

## BEAUTY AS A WAY OF KNOWING

*the redemption of knowing through the experience of beauty*

Barry Bignell, Victorian College of the Arts, University of Melbourne.

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Progress in human affairs is most often gauged by the expansion of knowledge. Yet despite the enormous expansion of knowledge in the twentieth century, it is fair to say that we are more than ever aware of what we do *not* know, if knowledge can be defined as the relation of human beings to themselves and to the world.

There has been in recent decades a growing concern for the fate of the natural world; a fate, it would seem, that is contingent on the direction taken by human intelligence. What kind of intelligence, and what direction? The question begs the whole point of this chapter, which is, that the same intelligence that gave rise to an ecological crisis of unprecedented magnitude will prove spectacularly impotent in grappling with the crisis it has created and, that to avert the crisis it must learn to know *itself*, a different thing from knowing *about* itself.

'*Homo sapiens*,' writes scientist, Edward O. Wilson, 'is the only species to suffer psychological exile' (1998:243). The reference here is to that aspect of the human condition known as self-consciousness, the awareness of oneself and of the *distinction* between oneself and the external world (see *Being-in-the-world*, this volume). Self-consciousness as a fact of our existence means that all our knowledge is generated from a perspective on, above, or over against things, that is, as *outsiders*. While self-consciousness may be seen as an evolutionary gain in that it eliminated medieval superstition and bondage to the will of Nature, and made possible the conquest of the physical world which resulted in the many technological and medical benefits we now enjoy, it has been won at a cost: disconnection from the source of experience. It may be said that we know, but without experiencing or living that knowledge. Most of our knowledge is abstracted *from* experience. (How many experience the sounds of the words they speak, for example?) In knowing a thing, we affirm our own separate existence as a subject distinct from the thing known; but at the same time we exclude from our consciousness the *life* of the thing. For example, one can learn many things about a butterfly by pinning it to a board, except what makes it a butterfly: life.

Our status as knowers makes us cognitively privileged beings; for, to know is to *take possession* of a world. Knowing sets us apart from that world, as Owen Barfield explains:

The real world, the *whole* world, does not consist only of the things *of* which we are conscious; it consists also of the consciousness and subconsciousness that are correlative to them. They are the immaterial component of the world. But today the only immaterial element our mental habit acknowledges is our own little spark of self-consciousness. That is why we feel detached, isolated, cut off not only from the world as it really is, but also from those other little sparks of detached self-consciousness we acknowledge in our fellow human beings (1987:71-72)

'Psychological exile' is not, however, a permanent condition to which we are irrevocably condemned. Barfield (1967:169) points out, on the contrary, that although self-consciousness

is ‘an obvious and early fact of experience to every one of us, a fundamental starting-point of our life as conscious beings, we can see from the history of our words that this form of experience, far from being eternal, is quite a recent achievement of the human spirit.’ It is only from around the time of the Reformation that a crop of words prefaced with self (e.g., self-conceit, self-liking) appeared in the English Language (Barfield 1967:170).

If we are to take our potential as self-conscious knowers to a deeper level, the first step is to acknowledge our cognitive cut-offness, if I may use that term, and the suffering it can provoke, a sense of which is conveyed in this passage by poet, Paul Matthews (1994:17):

Many people today have developed a deep concern for the Earth, and feel Nature’s wounds as their own, but how many realize that language too is involved in this ecology (this ‘house-logos’)? (1994:17)

The wound manifests as a kind of longing, a yearning for something lost, a vacuum where something else should be. Although we each feel this longing as our own (for that is what *self-consciousness* implies), we find, if we look closely, that it is there in the world. Can we not see a stone released from the hand as exhibiting longing in its fall to the earth, where it belongs? Does a plant, in reaching upwards to the light, not reveal its affinity for the sun? Does the heart not pulse in its yearning for more blood? (To offer explanations of gravity, photosynthesis and blood circulation respectively to a child too young to handle abstraction will no doubt result in a blank, if not resentful, stare.) Can the consonant not be seen as longing for the vowel? Does the caged bird not long to fly? There are many such examples, but in every case the longing is a desire of the thing to be itself.

Can we say, then, that the loss of which we are vaguely aware is the loss of ourselves, our essential nature, and that the longing we feel is a desire to be more than we are, to be more fully human? Is our empathy, another name for which is un-selfing, not telling us that, although as outsiders we are able to identify things, in that very act of identification, that is, in naming them, we ignore them, and therefore cease to identify *with* them? The longing, then, is a yearning *to be*, nostalgia for home, to which the French give the term, *Nostalgie du Paradis*. Occasionally, in unguarded moments, we catch a glimpse of home across the gap isolating us from the other, and it can move us to tears. We are, for a time, transformed; we become different people, people who have found our natural epistemological condition. This ‘felt change of consciousness’, as Barfield (1984:48) calls it, is what I am calling the experience of beauty.

I am acutely aware that the formal discourse on beauty (aesthetics) is concerned, for the most part, with the beautiful object. This approach seems to me to take the subject/object binary as an irreconcilable given. The ‘felt change of consciousness’ I am speaking about here has nothing to do with seeing beauty *in* something (as in the cliché, ‘Beauty is in the eye of the beholder’) nor with beauty as some kind of value-adding. Rather, it is about entering, in full consciousness, the experience of knowing and, *in* the experience, seeing the known and ourselves in a new light. Beauty is not the exclusive province of aesthetics; the *experience* is available to all.

Philosopher John Armstrong (2005: 74) says something of the experience as developed by the Greek scholar, Plotinus (AD 204-270):

The pain of beauty occurs because it puts us in touch with an aspect of ourselves that we value highly (our 'true home'), an aspect of existence in which, for a while, we feel that we are what we should be. An order of value is made apparent to us. But we also see, also feel, that very much of the time, nearly all of the time, we neglect and disown this part of ourselves, or feel that we have to smother it in order to get on with the business of living. Thus we feel that we have betrayed or lost what should have been the most precious aspect of ourselves. It has become marginal; we have disowned ourselves.

Can we make the experience more than a chance occurrence? Can we, in full awareness inhabit the threshold, the space between knowledge and experience? Can we, in fact, raise ourselves to knowing *as* experience, to a kind of knowing that comes before words; for 'being outside' is a prerequisite for a language of the already formed, the abstract, which cuts us off from the source of experience? The possibility is already given in the fact of self-consciousness, but is conditional on our having 'enough imagination, and enough power of detachment from the established meanings or thought-forms of [our] own civilization ... the power not only of thinking, but of *unthinking* ...' (Barfield 1984:133). It requires that we can picture reality, not as objects, but as image, figure and motion.

The following activity is designed to help learners transform abstract, verbally generated knowledge into experiential knowing by developing their powers of pictorial and kinaesthetic imagination.

Stand before, say, a yew tree! You know it *as* a yew tree because you can identify it. What you may not realize is that your knowledge is dependent on your mental activity, which consists in your meeting what is there before you with the learnt concepts encapsulated in the words trunk, bark, branch, leaf, growth, physical space, stability, uprightness, green, and, of course, yew or conifer, all of which combine to allow you to make the judgement, yew tree. Further, you know this tree only because you inwardly compare it with all other species of tree. All this happens outside your awareness.

Now, imagine that the tree is new to you, *as if* you have not seen it before, as if you do not know the word 'tree' – which is a generalisation in any case – as if you cannot even speak its name. Ask yourself: What is the gesture of this *particular* tree. How does it express *itself*? What does *it* say to me of its becoming and its form, of its unfolding from the womb of the earth? Go to the beginning of language, rather than the end. Let your arms and hands rather than your larynx do the talking; for the larynx, in evolutionary terms, is really a condensed form of the speaking and simultaneously spoken body. Go to the invisible *movement* of speech, the vestiges of which are still there in your hands when you speak to others in ordinary conversation. Become the tree. Find a gesture for it. Per-form it. *This* is speaking. *This is* naming. It is just that it is speaking in order to disclose, not to represent, symbolise, signify, label, or even to communicate.

You will discover immediately how difficult it is to avoid thinking old concepts. But then, abstraction is the habit of a lifetime, and an extraordinarily difficult one to break. You may feel that your first efforts are somewhat unreal, shadowy, or empty. With the *will* to practise, however, and applying it to all percepts, including your own longing, you will find in time that you become *inwardly* articulate. You are participating in your own knowing process, rather than substituting familiar words for it. You are practising responsible knowledge. Bear in mind that your aim is not to be correct; for truth today has come to mean the correctness of

statements as expressed in the precise meanings of words, as these *correspond* to things and events in the external world. The ‘truth’ you are living is an ancient one, to which the Greeks gave the name *aletheia*, unhiddenness, as a thing uncovering or revealing itself. We can ponder John Keats on this: ‘What the imagination seizes as Beauty must be truth’ (1979:36f). In your attempt to reveal the tree-ness of the tree, which can never be more than itself, *you* are yourself by being *more* than yourself.

To conclude, underlying the most pressing issues facing us today is the trivialization of human intelligence, by which I mean the assumption that the future of civilization consists in more knowledge, rather than better knowing. Direct knowing and participation in the world through the experience of beauty can help fill the emptiness, heal the wounds, reduce the separation, ease the alienation, fulfil the longing, and satisfy the yearning in ways that do not rely on the false promises of consumerism and technological progress. The more learners can become fully themselves through developing a sense of beauty in being-in-the-world, the less likely they are to destroy that world, since they would know that they are destroying themselves. The changes that sustainability demands go beyond material changes in our surroundings, to cognitive change, or more simply, a change of mind, upon which the psychological and spiritual health, the very sanity of humanity as well as its future survival depends.

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