, as Roger Scruton was able to express in many ways, or—as Rob van Gerwen wanted to re-

<sup>1</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York: Crossroad, 1986), 86.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Massimiliano Mirto, “L’opera d’arte come epifania della verità dell’ente in Hans Georg Gadamer,” *Ars Brevis* 19 (2013): 355-360.

phrase it—<sup>3</sup> it is “a necessity for a life worth living,” which recalls George Lakoff’s well-known title *Metaphors We Live By* (1980), although it is true that there is something more: not simply a reality of everyday life, but a necessity for a flourishing life. “Our favourite works of art seem to guide us to the truth of the human condition and, by presenting completed instances of human actions and passions, freed from the contingencies of everyday life, to show the worthwhileness of being human.”<sup>4</sup> On a YouTube video of Schubert’s last three piano sonatas, I came across the following comments from 2020: “This music, at this moment, saved my day. It is already a day with sense;” and “I love you Schubert, you are one of the reasons that I am alive and feeling the life in my veins.”<sup>5</sup>

This entire volume deals in some way with this educational power, although we could say that the contributions by Federica Bergamino, Fulvia Strano, and Silvana Noschese are primarily concerned with this. Giampiero Pizzol’s intervention especially highlights the humanizing aspect of contact with living beauty, as humanizing is the experience of dwelling in a city whose creators have not lost sight of the fact that it is built for human life (see the text by Juan Carlos Mansur).

Jaana Parviainen’s and Juan José García-Noblejas’ contributions on the nature of the knowledge that gives reason for artistic creation and its fruition are profound and precise. To do this, they resort to epistemologies that are

<sup>3</sup> Rob van Gerwen, “Roger Scruton on ‘Why Beauty is not a Luxury but a Necessity for a Life Worth Living’”, Soeterbeeck Instituut, Ravenstein, June 12, 2009.

<sup>4</sup> Roger Scruton, *Beauty* (Oxford, UK - New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 129.

<sup>5</sup> Brilliant Classics, “Schubert: The last three piano sonatas,” *YouTube*, August 12, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mcnrUbSqNuY>, accessed October 17, 2021. Pianists: Folke Nauta, Frank van de Laar, and Klára Würtz.

distant from each other in time, apart from the fact that their fields of focus and application differ: explaining the knowledge of one's own body and movement in dance, or the specificity of telling a story and how it relates to truth and to life. The chapter written by Michela Cortini and Giuseppe Madonna is similar, in that they inquire about what the contact with art offers to human life, comparing it with what science can offer, according to the epistemological proposal of Pavel Florensky, both a scientist and an authority on artistic matters.

Two reflections come from the very heart of the practice of educating with art: that of Giampiero Pizzol, in the world of theater; and the contribution of Silvana Noschese, in the field of music, specifically the impact of choirs in schools and even with the nuance of healing. In these non-academic essays one can perceive the vivacity of art coming alive in people, and in this they share the atmosphere with the reflections on the dynamic encounter with art in museums (Fulvia Strano), which, as in the case of creators, cannot be pure spontaneity.

The term “encounter” has a personal value; it should not be given a purely metaphorical reading. Scruton attributes to the work of art a capacity to donate, which is something characteristic of the person (its effusive character, as García-Noblejas calls it): “My pleasure in beauty is therefore like a gift offered to the object, which is in turn a gift offered to me.”<sup>6</sup> Steiner also described this event as the encounter of two people, of two initiatives: “Where freedoms meet, where the integral liberty of donation or withholding of the work of art encounters our own liberty of reception or refusal, *cortesia*, what I have called *tact of heart*, is of the essence.”<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Scruton, *Beauty*, 31.

<sup>7</sup> George Steiner, *Real Presences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 155.



Of course, this set of texts does not pretend to be systematic about the nature of art, and neither will I pretend to be systematic here. It does not seem to me the place to decide whether beauty defines the “fine arts.” In some languages it would seem so by the name (“*belle arti*”), and although the title of the volume speaks of “beauty,” we do not want to make it a whole aesthetics. In fact, when discussing humanization as we do here, we sometimes prefer to speak of the experience of beauty, not of art, with the understanding that the first noun is broader than the second and includes it. Nor is this the time to clarify whether art is imitation and, if so, of what kind. In my contribution on Schnittke’s music, the idea of imitation does come up, but only because the composer sometimes followed imitative criteria (the symbolic criterion being more frequent). The revelation of the human condition in his music sometimes assumes the form of mirroring, in a way that recalls Octavio Paz’s explanation of the essence of the poetic word: “It is not an explanation of our condition, but an experience in which our condition, itself, is revealed or manifested.”<sup>8</sup> Before our very eyes something happens about which we can say: I am like this, I am made like this.

Allow me to explain a curious fact. To discuss Alfred Schnittke in one chapter, and Alan Parsons and Eric Woolfson in another, would seem like a strident approach. I note that Schnittke, one of the most relevant classical<sup>9</sup> composers of the second half of the 20th century, is known for his frequent use of orchestration that recalls the sonorities of progressive rock. What happens is that he was very up to date with the rock music of the time, which, moreover, he

<sup>8</sup> Octavio Paz, *The Bow and the Lyre* (The Texas Pan American Series, Kindle Edition, 2013), chapter 7, “The consecration of the instant”.

<sup>9</sup> What in German has come to be called “E-Musik”, i.e. “*ernste Musik*” or “serious music”, as distinct from “U-Musik”, which would be “*Unterhaltungsmusik*” or “entertainment music”. Music that is not “classical” would be “popular”. All designations have their own weaknesses.

listened to every day at home, since his son Andrey cultivated it (as a performer and composer) and collaborated on some of his works.<sup>10</sup>

There are many stories of what we could call “social redemption” through art. A well-known one is that of the youth orchestra program in Venezuela that has rescued young people from a life of misery and a nihilistic atmosphere that frequently involves drugs and crime. Known as “El Sistema,” the program has been adopted by other countries with excellent results. A symbolic example is a musician who grew up in this program, who as of this very year is the artistic director of the Paris Opera. In another artistic field, the capillary effect of the cultivation of urban art in some depressed neighborhoods of the Mexican city of Puebla, which are marked by poverty and crime, has been noticeable in recent years. The non-profit organization La Rueda has achieved significant decrease in the rate of violence, accompanied by a social climate that was previously unimaginable: the inhabitants are proud of their neighborhoods, which are now visited by tourists because there are things worth seeing and because there is safety in the streets. These are realities that are in tune with Mansur’s reflections in this volume and in other areas of his work, such as the seminars he regularly organizes on the aesthetics of the city. One of these seminars in 2019 discussed the need for quality city-design, the social effects of the lack of beauty in a neighborhood (gentrification, for example), the right to beauty, and other topics which show us that it is difficult to delve into aesthetics without touching ethics.

This keen eye on dwelling compensates for the relative absence of architecture in this volume, just as the other visual arts are included in the contribution on museum

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Alexander Ivashkin, *Alfred Schnittke* (London: Phaidon, 1996), 189 and 208.

didactics and other references, in particular the one to Florensky about the icon and its relationship with perspective representation (see the essay by Cortini and Madonna).

On the seventh centenary of Dante, the year in which we worked together on this project, a 2008 letter from Benigni to Dante circulated, in which he lists at length all that he thinks we learn from reading the *Divine Comedy*, where we find the following beautiful and profound remark. We learn:

that, after reading you, we can no longer look at others distractedly,  
but as mysterious treasures, repositories of an immense destiny<sup>11</sup>.

Aesthetics without ethics is, to say the least, inhuman. And thus it is understandable that the first and the last three items that Benigni gives are:

that God needs mankind  
[...]  
that there is someone who never turns his gaze  
/from us, because he loves us;  
that beauty is born painfully;  
and that art is a gift.

The spiritual dimension of art seems to derive simply from the structure of the human person, this dynamic character by which everyone is always in a process of becoming—to become who one is. And it is possible to deviate. Thomas Merton speaks of the frequency with which an artist can make serious efforts to be someone other than himself. “For many absurd reasons, they are

<sup>11</sup> Roberto Benigni, “Lettera a Dante,” *Dante Society London*, <https://dantesocietylondon.com/robertobenigniletteraadante.html>, accessed October 14, 2021; for the English translation: Mary Manning, “Roberto Benigni: Dante is Beautiful,” *Oltre i confini – Beyond Borders*, <https://www.marymanning.net/lingua-e-cultura/roberto-benigni-dante-is-beautiful/>, accessed October 14, 2021.

convinced that they are obliged to become somebody else who died two hundred years ago and who lived in circumstances utterly alien to their own.”<sup>12</sup> Merton presents this phenomenon to apply it to the personal relationship with God that someone may not find by trying to live it according to someone else’s relationship.

We have here one of the cases in which the artistic experience illuminates other areas of human life. This is especially true of those who do not live fully in art, in a professional way, because the poor artist is a man like any other. In fact, he is often more fragile, with the misfortune that what for others is fresh air, a new light, a rest along the road, for him can be the thing he is struggling with every hour of every day. Etty Hillesum, much quoted on spiritual matters, was a writer with all the psychological profile of the artist, and she strongly felt this vulnerability:

There are moments in which it is suddenly brought home to me why creative artists take to drink, become dissipated, lose their way, etc. The artist really needs a very strong character if he is not to go to pieces morally, not to lose his bearings. I don’t quite know how to put it properly, but I feel it very strongly in myself at certain moments. All my tenderness, all my emotions, this whole swirling soul-lake, soul-sea, soul-ocean, or whatever you want to call it, wants to pour out then, to be allowed to flow forth into just one short poem, but I also feel, if only I could, like flinging myself headlong into an abyss, losing myself in drink.

After each creative act one has to be sustained by one’s strength of character, by a moral sense, by I don’t know what, lest one tumble, God knows how far. And pushed by what dark impulse? I sense it inside me; even in my most fruitful and most creative inner moments, there are raging demons and self-destructive forces. Still, I feel that I am learning to

<sup>12</sup> Thomas Merton, “Integrity,” in *Seeds of Contemplation* (London: Hollis and Carter, 1949), 98.

control myself, even in those moments. That is when I suddenly have the urge to kneel down in some quiet corner, to rein myself in and to make sure that my energies are not wildly dissipated.<sup>13</sup>

This is a development of what Benigni stated when he said that “beauty is born painfully” (*la bellezza nasce terribilmente*). But in addition to this there is also the reality of the gift, pointed out by Benigni himself, and by Steiner and Scruton, who are remarkably bold in recognizing in the work of art the characteristics of a person. It is one of the reasons why the encounter with art, one of those authentic encounters, which do not happen often, has something prodigious, a touch of the other world. It is a thrill that is very effectively conveyed by a page from *The Elegance of the Hedgehog*, where a highly intelligent and hypercritical pre-adolescent girl seems to yield to the enchantment of a choir, transforming her venom into tears of surrender:

Yesterday afternoon was my school’s choir performance. [...]

Eventually we got to the gym, everybody found a place as best they could. I was forced to listen to the most asinine conversations coming at me from below, behind, every side, all around (in the bleachers), and in stereo (cell phone, fashion, cell, who’s going out with who, cell, dumb-ass teachers, cell, Cannelle’s party) and then finally the choir arrived to thundering applause. [...]

Every time, it’s a miracle. Here are all these people, full of heartache or hatred or desire, and we all have our troubles and the school year is filled with vulgarity and triviality and consequence, and there are all these teachers and kids of every shape and size, and there’s this life we’re struggling through full of shouting and tears and laughter and fights and break-ups and dashed hopes and unexpected luck—it all disappears, just like that, when the choir begins to sing. Everyday life vanishes into song, you are suddenly

<sup>13</sup> Etty Hillesum, *An Interrupted Life. The Diaries, 1941-1943 and Letters from Westerbork* (New York: An Owl Book Henry Holt and Company, 1996), 91. [March 17, 1942, 9:00 pm].

## INTRODUCTION

overcome with a feeling of brotherhood, of deep solidarity, even love, and it diffuses the ugliness of everyday life into a spirit of perfect communion. Even the singers' faces are transformed: it's no longer Achille Grand-Fernet that I'm looking at (he is a very fine tenor), or Déborah Lemeur or Ségolène Rachtet or Charles Saint-Sauveur. I see human beings, surrendering to music.

Every time, it's the same thing, I feel like crying, my throat goes all tight and I do the best I can to control myself but sometimes it gets close: I can hardly keep myself from sobbing. So when they sing a canon I look down at the ground because it's just too much emotion at once: it's too beautiful, and everyone singing together, this marvelous sharing. I'm no longer myself, I am just one part of a sublime whole, to which the others also belong, and I always wonder at such moments why this cannot be the rule of everyday life, instead of being an exceptional moment, during a choir.

When the music stops, everyone applauds, their faces all lit up, the choir radiant. It is so beautiful.

In the end, I wonder if the true movement of the world might not be a voice raised in song.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Muriel Barbery, *The Elegance of the Hedgehog* (New York: Europa Editions 2008), 185.

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*Rafael Jiménez Cataño*  
Rome, November 22, 2021  
Feast of Saint Cecilia

Gadamer's quotation of this introduction is found more completely on one of the front cover's flaps. The full references for Emerson's text on the other flap and that of Potok on the back cover (or on the book profile, in the electronic versions) are these:

- Chaim Potok, *My Name is Asher Lev* (New York: Anchor Books, 2009), 278.
- Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Life and Literature, lecture 2: Art*, in *The Later Lectures of Ralph Waldo Emerson: 1843-1871* (Athens and London: University of Georgia Press, 2001), 217.