PLOTINUS
ON THE BEAUTIFUL

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PLOTINUS
ON THE BEAUTIFUL

BEING THE SIXTH TREATISE OF THE FIRST ENNEAD
LITERALLY TRANSLATED

BY

STEPHEN MacKENNA

"For Soul is Form and doth the Body make."
SPENSER.

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NOTE.

The treatise of the Beautiful was the first of Plotinus' writings. The thesis of it is broadcast throughout the Enneads. Even the treatise of the Origin of Evil ends on the note of Beauty, Beauty present, dimly, in all visible evil lest men be disheartened and the gods unhappy, present "for remembrance." For all the Universe is symbol, by right of being Emanation, and the One-All is the Eternal Beauty.

A certain literalness here and there is intentional: the translation belongs to an entire version now well in hand, the first complete in English, and that may appear in the whole to be only the due respect of mannerism which in an isolated fragment gives a jar.

Sources, &c: Text, Richard Volkman, Creuzer (Oxon): Latin translation of Ficino, German of Herman Mueller, French of Bouillet, Barthélemy St.-Hilaire; Commentaries of Vacherot and Jules Simon.

"Intelligence" translates Nous=(according to context) (a) First-Emanation of the One, the Divine Mind, and, by expansion, the supra-sensible Intelligible world, or (b) the intuitive,

true-knowing Nature in man. "Soul," either the Second-Emanation, the Kosmic soul, or the soul of man. "Matter" is sometimes the "matter" of daily speech, sometimes primal unshaped sub-stratum, the uttermost Emanation of the One, almost not-being, perhaps = Chaos. The use of capitals for the initials of certain words calls attention to a technical or peculiarly Plotinian sense, e.g., = There *in the Realm of Intelligibles.*

Dublin, 1908. *S. M. K.*

ON THE BEAUTIFUL; BEING THE SIXTH TREATISE OF THE FIRST ENNEAD, LITERALLY TRANSLATED

I.

THE BEAUTIFUL addresses itself chiefly to sight; but there is a beauty of sound, too, both in sequences of words and in all Music —for melodies and cadences are beautiful— and, to rise from the realm of Sense to a higher order, there are pursuits, actions, faculties, sciences that have beauty, and there is the beauty of the virtues.

Whether there be any beauty loftier still will appear as we proceed.

What is it, then, that makes material things show beautiful to us? What inclines the ear towards sound as being beautiful? And all that holds from Soul, how comes it that, universally, this order of things is beautiful? Are all these several things beautiful by virtue of some one common principle, or is there a Beauty peculiar to the embodied and another Beauty for the other order? And what manner of entity can this Beauty be, or these differing Beauties?

Consider that some things, bodies for instance, are beautiful not in their own right but by something they partake in, while others are essentially beautiful, as the nature of virtue is. The same bodies show sometimes beautiful, sometimes unbeautiful; so that their quality as being body is quite another thing than their quality as being beautiful. What is this something that appears in the bodies? It is here that our enquiry naturally begins.

What is it that attracts the eyes of those that see a beautiful object and swerves them towards it and forces them to approach it and makes them glad in its sight? If we possess ourselves of this, perhaps it may serve for a standpoint from which we may survey what lies beyond.

Almost everyone declares that the symmetry of parts towards each other and towards a whole, with besides a certain grace of colour, constitutes the beauty appealing to the eye, that in visible things—and in all things else, universally—to be beautiful is to be symmetrical and fashioned after a certain measure.

But by this teaching, of necessity, only a compound can be beautiful, never anything simple; and only the whole will be beautiful, the several parts having beauty not in them-

selves but only in that they serve to make the whole beautiful. Yet a beautiful whole demands beauty in the parts; Beauty is assuredly not put together from ugliness; the beauty must govern throughout.

Again, by this doctrine, colours and even the light of the sun, being simple and not having the beauty of symmetry, must be outside of beauty. And how, then, is gold a beautiful thing? And lightning by night, and the stars, why are these so beautiful to see? In sounds, too, the simple must be banned, though often in a whole beautiful work each several note is beautiful in itself. Again, since the one face, though its symmetry remain unchanged, appears sometimes beautiful and sometimes not, must it not be avowed that Beauty is something other than symmetry, that symmetry itself owes its beauty to something else?

And if we turn to the beauty in pursuits or in systems of doctrine and call in symmetry as a cause here also—what symmetry can possibly be affirmed in beautiful pursuits, laws, teachings or sciences? How can speculations stand symmetrically one to another? By being in accord, perhaps? But there will be found no less unison or harmony in the ugly: the pro-

positions that Justice is a generous artlessness and that Saving-Discretion is mere feebleness chime harmoniously, run together in entire good-fellowship.

Then again every virtue is a beauty in the soul, a beauty truer than any of these others, but in virtue where is the symmetry? Virtue cannot have the symmetry of size or of number, diverse though the parts of the soul may be; for what principle of proportion could enter into the compromise or the coalescence of the soul's faculties or purposes?

Finally, how would there be beauty in Intelligence, essentially the solitary?

II.

Let us, then, attack the problem afresh and enquire what precisely is the Primal Beauty in material things.

Undoubtedly there exists something that is perceived at the first glance, something which the soul names as from a previous knowledge, and, recognising it, welcomes it, and, as it were, moves into harmonious association with it. Let the soul on the other hand fall in with the Ugly, and it shrinks within itself, denies it, turns away from it, not in harmony with it, resenting it.

Our interpretation is that the soul—by the very force of its nature, by its belonging to the nobler being in the ranks of beings—when it sees anything of that kinship or any trace of that kinship, thrills with delight, takes its own to itself, and so is stirred afresh to the sense of its Nature and of all its affinity.

But what likeness is there between beautiful things here and The Beauty There? For if there be such a likeness (as the soul discerns) then the two orders must be resemblant; but how can there be the one beauty here and There?

We hold that things here are beautiful by participation in Forming-Idea.

All shapelessness, within whose nature it is to admit of Form and Idea, as long as it remains wholly without share in Reason and Idea is ugly as being outside of the Divine Reason. This is the absolute Ugly. An ugly thing is something that has not been entirely mastered by shape and by Reason, the Matter not having offered itself to be controlled throughout by Forming-Idea.

Where the Forming-Idea has entered, it has grouped and co-ordinated what from a diversity of parts was to become a unity; it has wrought the diversity to a single determined

reality, stamping on it the unity of harmonious coherence; for the Idea is a unity and what it shapes must become a unity in the degree possible to what is formed from diversity. And, on what has thus been brought to unity, Beauty enthrones itself, giving itself to the parts as to the sum; when it lights on a natural unity indistinguishable into parts then it gives itself to that whole: it is much as there is the beauty, conferred by art, of all a house with all its parts, and the beauty that some natural quality may give to a single stone.

And it is thus that the material thing becomes beautiful, by partaking in the Reason that flows from the Divine.

III.

And there is a faculty peculiarly addressed to Beauty—one incomparably sure in the appreciation of its own—which unerringly discerns the beautiful when all the powers of the soul hold court together. Or perhaps it is the soul itself that acts immediately, naming the beautiful when it discerns something accordant with its own indwelling Idea—using this Idea as a canon of accuracy for the judging.

But what accordance is there between the embodied and that which is before body?

By right of what principle does the architect, when he finds the house that stands before him correspondent with his inner idea of a house, pronounce it beautiful? Is it not that the house before him, if you put aside the mere stones, is that inner idea communicated to the mass of exterior matter, the essentially undivided made manifest in a diversity?

So, the perceptive faculty: discerning in certain bodies the Idea which has welded and dominated shapeless nature, its contrary—observing, further, impressed upon the common shapes a shape excellent above the common—it has brought to a unity what was still only a thing of fragments, and caught it up and borne it within, to the essentially indivisible, presenting it before the inner Idea as something concordant and congenial, a natural friend; and then there is a joy like that of a good man discerning in a youth the early signs of a virtue accordant with the fulfilled virtue within himself.

The beauty in colour, too, is simple, deriving from shape, from the conquest of the darkness in Matter by the appearance of light, the unembodied, which is Reason and Form-

ing-Idea. Hence it is that Fire, unlike all material things, is beautiful in and by itself alone, holding the rank of Form to the other elements, living aloft, the sprightliest of all bodies as very near to the unembodied, itself alone admitting no other to itself, all the others penetrated by it. For they take warmth, but it does not grow cold; it has colour primally, they receive colour from it as their Form; therefore it shines and glows, as it were, by right of being Form. And all that has not yielded, and so takes but feebly of its light, remains outside of Beauty as not having accepted the plenitude of the Form of colour.

And harmonies unheard in sound create the harmonies we hear, and so bring the soul to the consciousness of Beauty, showing it the one Beauty in another kind. For it is a condition of sensible harmonies that they be measured not by any haphazard principle but by some principle whose peculiar service it is to create the Form that is to dominate Matter.

Thus much of the beauties of the realm of Sense, images, it is true, and shadows, fugitives that have entered into Matter—but to adorn and to ravish where they appear.

IV.

So we may now leave Sense to its low place and make our way upward to the sight of beauties above all these, beauties which Sense is not given to see, which, without help from the organs, the soul sees and proclaims.

As it is not for those to speak of the beautiful things of Sense who have never seen them or felt them beautiful—men blind from birth, let us suppose—in the same way those must be silent upon the beauty in noble pursuits who have never taken to themselves the beauty there is in pursuits and in knowledge and all this order; nor may those speak of the splendour of virtue who have never known the face of Justice and of Saving-Thought, beautiful beyond the beauty of Evening and of Dawn. This vision is for those only who see with the soul's sight; these, seeing, will rejoice, and awe will fall upon them and a trouble deeper than those other things could give, for now they stand before the Authentic Beauty. This is the spirit that must always wait upon beauty in any of its forms, wonderment and a delicious trouble, longing and love and an awe blended with delight. These emotions may be felt for the unseen Beauty as for the seen and these the souls feel for it, all souls in some sense,

but those the more deeply that are the more deeply apt to this nobler love—just as all men feel the love of beautiful forms of body, but all are not urged by it equally, and those only are called Lovers who love the most.

V.

We must then begin to question those Lovers whose love is for things outside of sense.

What do you feel in presence of what are called beautiful pursuits, before the beauty of conduct, of soundly disciplined morals, of all the works and consequences of virtue, before the beauty of souls? And when you perceive that you yourselves are beautiful within, what do you feel? What is this Dionysiac exultation that possesses you, this straining upwards of all your being, this longing to break away from the body and live self-gathered in the very self? These are no other than the emotions of those filled with a veritable love. And what is it for which such lovers spend all this passion? It is not for shape or for colour or for proportion; it is for a soul—something not known by shape or by colour—that possesses Saving-Thought and all the other splendour of the virtues, invisible they too as the soul.

It is that you find in yourselves, or enjoy in another, Loftiness of Spirit and Righteousness of Life and the purity of Saving-Thoughtfulness, and Courage of the majestic face, and Gravity, and Modesty that goes fearless and tranquil and passionless, with, shining down over all, the light of godlike Intelligence.

But, reverencing and loving these, why do you declare them beautiful?

It is that they are Beauty's self, Beauty manifest, and one that sees them cannot but cry aloud that these are the veritable Beings. For what are the veritable Beings? Assuredly the Beautiful.

But Reason, unsatisfied, asks by what property in them have they wrought the soul to loveliness. What is this comeliness, as of light, resting upon all the virtues?

Are you willing that we take the contrary, the Ugliness of the soul and set it against its Beauty? Perhaps to elucidate the nature and cause of its ugliness will most help to our end.

Let us, then, suppose an ugly soul; uncontrolled and unrighteous; charged with all the lusts; torn by internal discord; going in fear through its weakness of purpose, in envy through pettiness; thinking, in the little thought it has, only of what decays and is

base; perverse in all its instincts; the friend of unclean pleasure; living the life of abandonment to bodily sensation; taking its shame as its joy. What can we say but that this Ugliness is some foul accretion gathered about the soul, perverting it, soiling it, so that, encrusted with all manner of evil, it has no longer a clean life or a clean sensation but commands only a life dimmed by the gathered evil; that, polluted by multiform decay, it no longer sees what a soul should see, may no longer rest in its own being, dragged ever as it is towards the outer, the lower, the dark? An unclean thing, I think, and driven hither and thither by its lust of what falls under the senses, deeply infected by the taint of Matter, sunken deep in Matter and sucking Matter into itself; in its union with the ignoble it has trafficked away for an alien nature its own native Form and Idea.

If a man have fallen into filth or mud, whatsoever grace he had ceases to appear, and he shows only as the thing the filth or mud has smeared him into; Ugliness has come to him by the accretion of foreign matter; and if he is to be comely again it must be his business to wash and clean himself till he become what he was.

So, we may justly say, a soul becomes ugly

—by an accretion, by an admixture, by a descent into body, into Matter. And this is the disgrace of the soul, that it cease to be clean and apart. The disgrace of gold is in its being permeated with earthy matter; if this be worked out the gold is left and is beautiful—isolated from all that is other than itself, gold with gold alone. And so the soul; let it but be cleared of the desires that come by its too intimate commerce with the body, emancipate from all the passions, purged from all that has accrued by its embodiment, withdrawn, a solitary, to itself again—in that moment the ugliness, that came only from the alien nature, is stripped away.

VI.

For, as the ancient teaching was, Saving-Restraint and Courage and every virtue, and even Wisdom itself, are but a purification. Hence the Mysteries with good reason adumbrate the immersion in filth of the unpurified even in the lower world of Hades, since all that is unclean has a friendly feeling for filth for its very evil's sake, and swine, foul of body, take their joy in foulness.

What else is the true virtue of Saving-Restraint but to have no converse in the

pleasures of the body, to break away from them as neither clean nor worthy of the clean? So, too, Courage is but fearlessness of death, as death is but a parting of soul from body, a thing no man can dread who cares to be his unmingled self. And Magnanimity is but the disdain of the things Here. And Wisdom is but Thought in its withdrawal from the lower places, Thought lifting the soul to the Above.

The soul, then, purified, becomes Idea and Reason, wholly free of body, intellective, entirely of that Divine order from which the Fountain of Beauty rises and all the stream of Beauty. Hence the soul lifted up to Intelligence is beautiful to all its power. For Intelligence and what things proceed from Intelligence are the soul's beauty—a beauty native to it and not foreign, for only so is it truly soul. And it is just to say that in the soul's becoming a good and beautiful thing is its becoming like to God, for Thence is all the Beauty and all the Good in beings.

Or, better, Being is Beauty, as the contrary nature is the Ugly. And the Ugly is also the Primal Evil; therefore its contrary is at once good and beautiful or is Good and Beauty. Hence the one test wlll discover to us the Beautiful and the Good, the Ugly and the Evil.

And Beauty, this Beauty which is also the Good, must be posed as the First; by immediate participation Thence, Intelligence is the Beautiful; Soul is beautiful through Intelligence; those other beauties, the beautiful among actions and the beautiful among pursuits, have become beautiful by the operation of the shaping soul. So too, even in the realm of Matter things of which Beauty may be affirmed have become so by the soul. For the soul, a divine thing, a member as it were of the Primal Beauty, makes beautiful to the fulness of their capacity whatsoever things it seizes and moulds to its will.

VII.

Therefore, let us make our way upward again towards this Good, the desired of every soul. If any have seen it, he knows what I intend when I say it is beautiful. Even the desire of it is a thing desirable as a good. To attain it is for those that are willing to take the upward way, for those that will turn away from other things for it, divest themselves of all we have gathered round us by our descent. So to those that go up to the holy celebrations of the Mysteries there are appointed purifications and the laying aside of the garments worn

before and the approach in nakedness; until, passing on the upward path all that is other than the God, each in the loneliness of himself beholds that lonely-dwelling Being, the Apart, the Single, the Pure, the Being from Which all things depend, for Which all look and live and act and know, for that This is the Cause of Life and of Intelligence and of Being. And one that shall know this vision —with what passion of love shall he not be seized, with what pang of desire, what longing to be merged into one with This, what wondering delight! If he that has never seen this Being must hunger after It as after the Good, he that has seen It must love and reverence It as the very Beauty; he will be flooded with awe and gladness, pierced by a salutary wound; he loves with a veritable love, with sharp desire; every love other than this he must needs despise, and disdain all that he once judged beautiful.

This indeed is the mood even of those who, only because they have come to the vision of Gods or Spirits, can never again take equal pleasure in the beauty of embodied things; what then must we not conceive of him who contemplates Absolute Beauty, essentially the Pure, wholly without the taint of flesh and of

Matter, the Being whose place is neither in earth nor in heaven—so perfect we must make Its purity—apart from all these things in that they are contingent, mixed, not primal but proceeding from This?

Having vision of This Being—the Choragos of all Existence, the Self-Intent that still gives forth but admits nothing to Itself—resting absorbed in the sight and enjoyment of This, becoming like to This, what beauty can the soul yet fail of? For This, the Beauty Pre-eminent, the Absolute and the Primal, fashions its lovers to Beauty and makes them, too, worthy of love.

And for This the sternest and the uttermost combat is proposed to the souls; all our labour is for This, lest we be without part in this noblest vision, which he that possesses is blessed in the blessed sight he sees, and he that fails of it has failed wholly. For not he that has failed of the joy that is in colours or in visible forms, not he that has failed of power or of honours or of kingdom has failed, but only he that has failed of only This, for the possession of Which he should renounce kingdoms and command over earth and ocean and the heavens, if only, spurning the world of Sense from beneath him and turning to This, he may see.

VIII.

But what must we do? How is there access? How do we come to vision of the inaccessible Beauty dwelling as if in consecrated precincts and remote from the common ways where all might see, even the profane?

He that has the strength, let him arise and withdraw into himself, foregoing all that is known by the eyes, and turn for ever from the material beauty that once made his joy. When he sees those forms of beauty that show in body let him not follow them; he must know them for images, vestiges, shadows, and hasten away towards That they tell of. For if anyone pursue what is like a beautiful shape playing over water and clutch at it as something true—there is a myth somewhere, I think, that tells of such a one, how he sank into the depths of the current and was not seen again. So, too, one that possesses himself of beautiful material things and will not let them go, shall be carried down, not in body but in soul, to the dark depths loathed of Intelligence where, blind, in Hades also he shall have converse with shadows, there as here.

"Let us flee, then, to the beloved Fatherland"—this would be the truer counsel. But what is this flight? How are we to gain the

open sea, as Odysseus ordered flight from the sorceress Circe or Calypso? For Odysseus, as it seems to me, stands for a parable—not content to stay though he have all the pleasures of the eyes and his days be filled with the abundance of the beauty of Sense.

Our Fatherland is There whence we have come, and There is the Father. What then is our course, what the manner of our flight? This is not a journey for the feet; ever the feet bring us from one spot of earth to another. Nor do you need to plan a journey by horse-and-chariot or over sea. All this order of things you must set aside. Nor do you need to see; you must close the eyes and call instead upon another vision which is to be waked within you, a vision which all possess, which few apply.

IX.

And this inward vision, what is its operation?

Newly awakened, it is all too weak to gaze upon its brilliant mark. Therefore the soul itself must be trained to the habit of contemplating, first, all beautiful pursuits, then works of beauty—not those that the arts labour but the actions of men known as good. Lastly, you

must observe the souls of those that have shaped these works of beauty.

But how may you come to see into a virtuous soul and know the beauty it contains?

Withdraw into yourself and look. And if you do not find yourself beautiful as yet, do as does the creator of a statue that is to be made beautiful; he cuts away here, he smoothes there, he makes this line lighter, this other purer, until he has shown a beautiful face upon his statue. So do you also; cut away all that is excessive, straighten all that is crooked, bring light to all that is shadowed, labour to make all glow with beauty, and do not cease chiselling your statue until there shall shine out on you the godlike splendour of virtue, until you shall see the final goodness surely established in the stainless shrine.

And, when you have become this perfect work and see that it and you are one, when you are self-gathered in the purity of your being, nothing now remaining that can hinder your inner unity, nothing from without clinging to your inner self; when you find you are wholly yourself, wholly that Light which is the only true light—which is not measured by size, not narrowed by any circumscribed shape, nor again diffused as a thing void of term, but is

wholly outside of measure as something greater than all measure and above all quantity—when you perceive that you have grown to this; you are now become very vision; now call up all your confidence, strike forward yet a step—you need a guide no longer—strain and see.

This is the only eye that sees the mighty Beauty. If the eye that undertakes the vision be dimmed by vice and unpurified, or weak and unable in its cowardly flinching to see the Uttermost Brightness, then it sees nothing, even though another point to what lies plain to see before it. To any vision must be brought an eye fitted to what is to be seen and having some likeness to it. Never did eye see the sun unless it had become sun-like, and never can soul see Beauty unless itself be beautiful.

Therefore, first let each become godlike and each beautiful who cares to see God and Beauty. Then, mounting, he will come on his upward way, first to Intelligence, and survey all the beautiful Ideas There, and will avow that this is Beauty, that the Ideas are Beauty, since all is beautiful by these, by the offspring and essence of Intelligence. And what he will see beyond this, we call the Nature of Good, that which carries Beauty as

thrown out before It. So that, in the sum of the Intelligibles, the First is the Beautiful: if we discriminate among them, we call the Realm of Ideas the Intelligible Beauty, while the Good, that which lies beyond, is the Fountain at once and Principle of Beauty. Or we may make the Good and the Primal Beauty one and the same. And thus, always, Beauty's seat is There.

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