

# **The prophetic vision of beauty: The ethical intersection of literature and theological aesthetics**

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THE PROPHETIC VISION OF BEAUTY: THE ETHICAL  
INTERSECTION OF LITERATURE AND  
THEOLOGICAL AESTHETICS

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**Abstract**

*In his 1970 Nobel Prize in Literature lecture, Russian author Alexandr Solzhenitsyn asserted that the famous utterance of Dostoyevsky's Prince Myshkin, "Beauty will save the world," was not the issue of vain hope or foolish romanticism, but rather "prophecy." This paper will investigate the way in which Solzhenitsyn's ethical claim concerning literature intersects with theological aesthetics, especially in the latter's assertion that beauty must be recovered from its decline beneath the amorphous sublime and re-associated with the good and true. Solzhenitsyn's challenge was primarily addressed to the global community of authors, calling them to offer a collective moral "field of vision" for humanity through their literary art. I will locate the ethical import of this literary "field of vision" in its relation to self-knowledge, and then explore theological aesthetics' claim that the identity of the human being is revealed, judged and affirmed in an encounter with the beauty of Christ.*

"And so perhaps that old trinity of Truth, Good, and Beauty is not just the formal outworn formula it used to seem to us during our heady, materialistic youth. If the crests of these three trees join together, as the investigators and explorers used to affirm, and if the too obvious, too straight branches of Truth and Good are crushed or amputated and cannot reach the light—yet perhaps the whimsical, unpredictable, unexpected branches of Beauty will make their way through

and soar up TO THAT VERY PLACE and in this way perform the work of all three. And in that case it was not a slip of the tongue for Dostoyevsky to say that ‘Beauty will save the world,’ but a prophecy.” —Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn

In his lecture for the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1970, Russian author Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, whose celebrated writings revealed to the world the crimes of the Stalinist regime in Russia, knowingly countered the prevailing opinion on the status of beauty expressed in contemporary aesthetics discourse. Kant’s famous differentiation in *Critique of Judgment* between the peaceful, harmonious play of the imagination with the beautiful, conceived as bounded sensible form that universally pleases, and the destabilizing, dynamic encounter with the sublime—the formless, unrepresentable and indeterminate—signalled beauty’s decline from the central interest of modern aesthetics. Today, the diminution of beauty is maintained by many theorists, often out of an expressed concern for justice. As Eastern Orthodox practitioner of theological aesthetics David B. Hart acknowledges, “There is . . . an undeniable ethical offense in beauty: not only in its history as a preoccupation of privilege . . . [but also in] its unsettling prodigality.”<sup>1</sup> Beauty will appear in places of unspeakable anguish, a free play of light amidst the hideousness of ethnic cleansing, suicide bombs, epidemic, and famine. It seems that beauty, if not complicit in, is at least indifferent to violence and suffering in the world, and this may strike the human sensibility as a sign of cruelty. But some push the indictment still further. Implicated by its evocation of the gaze of desire that purportedly always objectifies, obfuscates, and owns the other, beauty “has come to be identified as a source of oppression and discrimination,” according to art critic and curator Saul Ostrow.<sup>2</sup>

Into such a climate of growing ambivalence if not outright hostility towards beauty, Solzhenitsyn, who was acquainted with suffering through his exile to the Soviet gulag, interjected a remarkable claim

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1 David Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 15.

2 Saul Ostrow, “The Eternal Problem of Beauty’s Return,” review of *Beauty Matters* edited by Peg Zeglin Brand/*On Beauty and Being Just* by Elaine Scarry/*Monster/Beauty: Building the Body of Love* by Johanna Fruch/*Beauty and the Contemporary Sublime* by Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe, *Art Journal* 62, 3 (2003): 113 (italics mine).

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for beauty's moral force. In his address to the writers of the world, he dares to assert that it is "a certain peculiarity in the essence of beauty" that gives to art "the convincingness . . . [that is] completely irrefutable."<sup>3</sup> Attesting to the potency of beauty's "secret inner light," he writes that "through art we are sometimes visited—dimly, briefly—by revelations such as cannot be produced by rational thinking."<sup>4</sup> According to Solzhenitsyn, art that conveys "the truth . . . as a living force," inherent in its very form and not just as a proposition carried within it, is incontrovertible. As such, art—particularly literature—can thus be prophetic in exposing violence as the "method" and falsehood as the "principle" wielded by totalitarian governments, but also in countering more subtle forms of ideological captivity and coercion around the world.<sup>5</sup> While decrying authoritarian attempts to control art, such as he personally suffered under the Communist regime, Solzhenitsyn was still emboldened to ask: "For what purpose have we been given this gift? What are we to do with it?"<sup>6</sup> Through his speech, he sought to "reproach, beg, urge and entice" the artist to recognize that "the gift of talent imposes responsibility on his free will."<sup>7</sup> That task is to create truthfully, to bear witness to "that which lies nearby" so that art, and especially "world literature," may convincingly offer humanity a collective "field of vision" in which to "see itself as it really is."<sup>8</sup> His hope was that such vision, giving form and presence to the various individual and collective experiences from one generation to the next and one people group to another, would give rise to a shared "scale of values" concerning the dignity and freedom of human beings. By this universal sense of measure, we would have the means by which to both "pass judgement" on institutions and individuals, and close the "yawning gap" between cultural-linguistic frameworks.<sup>9</sup>

Solzhenitsyn's urgent proposal that literature must act as a mirror for human consciousness and action, echoing the philosopher's

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3 Alexandr Solzhenitsyn, "Nobel Lecture," in *Nobel Lectures, Literature 1968-1980*, ed. S. Allen (Singapore: World Scientific Publishing, 1993), 2, [http://nobelprize.org/nobel\\_prizes/literature/laureates/1970/solzhenitsyn-lecture.html](http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1970/solzhenitsyn-lecture.html).

4 *Ibid.*, 2.

5 *Ibid.*, 10.

6 *Ibid.*, 2.

7 *Ibid.*, 6.

8 *Ibid.*, 9.

9 *Ibid.*, 3-4.

injunction to “know thyself,” is framed in a metaphysical understanding of great works of art as embodied instantiations of beauty. The particular work acts as a conduit of a “bright thrust of light” that “inflames even a frozen, darkened soul to a high spiritual experience.”<sup>10</sup> In this conception, the Eastern Orthodox Solzhenitsyn draws from a long Christian tradition of theological aesthetics. Though only recently developed as an interdisciplinary field of study, theological aesthetics has its roots in the thought of the Church Fathers, who subsumed and “converted” the Neoplatonic formulation of beauty as the radiance overflowing from the Absolute One into the realm of material beings. Plotinus stated, “We ourselves possess beauty when we are true to our being; . . . our self-knowledge, that is to say, is our beauty.”<sup>11</sup> This notion of the connection between self-knowledge and beauty became a central concern of theological reflection, especially through the writings of Saint Augustine, who explicated it through the concepts of memory, reason, confession, and forgiveness, leading to his memorable address to Christ: “Late have I loved you, beauty so old and so new: late have I loved you.”<sup>12</sup> In this paper, I will explore the intersection of the moral view of art and literature as expressed by Solzhenitsyn and the premise of theological aesthetics, a point at which is found the shared notion of the prophetic force of beauty, namely, that the ethical desire for the good arises and is directed and chastened by a decentering revelation of what it is to be fully human.

From what do we derive our values, our sense of right and wrong, our “ought-to-be’s”? Theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar, whose seven-volume *The Glory of the Lord* is the seminal text of theological aesthetics, asserts that the ethical sense is activated in the primal recognition of beauty: the face, or presence, of the other. Von Balthasar tells us that the “I” of a child “awakens in the experience of a ‘Thou’: in its mother’s smile through which it learns that it is contained, affirmed and loved in a relationship which is incomprehensively

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10 Ibid., 2.

11 Plotinus, “On the Intellectual Beauty,” in *The Critical Tradition: Classic Texts and Contemporary Trends*, 3rd ed., ed. David H. Richter (Boston: Bedford/St. Martins, 2007), 119.

12 Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1992), 201.

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encompassing, already actual, sheltering and nourishing.”<sup>13</sup> Such a dawning of consciousness resonates with Hans-Georg Gadamer’s description of truth in *Truth and Method* as *aletheia*, the “radiance,” mode of appearing, or disclosure of being to our finite comprehension, which is the defining aspect of beauty.<sup>14</sup> The truth of “myself,” von Balthasar is asserting, is not something to be proved like a scientific fact, but is experiential, originating in an encounter that reveals an “I” existing because of a “Thou,” and this is first experienced in the *alethetic* vision of the face of the mother, a face that is not our own. Subjectivity is grounded in sensual awareness of the other and in recognition of primordial dependency. The “I” is not self-existing but born into and continuously carried forward in a social, and thus moral, context. This truth of a self founded in and dependent upon otherness rather than in the operations of a solitary *cogito* will be repeatedly manifested, from infancy onward, though it can and—as one must admit by examining human behaviour—inevitably *will* be forgotten, evaded, or denied.

In that initial glimpse of beauty in the face of the mother, the journey for every human is begun and defined as *epektasis*, a reaching out towards what he or she desires. Von Balthasar maintains that desire is originally oriented by that first social encounter, “the experience of being granted entrance into a sheltering and encompassing world”—pure gift.<sup>15</sup> However, the “distinction” of the self from the parent in the process of individuation gives rise to a consciousness of freedom. Out of this consciousness come the inevitable searching questions, such as: Who am I? What will satisfy me? And how do I matter? The Aristotelian conception of the uniqueness of human nature, perhaps most notably explicated in *Nicomachean Ethics*, stresses the fact that humans ask these kinds of questions, that humans make *choices* about their ends whereas other species seem to have their ends assigned to

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13 Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*, vol. 5, ed. Brian McNeil and John Riches, trans. Oliver Davies, Andrew Louth, Brian McNeil C.R.V., John Saward and Rowan Williams (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1991), 616.

14 Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Continuum, 1994), 457.

15 Von Balthasar, vol. 5, 616.

them.<sup>16</sup> As an exercise of freedom to realize our humanity, morality is understood to be a project, an endeavour that encompasses more than following a list of proscriptions and commands, an absolute law that is somehow encoded in our being and immediately knowable. Rather, becoming human requires an ontologically grounded imagination, vigilantly attentive to our fragile contingency and condition as a “being-towards-death,” as the existentialists make us aware, but also alert to desire and to what delights and stirs our longings.

Charles Taylor takes up this position in *Sources of the Self*, asserting that to be human is not only to go about choosing ends, but also to be continually seeking identity through “orientation to *the good*.”<sup>17</sup> This moral self-interpretation, Taylor tells us, is not achieved in isolation, but through the “language community” into which we are born and through which is articulated “some framework(s) which defines the shape of the qualitatively higher [the good] but also a sense of where we stand in relation to this [good].”<sup>18</sup> Drawing on the insights of Taylor, Trevor A. Hart writes in his essay “Creative Imagination and Moral Identity” that “one vital source of articulation [of moral identity] lies in those social practices of imagination which, since Kant, we habitually refer to as ‘the arts.’”<sup>19</sup> Hart insists that interaction with imaginative works gives us opportunity to think analogously about our own lived world, to be open to the challenge or reinforcement of our assumptions of meaning and coherence. Further, as Thomas Merton writes, the most compelling “poets and poetic thinkers” are those

who construct myths in which they embody their own struggle to cope with the fundamental questions of life—[and who] are generally ‘prophetic’ in the sense that they anticipate in their solitude the struggles and the general consciousness

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16 Ric Machuga, “Getting from Is to Ought: Why there is no dichotomy between ‘facts’ and ‘values,’” *Books and Culture: A Christian Review* 10, 3 (2004): 28.

17 Charles Taylor. *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), 33 (italics mine).

18 *Ibid.*, 42.

19 Trevor A. Hart, “Creative Imagination and Moral Identity,” *Studies in Christian Ethics* 16, 1 (2003): 11.

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of later generations.<sup>20</sup>

To this assertion, I will add the warning from Solzhenitsyn, considered to be a poet-prophet by readers across a wide band of the ideological spectrum: “But woe to that nation whose literature is disturbed by the intervention of power . . . It is the closing down of the heart of the nation, a slashing to pieces of its memory.”<sup>21</sup> Creative works must be allowed to present their truths without coercion or violation in order that they may express not only a clear vision of what is but also what *ought*—and what *is possible*—to be. This should give us in the “free world” pause: what might be the unrecognized “intervention of power” to restrain, tame, and contain art’s subversive potentialities in our own democratic culture? Solzhenitsyn, it must be acknowledged, did not overlook in his “prophesying” what he observed to be the corrosive effect upon human values of rampant materialism and a debased understanding of freedom in the Western world.<sup>22</sup>

But what compels us to heed the prophetic voice of the poet? Why would we attend to what our “language community” teaches of the good, the call to our socio-ethical responsibilities, even should it come to us through the imaginative works of literature? Is there an innate desire, or *eros*, that naturally corresponds to some universally clear and apparent “good”? Taylor contradicts such a notion, referring to the Freudian ego which, if free, “would be a lucid calculator of pay-offs,” and not much more.<sup>23</sup> Rather, as Elaine Scarry maintains in *On Beauty and Being Just*, Plato, Augustine, Dante, and the line of poets that creatively appropriated their metaphysical view were right to insist that one of the primary ways of moral orientation is the disorienting or “decentering” encounter with beauty, which not only stirs up desire, but awakens the sense of careful attention. In this way,

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20 Thomas Merton, “Prophetic Ambiguities: Milton and Camus,” in *The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton*, ed. Bro. Patrick Hart (New York: New Directions, 1985), 252.

21 Solzhenitsyn, 6.

22 See Solzhenitsyn’s 1978 commencement address at Harvard University, “A World Split Apart,” <http://www.columbia.edu/cu/augustine/arch/solzhenitsyn/harvard1978.html>.

23 Taylor, 33.

Scarry argues, “beauty prepares us for justice.”<sup>24</sup> Scarry joins Gadamer in a return to Plato in order to recover the idea that “the intangibility of the good finds an analogue in the beautiful.”<sup>25</sup> Gadamer explains: “The beautiful reveals itself in the search for the good . . . [and] that which manifests itself in perfect form attracts the longing of love to it. The beautiful disposes people in its favour immediately.”<sup>26</sup> Beauty, the compelling appearance of a self-transcendent reality in excess of our rational comprehension and irreducible to our control, reveals what we might otherwise elude in our search for self-knowledge: the good that demands a re-ordering of our desires. In the frequently quoted words of the poet Rainer Maria Rilke, beauty declares, “You must change your life.”<sup>27</sup>

With this understanding of beauty’s relevance to the good, theological aesthetics joins with Solzhenitsyn in his indirect but firm contradiction of modern aesthetics’ preference for the formless sublime. Beauty matters. It is tangible particularity. Rather than being sublimely amorphous and abstract, the other, by whom we are faced with an ethical demand, is embodied and sensuously encountered while exceeding our conceptual anticipation and grasp. Theological aesthetics understands beauty as both immanent and transcendent, the infinite appearing within the bounds of the finite. It argues for this understanding on the basis of the Incarnation. For theological aesthetics, the ultimate, archetypal form of beauty is Christ—a beauty Francesca Aran Murphy defines as radiance that “communicates the reality of all of the transcendentals. If being, truth and the good are interpreted in its light, their own reality will shine forth.”<sup>28</sup> Accordingly, theological aesthetics claims that the incarnate Christ—the Divine Word become flesh—is the revelation of the sublime glory of the Trinitarian communion of God, offered to the embodied imagination within the form (Gestalt) of an immanent, perceivable human life. Further, theological aesthetics sees the enfleshed form of Christ as

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24 Elaine Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 78.

25 Gadamer, 481.

26 *Ibid.*, 481.

27 Rainer Maria Rilke, “Archaic Torso of Apollo,” in *Translations from the Poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke*, trans. M. D. Herter Norton (New York: Norton, 1962), 181.

28 Francesca Aran Murphy, *Christ the Form of Beauty: A Study in Theology and Literature* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995), 32.

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analogically present in the encounter with each human other, and in the infinite instances of the beautiful in nature and in art, since all of being, by virtue of creation and incarnation, participates in the beauty of Christ's form. "Therefore," writes von Balthasar, "it is right that the child should glimpse the Absolute, 'God' . . . first in its mother, its parents."<sup>29</sup> Tangible encounters with particular beauty analogically communicate the form of beauty that, for theological aesthetics, is not a static Platonic idea or concept, but a person—the Incarnate God.

The metaphysical notion of beauty's power of attraction and correspondence with the true and the good is the theme by which theological aesthetics has endeavoured to articulate its gospel (or "good news") as a revelatory encounter with the glory and graced form of Christ. John W. de Gruchy, a South African theologian grappling with a complex of issues, from apartheid's legacy to AIDS, follows Solzenhitsyn in asserting that

a concern for truth without goodness and beauty lacks the power to attract and convince those whose critical sensitivities are repelled by . . . dogmatism. A concern for goodness without truth or beauty . . . degenerates into barren moralism and misguided iconoclasm. In short, truth and goodness without beauty lack the power to convince and therefore to save.<sup>30</sup>

Approaching the matter from "below," in the realm of the phenomenal experience rather than speculative thought, Alejandro Garcia-Rivera proposes in *The Community of the Beautiful* that "aesthetics be recast as the science which asks . . . *what moves the human heart?*"<sup>31</sup> Again, aesthetics is a matter of self-knowledge and desire, but according to Garcia-Rivera, it is recognizably a *religious* event. It is religious because "beauty's trace reveals a divine starting point," a transcendent connection.<sup>32</sup> Without the recognition of this

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29 von Balthasar, vol. 5, 616.

30 John W. de Gruchy, "Holy Beauty: A Reformed Perspective on Aesthetics Within a World of Unjust Ugliness," 3, in *The Project on Lived Theology*, <http://livedtheology.org/pdfs/deGruchy.pdf> (accessed 2 December 2009).

31 Alejandro Garcia-Rivera, *The Community of the Beautiful: A Theological Aesthetics* (Collegeville: Liturgical, 1999), 9.

32 *Ibid.*, 10.

transcendence, “the Church will find difficult the expression of her faith, much less her conviction of the dignity of the human person, and even less, be a sacrament to the world.”<sup>33</sup> Without reference to beauty as a transcendental, desire would be merely self-referential, with no freedom of flight into the opening and re-ordering of beatific grace; however, without beauty as immanent form, faith would have no tangent with the earth.

To persuasively “be a sacrament” to the world, as von Balthasar documents in *The Glory of The Lord*, the early Church borrowed its metaphysical formulations from antiquity’s “great themes” to testify concerning “the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.”<sup>34</sup> Thus, the recurring Christian theme of “eros as the fundamental yearning of the finite creature for transcendence in God as the primordial unity, the primordial beauty” is a Platonic formulation.<sup>35</sup> On the other hand, the affirmation of the dignity and worth of immanent created beings that analogically bear the “trace” of the divine beauty is an expression of divine *agape* in Plotinian terms. Despite the appropriated tropes through which it is articulated, the beauty that is the subject of theological aesthetics, argues Eastern Orthodox theologian David B. Hart, is distinctly a peaceful persuasion and not the totalizing violence that absorbs the many into the One, of which Greek metaphysics have been charged and convicted. In *The Beauty of the Infinite*, Hart addresses the “postmodern” critique of metaphysical discourses of sameness and analogy (especially as articulated by Levinas and Derrida), asserting that the former, the charge that metaphysical conceptualization reduces everything to identity with the ego, does not apply to theological aesthetics, which is centered in a narrative of difference and particularity, including the affirmation of the goodness of multitudinous creation and “the concrete person and history of Jesus.”<sup>36</sup> As for the latter, Hart asserts that the concern that analogy denies the difference and distance between the objects interrelated through its operation fails to rightly comprehend the analogy of being central to Christian metaphysics.

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33 Ibid., 11.

34 2 Corinthians 4.6.

35 Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord*, vol. 4, ed. John Riches, trans. Brian McNeil C.R.V., Andrew Louth, John Saward, Rowan Williams and Oliver Davies (San Francisco, 1989), 321.

36 Hart, 13.

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Hart writes:

There is also a moral element in receiving the glory of God's work under the aspect of beauty. . . . A proper understanding of beauty's place in theology may show how Christian thought eludes metaphysical ambitions [to deny difference and overcome distance], without sacrificing . . . the language of analogy, reconciliation, or truth.<sup>37</sup>

It is just this concern about Christianity's assimilation of metaphysical violence of which John D'Arcy May writes in *Transcendence and Violence*. He insists that wrong is committed against the "religious Other" in cross-cultural (missional) contexts where the absolutist dogma of theo-ontology, derived from early Hellenistic influence on the Church Fathers, "remains 'ontic,' even 'positivistic' in its orientation to Being, of which God, in the end, is regarded as a unique instance."<sup>38</sup> In response to such an objection, fellow missionologist Lesslie Newbigin, similarly to Hart, recognizes the creative use of Greek concepts by the Church, for "there can never be a culture-free gospel." "Yet," he adds, "the gospel, which is from the beginning to the end embodied in culturally conditioned forms, calls into question *all* cultures, including the one in which it was originally embodied."<sup>39</sup> Newbigin posits a pattern of hermeneutical unfolding in the testimony of Christ's followers by which the revelatory encounter "involve[s] contradiction [of the culture of self], and a call for conversion" for all who have ears to hear or eyes to see it.<sup>40</sup> Without denying the atrocities committed in the name of God against the other, these thinkers maintain that true conversion centers on personal conviction, not coercion.

While he is ill at ease with the Christological particularity of Christianity, May affirms the need for "the element of vision"—the beauty of presented form—found in "narrative traditions rather than conceptual systems" to provide a context for ethics. He writes:

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37 Hart, 18.

38 John D'Arcy May, *Transcendence and Violence: The Encounter of Buddhist, Christian and Primal Traditions* (New York: Continuum, 2003), 147.

39 Lesslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture* (London: SPCK, 1986), 4 (*italics mine*).

40 Newbigin, 6.

[Such vision] ensures that people *see the point* of being moral. This ‘meaning’ of morality, though immanent within the moral act itself, is in danger of not being realized if its intrinsic orientation to transcendence is not dramatized in metaphor, symbol and story. . . . Ethics has both *normative* and *visionary* dimensions.<sup>41</sup>

Hart is sharply opposed to May’s discomfort with Christianity’s assertion of the centrality of Christ in his own unapologetic description of the gospel as the rhetorical address of “a particular story, a particular Jew, a particular form” that is the truth of being. However, he and May are in agreement about the visionary component of ethics, as of faith. Reworking a phrase from Emmanuel Levinas, Hart writes:

Ethics is an aesthetics: an optics, that is, in an unequivocal sense, an order of seeing that obeys a story of being according to which the other is delineated with the radiant proportions of the other, who elicits the infinite regard of God and compels an infinite awe and even love from the one who looks on. . . . The secret of the ethical is that . . . vision obeys the aesthetics that forms it.”<sup>42</sup>

With ethics as an “order of seeing” shaped by story, Hart insists on the distinction of Christian theological aesthetics from Greek metaphysics, regardless of the borrowed formulations. The Christian vision of what is and “ought to be” is informed, not by contemplation of the Neoplatonic sublime One, but by the interpersonal and generative communication with humanity of the infinitely capacious love within the triune God that eventuated in the historical Incarnation.<sup>43</sup> Theological aesthetics asserts that the beauty of Christ is simultaneously the revelation of the transcendentals—being, the good, and the true—as facets of the Trinitarian relation, and the manifestation of the immanent *imago Dei*, humanity’s proper form.

There is within theological aesthetics, then, a correspondence to the decentering effect of beauty that Solzhenitsyn claimed for great works

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41 May, 152.

42 Hart, 343.

43 Hart, 151.

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of world literature. Just as these latter works contain “revelations” of “secret inner light,” so theological aesthetics speaks of the “image of the invisible God,”<sup>44</sup> revealed in the face of Christ, a disturbing beauty that was anticipated by the biblical account of the prophet Isaiah’s inaugural vision.<sup>45</sup> De Gruchy writes that, as a prototype to Christian conversion, Isaiah’s “call to be a prophet of social justice . . . was an ‘aesthetic moment’ of intense vision and audition . . . of God’s holy beauty [that] enabled him to perceive reality in a totally new way.”<sup>46</sup> In the affirmation that “the whole earth is full of his glory,”<sup>47</sup> judgment is concurrently passed on humanity’s willful lack of perception and consequent moral failures. The prophet is the archetype of the poet in experiencing such embodied enlightenment and being compelled to faithfully communicate the epiphany, though to do so may come at a cost among “a people of unclean lips.” It is just this poet-prophet type of which Merton writes in his reference to artists under communist oppression and propaganda. In an observation that can be applied to Solzhenitsyn, Merton perceives that they “seem to be the most serious prophets of a genuine liberation for thought, life, and experience. They protest more articulately than anyone . . . [though] subject[ed] to all kinds of harassment.”<sup>48</sup>

Solzhenitsyn indeed struggled “in agonizing moments in camps, in columns of prisoners at night, in the freezing darkness through which the lanterns shone” to find the words that would be “successful ambassadors” for the suffering ones.<sup>49</sup> In his Nobel Prize lecture, those words fashioned in adversity are released in a powerful plea: “One world, one mankind cannot exist in the face of six, four or even two scales of values: we shall be torn apart by this disparity of rhythm, this disparity of vibrations.”<sup>50</sup> The evening news attests to the fact that we live in a world fractured by competing claims of values asserted by violent and mastering wills. Solzhenitsyn asks how the “stubborn

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44 Colossians 1.15 King James Version.

45 Isaiah 6.

46 De Gruchy, 4.

47 Isaiah 6.3 King James Version.

48 Thomas Merton, “Answers on Art and Freedom,” in *The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1985), 376.

49 Quoted in Malcolm Muggeridge, *The End of Christendom* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2003), 45.

50 Solzhenitsyn, 5.

human creature” might become aware of “the distant joy and grief of others” and thus come closer to a common sense of the good. He places his hope in art’s beauty, its prophetic ability to tell the truth and unfold the good that is not merely evocative of a pleasurable experience, but one that is “shattering.”<sup>51</sup>

The role of the artist, Solzhenitsyn insists, is to remain highly perceptive to “the beauty and ugliness of the human contribution to [the world], and to communicate this acutely to his fellow-men.”<sup>52</sup> When we see ourselves in the mirror of literature—“one of the most sensitive, responsive instruments possessed by the human creature”<sup>53</sup>—we are at once affirmed and judged. But there is more. He writes: “Like that little looking-glass from the fairy-tales: look into it and you will see—not yourself—but for one second, the Inaccessible, whither no man can ride, no man fly. And . . . the soul gives a groan.”<sup>54</sup> In its aesthetic appeal to the imagination, art offers freedom from the grip of the inevitable and the malaise of the indifferent, and awakens the longing for transcendent possibilities. By the light of that vision we may reach beyond the self-identity of the Freudian ego, to realize more deeply the intersubjective awareness that began when we first looked into the face of the beautiful other. In that face, theological aesthetics seeks to persuade us, we will catch a glimpse, however darkly, of the divine beauty that empties the ego even as it enlightens and draws the “I” to itself.

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51 *Ibid.*, 2.

52 *Ibid.*, 1.

53 *Ibid.*, 1.

54 *Ibid.*, 2.

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