

Wagtail Cottage,  
Bankhouse Lane,  
Smallwood,  
Cheshire,  
CW11 2UX.  
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Dear Friends,

### **How is beauty changing the world now?**

Re-reading John-Francis Phipps' Introductory Paper as I start this response, I realise that I had thought the question was: "How is beauty *saving* the world now?" This has obviously shaped the direction of my thinking, hopefully not in an unhelpful way<sup>1</sup>.

I am struck by John-Francis' discussion of timelessness and creativity in his opening paragraphs. His comments put me in mind of discussions of "flow".

#### **Flow**

Flow is that state of absorption in which one is concentrated to the extent that all distractions fade away and the activity feels effortless and enjoyable. Being in flow means gathering and focusing one's inner resources in order to enter what we might call a higher state of consciousness. In this state we are more effective and creative.

We can find ourselves in "flow" when doing a wide range of things. Although I am not a musician, I can become deeply absorbed when playing with a musical instrument. Time passes unnoticed when I am playing a video game I enjoy. Sometimes, when engrossed in a book, I get a strangely compelling feeling of immersion. When I am running, I sometimes enter flow – "the runner's high".

"Flow" seems identical to something called "access concentration" in the literature on meditation. This is a state in which "our thoughts and emotions [...] start co-operating with our efforts to concentrate, instead of continually pulling us away from it" (Kamalashila, 66). Kamalashila explains that the freedom from distractions means we have "more free energy available". My own experience of meditation bears this out: it is possible to find oneself in a state of mind free from distraction with a very sharp focus on the object of meditation. This feels effortless and very enjoyable.

Simple meditation practices are basically just training in concentration. You attempt to keep the mind focussed on something (the breathing, for example) and keep coming back to it when you notice you are distracted. This shows us that development of this state of attention is a key aspect of the spiritual life. The Buddha's last words are reported to have been: "With mindfulness, strive on!" The twentieth century French mystic Simone Weil also emphasises the importance of mindfulness:

Attention, taken to its highest degree, is the same thing as prayer, it presupposes faith and love. (Weil, 1963, 105)

It is the positive emotional aspect of deep attentiveness which connects "attention" or "prayer" with "beauty". In current parlance, being able to recognise and cultivate this type of mental state is a key element of "Emotional Intelligence".

Being able to enter flow is emotional intelligence at its best; flow represents perhaps the ultimate in harnessing the emotions in the service of performance and learning. (Goleman, 90)

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1 I wrote this before getting John-Francis' paper of 22/5/09 in which he mentioned that the question had come from a quotation from Dostoevsky: 'Beauty will save the world.'

In his article “In the Zone”, A. J. Marr comments on the ground-breaking research into flow states carried out by Mihaly Csikzentmihalyi. Marr states that “pleasant emotional experiences that are characteristic of meditation have long been associated with strict attentiveness to specific stimuli [...] and seen as a byproduct of that attentiveness.” Whether we are praying, learning, meditating, creating, interacting with others, or simply appreciating nature, our sense of the beautiful and our feelings of pleasure can help us by creating a positive feedback loop which draws us deeper into the mindful state in which we are able to “be” more fully.

Often, we struggle when trying to pray, meditate or Meet for Worship:

The mind wanders and the will falters again and again... But it is foolish to allow failures in concentration to plunge us into profitless self-condemnation. A mother does not condemn her child who is struggling with many a failure to learn how to walk, but rather she is pleased by each successful effort... I like to believe that God is similarly pleased with our efforts and understanding of our many failures. What matters is whether or not the will, like a compass needle when deflected, is so pivoted that it can swing back to the true direction.

St Francis de Sales is reassuring:

*When your heart is wandering and distracted, bring it back quickly to its point, restore it tenderly to its Master's side, and if you did nothing else the whole of your hour but bring back your heart patiently and put it near our Lord again, and every time you put it back it turned away again, your hour would be well- employed.*

Thomas F Green, 1952 (QFP

2.49)

I like Thomas Green's image of the mother. We should seek to avoid becoming frustrated by our shortcomings and thereby entering a negative loop, rather we should focus on what is enjoyable in the experience and allow our sense of the beautiful to lead us into the Light.

The spiritual life is sometimes seen as something anhedonic, almost anti-life. We must correct this and remember the positive side. Even Paul exhorts us to enjoy being in the spirit!

Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. Do not quench the Spirit.

(1 Thesalonians 5, 16 – 19)

## **Beauty**

I have thought more, however, about that phrase in the paper about the world's “beauty beyond words and [...] vulnerability”.

I am very new to Quakerism (I attended my first meeting in January of this year) and this is the first time I have taken part in one of these Seeker discussions. I hope my approach to it will be acceptable. In what follows I have nothing original to say, rather I am trying to find a route through and between some ideas I have come across in my reading which chime with my own experience or aspirations.

**Shadowside speaks:**

**Don't believe him!**

**I know him better – his satanic arrogance!**

I have been immersing myself in Quakerly texts, but some of the material is from my old favourites. In particular, it will soon become evident that the writings of Simone Weil are for me a touchstone and constant inspiration.

In a Pendle Hill Pamphlet entitled “The Discipline of Prayer”, Frederick J. Tritton writes as follows:

To the lover of God all the works of the Lord praise Him and magnify Him for ever, and thus he sees in them more than beauty, divine as that is. To him they are manifestations not of some vague pantheistic life-force, but of the life and love of the Father who knows when the sparrow falls to the ground and who cares for all his creation. They are living sacraments, channels of grace. Pray to God to “cleanse the doors of perception,” so that you may see the world in its infinite perfection, not divided up into a multitude of parts as the intellect sees it, but as an integrated and living whole, as God sees it. (Tritton, 6).

Tritton's words establish immediately the spiritual aspect of beauty. Our emotional response to nature is in itself a sacrament, a gift of grace. The beauty of the world is in itself proof of God's good will towards mankind and the earth. We can see this attitude in God's promise to Noah in *Genesis*:

And I will establish my covenant with you, neither shall all flesh be cut off any more by the waters of a flood; neither shall there any more be a flood to destroy the earth. And God said, This is the token of the covenant which I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for perpetual generations: I do set my bow in the cloud, and it shall be for a token of a covenant between me and the earth. (Genesis, 9, 11-13)

In the aftermath of a flood of devastating proportions, which leaves the surviving humans fearing an angry deity who may destroy all life, the beauty of the rainbow reassures and comforts us.

I also delight to read Tritton's affirmation of the world as “an integrated and living whole”. Clearly, we should aspire to seeing the world as God sees it. In St. Paul's words:

now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known. (1 Corinthians, 13:12)

When we see the world holistically, rather than as “a multitude of parts”, we are seeing it “as God sees it.” This is amazing stuff to have written in 1948. For me it is a version of the Gaia hypothesis which, by including God and the human being's ability to love God through nature, enriches and surpasses the narrower “systems thinking” versions of that scientific argument.

This idea is, I think, also detectable in Gerard Manley Hopkins' poem “God's Grandeur”, which I would like to quote in full:

The world is charged with the grandeur of God.  
It will flame out, like shining from shook foil.  
It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil  
Crushed. Why do men then now not reckon his rod?  
Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;  
And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;  
And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell: the soil  
Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.

And, for all this, nature is never spent;  
There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;  
And though the last lights off the black West went  
Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastwards, springs -

Because the Holy Ghost over the bent  
World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.  
("God's Grandeur", Hopkins, 128)

Several things are fascinating here: Hopkins laments the destruction of the environment as an act of sacrilege. He shows us that the obsession with "toil" and "trade" leads to the wanton exploitation of nature: the world is "seared". Hopkins sees humanity as a species which is damaging the world, imposing its "smudge" and "smell" upon all things. Mankind has lost its sense of oneness with the earth. We no longer "feel" our essential relatedness to all life. We have sealed our spirits up in a way that is analogous to how our feet are "shod" within tough boots. As a result, we don't seem to care about the destruction of natural beauty, that we are making the earth "bare".

The poem counters this disturbing vision with the assertion that the world is still "charged" with God's awe-inspiring beauty. "Charged" can be read in several ways. The world is loaded with beauty, despite the destruction wreaked by industrialisation. Or perhaps Hopkins is suggesting that God has commanded the world to be beautiful – linking with the idea of the covenant of the rainbow. There's also a sense in which the Earth is charged with beauty like a cell charged with electricity. This energy is stored and ready to "flame out, like shining from shook foil."

The poet's insight that "nature is never spent" is an embryonic version of the Gaia idea. Hopkins believes in the self-healing power of nature.

### **Creative side speaks:**

#### **Up with the Spring**

If we dismantle can the wild revive  
around us? Cows paddle in this canal  
clogged with no cargo now. Foxes crisscross  
this ex-train track: rail-less nettle-lined trail,  
soot-black from decades of coal-dust and grit.  
Muddy trail where mares trot, dogs walk, I run.  
Wild riverbank garlic; coriander  
scent. The weir fizzes the air with freshness.

Hopkins' beautiful image of the Holy Ghost presiding over the dawn, refreshing and renewing the world, gets at the heart of things. Maybe there really does live "the dearest freshness deep down things" and perhaps this power, with the help of the Spirit that guides it, can undo or repair the damage we are still inflicting upon the planet.

Like Hopkins, the American poet, Robinson Jeffers sees man's "smudge" as an offence to the earth. He describes man as "the spoiler" (how fascinating that Hopkins avoided using any form of that word, when "spoil" would have fitted so well into his rhyme-scheme!). Jeffers says this about the place he lives in the poem "Carmel Point":

It knows the people are a tide  
That swells and in time will ebb, and all  
Their works dissolve.

(Jeffers, 676)

These poems neatly draw out some of the tensions within the current flurry of environmental concern. Some warn that the planet is in danger and that we must reverse global warming in order to save it. Others are more open about their anthropocentric position and propose measures designed to maintain the pace of human progress and the lifestyles which go along with that (you can still have a car, just buy electric or dual-fuel). Still others propose more radical action, for example a significant reduction in the human population of the globe.

The “Deep Ecology” movement, for instance, has this as statement 5 within its “platform” (a basic statement of by the co-founders Naess and Sessions).

The flourishing of human life and cultures is compatible with a substantial decrease of the human population. The flourishing of non-human life requires such a decrease.<sup>2</sup>

Another interesting voice from this side of the debate is Theodore Kaczynski who writes as follows in “Industrial Society and its Future”:

§ 183. The positive ideal that we propose is Nature. That is WILD nature: those aspects of the functioning of the Earth and its living things that are independent of human management and free of human interference and control.

§ 184 Nature makes a perfect counter-ideal to technology for several reasons. [...] Nature takes care of itself.<sup>3</sup>

Like Robinson Jeffers, these proponents of stronger versions of the Gaia idea actually predict that the planet will wipe away some or all of “the spoilers” in order to preserve the bigger and more important) life-form that is the planet herself.

**Shadowside speaks: I would wipe all humans from the face of the world. Revelation will continue not through one species, but all. Freed from the tyranny of the destroyer, Mother-earth prepares the way of the dolphin-Christ, the crocodile-Christ, Christ-wolf, spider-Christ, Christ-virus, cuckoo-Christ, Christ-plankton, rose-Christ, bacteria-Christ, sea-Christ, Christ-oxygen, Christ-rock, wind-Christ, electricity-Christ, gravity-Christ, omni-Christ.**

I see a version of this in Hopkins' poem. He sees the beauty of the world not merely as some prettiness which reminds us how nice God is, rather it is “flame” and “grandeur” that shows itself precisely when something is “crushed” and it should awaken us to God's “rod” - the power as well as the punishment that awaits our misdeeds. However, this letter is not primarily concerned with Deep Ecology (although I would heartily recommend the seminal work of Devall and Sessions to all Friends who have not yet read it). I want to re-direct my attention to the theme of beauty.

Simone Weil, writing in the twentieth century with an awareness of the increasing secularisation of the human species, speaks about the beauty of the world as giving us a way to love God “implicitly”:

At the present time, [...] the beauty of the world is almost the only way by which we can allow God to penetrate us, for we are still further removed from the other two.” [love of one's neighbour and love for religious practices] (Weil, 1959, 117f)

For Weil, our appreciation of the beauty of the world offers one possible way for love of God to invade our secular, consumerist hearts. This “implicit” love of God may be able to save the world in two ways: firstly by restoring some kind of spirituality in the modern world and secondly by encouraging us to adopt an attitude towards the planet of loving stewardship rather than rapacious exploitation.

a sense of beauty, although mutilated, distorted and soiled, remains rooted in the heart of man as a powerful incentive. It is present in all the preoccupations of secular life. If it were made true and pure it would sweep all secular life to the feet of God, it would make the total incarnation of the faith possible. (Weil, 1959, 118)

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2 Online source – search for “Deep Ecology Platform”.

3 Online source – search for “Industrial Society and its Future”.

When Weil writes about the need to make our sense of beauty “true”, she is referring to the fact that our ideas about beauty are largely misdirected and mistaken. For instance, much “secular” thinking about “beauty” focuses on the beauty of *people* or *commodities*. When we are overtaken by love (or greed) it can seem to us that to join with (or take possession of) some beautiful person (or thing) is the only thing that matters. The fact that these feelings are so overwhelming is down to the fact they are actually versions of our need for a relationship with the total “beauty of the world”:

Carnal love in all its forms [...] has the beauty of the world as its object. (Weil, 1959, 125)

Our response to “beauty” is actually a spiritual impulse. This is why it cannot be fully satisfied by a simply material/physical kind of “love”:

Men want to turn this same love towards a being who is like themselves and capable of answering to their love, of saying yes, of surrendering. When the feeling for beauty happens to be associated with the sight of some human being, the transference of love is made possible, at any rate in an illusory manner. But it is all the beauty of the world, it is universal beauty, for which we yearn. (Weil, 1959, 126)

Our need for “beauty” or “love” cannot be fully satisfied by possessing a beautiful object or being “in love” with a human being (even one who loves us back).

The longing to love the beauty of the world in a human being is essentially the longing for the Incarnation. [...] The Incarnation alone can satisfy it. It is therefore wrong to reproach the mystics, as has been done sometimes, because they use love's language. It is theirs by right. Others only borrow it. (Weil, 1959, 126)

This is very important. When St. Teresa of Avila (for example) writes about her heart being pierced by divine love, she is not transferring repressed sexual feelings onto her spiritual experience. It is more accurate to say that when we talk about love in terms of an exclusive love for one other human being, we are transferring repressed spiritual longings onto a physical experience.

Beauty and the response to beauty is a spiritual experience. It is not alien to, or absent from our sexual relationships, but nor is it limited to them. No wonder that mystical writers from many different traditions speak of an overwhelming feeling of love for everything. There is an excellent passage from Rufus Jones which features in *Quaker Faith and Practice*:

Perhaps more wonderful still is the way in which beauty breaks through. It breaks through not only at a few highly organised points, it breaks through almost everywhere. Even the minutest things reveal it as well as do the sublimest things, like the stars. Whatever one sees through the microscope, a bit of mould<sup>4</sup> for example, is charged with beauty. Everything from a dewdrop to Mount Shasta is the bearer of beauty. And yet beauty has no function, no utility. Its value is intrinsic, not extrinsic. It is its own excuse for being. It greases no wheels, it bakes no puddings. It is a gift of sheer grace, a gratuitous largesse. It must imply behind things a Spirit that enjoys beauty for its own sake and that floods the world everywhere with it. Wherever it can break through, it does break through, and our joy in it shows that we are in some sense kindred to the giver and revealer of it. Rufus Jones, 1920

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4 Compare F. Hundertwasser: “Shit turns into earth [...] - it becomes lawn, forest, garden, - shit becomes gold ... The circle is closed, there is no more waste.”

Jones introduces two ideas here which I find fascinating. Firstly, he feels that our response to the beauty of the world offers proof that we are in some way “kindred to the giver and revealer of it”. This is a powerful idea. The beauty of the world is not merely some consolation for the negative aspects of earthly existence. Nor is it an evolutionary bonus (something along the lines of, say, our enjoyment of food or the pleasure involved in procreation). It is proof of our potential, one way in which “that of God” within us all can be identified and nurtured. The other idea is in some ways implicit in this first. Beauty is not necessary, it serves no purpose. We could survive without it. Here again we find the idea that the beauty of the world is a “gift of sheer grace”. As Simone Weil puts it:

The beauty of the world is Christ's tender smile for us coming through matter. He is really present in the universal beauty. The love of this beauty proceeds from God dwelling in the our souls and goes out to God present in the universe. It also is like a sacrament. (Weil, 1959, 120)

Weil deals with the “non-necessary” aspect of beauty in different terms, but in a way which seems to me entirely consistent with the line of argument we are following:

Beauty is the only finality here below. [...] A beautiful thing involves no good except in itself, in its totality, as it appears to us. (Weil, 1959, 121)

Beauty is an end in itself. It is “a mirror that sends us back our own desire for goodness” (ibid) as such it is the way in which God is visible in this world which in all other ways lacks finality “The absence of finality is the reign of necessity. Things have causes and not ends.” (Weil, 1959,131).

In Weil's version of “kenosis” (or emptying), God gives up being everything to allow us to come into existence.

He emptied a part of his being from himself. [...] God permitted the existence of things distinct from himself [...] By this creative act he denied himself, as Chrsit told us to deny ourselves. God denied himself for our sakes in order to give us the possibility of denying ourselves for him. (Weil, 1959, 102)

When we reciprocate by giving up our petulant demands to exist for ourselves, we open ourselves to God.

If I knew how to withdraw from my own soul it would be enough to enable this table in front of me to have the incomparable good fortune of being seen by God. (Weil, 1963, 35)

God is therefore able to love Herself through us. This is the perfect circuit that we make possible when we say “thy will be done” and are able to love necessity or to remain in a state of loving attention while in affliction.

If only I knew how to disappear there would be a perfect union of love between God and the earth I tread, the sea I hear ... (Weil, 1963, 36)

It is in this perfect feedback loop that beauty takes its place as a perfect meditation focus.

The beautiful is that which we can contemplate. A statue, a picture which we can gaze at for hours.

The beautiful is something which we can gaze at for hours.

A picture such as one could place in the cell of a criminal sentenced to solitary confinement for life without it being an atrocity, on the contrary. (Weil, 1963, 135f)

Actually it is clear that Weil doubts very much if any human production could be placed in this hypothetical criminal's cell in good faith.

Even the very highest achievements of the search for beauty in art or science for instance, are not truly beautiful. The only true beauty, the only beauty which is the real presence of God, is the beauty of the universe. Nothing which is less than the universe is beautiful. (Weil, 1959, 130)

The way that works of art fall short of the beauty of the universe is intimately connected with Weil's concept of necessity. It is possible for works or art to be other than they are, and the more that we can wish them to be other than they are, the further from perfection they are:

If we ask why such and such a word in a poem is in such and such a place and if there is an answer, either the poem is not of the highest order, or else the reader has understood nothing of it. [...] In the case of a really beautiful poem the only answer is that the word is there because it is suitable that it should be. The proof of its suitability is that it is there and that the poem is beautiful. The poem is beautiful, that is to say the reader does not wish it other than it is.

It is in this way that art imitates the beauty of the world. The suitability of things, beings and events consists only in this, that they exist and that we should not wish that they did not exist or that they had been different. Such a wish would be an impiety towards our universal country. (Weil, 1959, 130f)

Or, as she puts it in *Gravity and Grace*: "The beautiful is that which we cannot wish to change." (Weil, 1963, 58). It is perhaps worth pointing out that what we are talking about is not pantheism or idolatry. We are not to worship nature. It is, as I suggested above, an aid to contemplation, a focus. It points to something beyond itself. In Weil's terms it is a proof of the possibility of the Incarnation:

God is pure beauty. This is incomprehensible, for beauty, by its very essence, has to do with the senses. To speak of an imperceptible beauty must seem a misuse of language to anyone who has any sense of exactitude: and with reason. Beauty is always a miracle. But the miracle is raised to the second degree when the soul receives an impression of beauty which, while it is beyond all sense perception is no abstraction, but real and direct as the impression caused by a song at the moment it reaches our ears. Everything happens as though, by a miraculous favour, our very senses themselves has been made aware that silence is not the absence of sounds, but something infinitely more real than sounds, and the centre of a harmony more perfect than anything which a combination of sounds can produce. Furthermore there are degrees of silence. There is a silence in the beauty of the universe which is like a noise when compared with the silence of God. (Weil, 1959, 164f)

John Fowles also explores this idea:

The ubiquitous absence of 'God' in ordinary life is this sense of non-existing, of mystery, of incalculable potentiality; this eternal doubt that hovers between the thing



itself and our perception of it; this dimension in and by which all other dimensions exist. The white paper that contains a drawing; the space that contains a building; the silence that contains a sonata; the passage of time that prevents a sensation or object continuing for ever; all these are 'God'. (Fowles, 27)

Just as the atom is made of positive and negative particles, so each thing is made of its own existence and non-existence. Thus is 'God' present by being absent in every thing and every moment. It is the dark core, the mystery, the being-not-being of even the simplest objects. (Fowles, 27)

Some words from Robinson Jeffers seem relevant here: "the image of the pristine beauty/ Lives in the very grain of the granite." (Jeffers, 676). God is pristine beauty. We cannot apprehend this imperceptible beauty directly, but its image is ingrained in natural beauty.

There is one other supernatural use for the beauty of the world. As well as being an object we can contemplate to prepare ourselves for the encounter with the Divine, it offers us a pattern of that self-emptying, renunciation and obedience which is at the heart of the Christian story.

Matter is entirely passive and in consequence entirely obedient to God's will. It is a perfect model for us. (Weil, 1959, 87)

## **The Problem**

Some readers may have already spotted the problem with this view of nature. Because of course there are times when we would wish the universe to be "other than it is". But we can also take Weil's comment another way. When we wish the universe to be other than it is, we are like the reader of a poem of the highest order who "has understood nothing of it".

In her QUG pamphlet *Choosing Life*, Joycelin Dawes quotes Jung as follows: "One does not become enlightened by imagining figures of light, but by making the darkness conscious" (Dawes, 10). We cannot expect to experience the beauty of the world without also accepting its violence, the affliction which it visits upon ourselves and our fellow-beings.

This insight was a key aspect of George Fox's spiritual awakening:

If we set our hearts on goodness as a personal goal, it means that we have to ignore or suppress all the other parts of ourselves that do not fit into our ideal of goodness. That was what George Fox had already done and he was actually shocked when, on the first part of his inward journey, he came upon the dark and unacceptable parts of himself. Like Simone Weil, the twentieth century mystic, he found that he knew from the inside a potential for all possible crimes. His fantasies were guided by no one but himself, but he quickly made the acquaintance of the things inside him that could be bestial, murderous and depraved. Instead of slamming the door of his consciousness, as many of us do when we come on the less acceptable bits of our inner world, he went on through them, understanding that he would not be of any use to others if he did not acknowledge in himself the impulses to kill, to lust or cheat or indulge his more primitive passions. If he had not had the courage to accept what he discovered, he would never have made the discovery that sets Quaker spirituality apart from the narrow righteousness of the Puritans. He found that, having faced and acknowledged his dark self, he came upon a more liberating truth at the heart of himself. He experienced the moment of enlightenment which enabled him to trust the creative and intuitive part of himself and know that it could not be obliterated by the dark side... He spoke of 'the ocean of darkness and the ocean of light'. Both are symbols of the unconscious and of the contradictions and polarities of our being – our dark

negativities and our shining possibilities. Jo Farrow, 1984 (QFP, 26.29)

We cannot have an authentic spiritual life unless we are prepared to face the darkness. I think it is a truly radical and positive aspect of Fox's message that he encourages us to focus on the light which illuminates the dark places rather than either ignoring them altogether in a rosy haze of superficial "goodness" or becoming obsessed with sin and risking the despair or cruelty that can come as a result of only seeing the dark-side.

For me, Weil articulates this very clearly:

In the beauty of the world rude necessity becomes an object of love. What is more beautiful than the action of weight on the fugitive waves of the sea as they fall in ever-moving folds, or the almost eternal fold of the mountains.

The sea is not less beautiful in our eyes because we know that sometimes ships are wrecked. On the contrary this adds to its beauty. If it altered the movement of its waves to spare a boat, it would be a creature gifted with discernment and choice and not this fluid, perfectly obedient to every external pressure. It is this perfect obedience which constitutes the sea's beauty.

All the horrors which come about in this world are like the folds imposed upon the waves by gravity. That is why they contain an element of beauty. (Weil, 1959, 87f)

The sea is not less beautiful because it sometimes destroys us. Most of us would flee the destructive power of a tornado while storm-chasers seek them out, drawn to their awesome beauty; and God spoke to Job from "out of the whirlwind" (Job, 40, 6). This is the tension at the heart of the spiritual life. We must love God even in affliction, even when we feel forsaken. As Jeffers puts it: "it is bitter earnestness/ That makes beauty;" ("Boats in a Fog", Jeffers, 105)

If the world did not offer this resistance to our ability to love it, it would not be a useful meditation object:

We have a heavenly country, but in a sense it is too difficult to love, because we do not know it; above all, in a sense, it is too easy to love, because we can imagine it as we please. We run the risk of loving a fiction under this name. [...] Let us love the country of here below. It is real; it offers resistance to love. It is this country which God has given us to love. He has willed that it should be difficult yet possible to love it. (Weil, 1959, 132)

And it is in this way that art is of value as a spiritual practice. T.S. Eliot described it as the "intolerable wrestle/ With words and meanings" (Eliot, "East Coker"), Weil explores the concept as follows:

In art, the equivalent of this reign of necessity is the resistance of matter and arbitrary rules. Rhymes imposes upon the poet a direction in his choice of words which is absolutely unrelated to the sequence of ideas. Its function in poetry is perhaps analogous to that of affliction in our lives. Affliction forces us to feel with all our souls the absence of finality.

If the soul is set in the direction of love, the more we contemplate the necessity, the more closely we press its metallic cold and hardness directly into our very flesh, the nearer we approach to the beauty of the world. That is what Job experienced. (Weil, 1959, 131)

**Shadowside:**

**In the night I cut myself again. I take the blade and make three quick downward motions. To begin with the cuts are invisible, so fine is the razor. There's just the nerve-**

**pulse of pain telling you of the tear in the tissues. I like the moment before the cut when you weigh the desire to let the blade bite with the expectation of the pain. Then the tiny red lines start to thicken as blood pushes through. The blood is black-red. I dab at it with some cotton wool and watch the blood well. However neat and even one tries to cut, the line is not, in fact, quite straight. Some parts are deeper and a drop forms and slides away. Now I open the small tupperware pot in which I keep ashes. The ashes have been sieved, are fine and grey. I lick my finger tip and place it in the powder. Then I apply ash to the cuts. It stings ever so slightly as it contacts rawness. The blood blackens the ash. The ash can't stop the flow yet and I dab on more. I rub it into the cuts, making a dirty red black oval. It's like cave painting. And I watch as the red lines appear through the blackness and bleed again. When I am happy, I cover the whole thing with a plaster and put away my stuff. That's it.**

In Hopkins' poem "The Windhover", the bird is most beautiful, most fully an image of God, when it swoops to kill:

Brute beauty and valour and act, oh, air, pride, plume, here  
Buckle! AND the fire that breaks from thee then, a billion  
Times told lovelier, more dangerous, O my chevalier!  
(“The Windhover”, Hopkins, 132)

Infamously, Robinson Jeffers could write about World War II with the phrase “It is not bad. Let them play.” (“The Bloody Sire”, Jeffers, 563) and I cannot go with him in his celebration of conflict (although I do find his poems beautiful in their savage earnestness). Perhaps the way he continues with this exploration of the role of violence is more acceptable to our Darwinian world-view.

What but the wolf's tooth whittled so fine  
The fleet limbs of the antelope?  
What but fear winged the birds, and hunger  
Jewelled with such eyes the great goshawk's head?  
Violence has been the sire of all the world's values.

Who would remember Helen's face  
Lacking the terrible halo of spears?  
Who formed Christ but Herod and Caesar,  
The cruel and bloody victories of Caesar.  
(“The Bloody Sire”, Jeffers, 563)

## Conclusion

The Rainbow was the first Covenant. God used beauty to show us that he loved us, despite the violence of the Flood. Jesus' death on the cross is the new covenant. Once again beauty is integral to the message, but this time the dark side is integrated into the symbol. This is why the Cross is the perfect symbol for our predicament. Simone Weil writes very movingly about this<sup>5</sup>:

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<sup>5</sup> And compare this, from Kierkegaard: “What pleases him even more than the praise of angels is a human being who in the last lap of this life, when God seemingly changes into sheer cruelty and with the most cruelly devised cruelty does something to deprive him of all zest for life, nevertheless contrives to believe that God is

For the privilege of finding myself before I die in a state perfectly similar to Christ's when he said, on the Cross: "My God, why hast thou forsaken me?" – for that privilege I would willingly renounce everything that is called Paradise. Because all his desire was entirely directed towards God, and therefore he perfectly possessed God. He was enduring almost infernal suffering, but what does that detail matter? It is in respect of false goods that desire and possession are different things; for the true good, there is no difference. Therefore, God exists because I desire Him; that is as certain as my existence.(Weil, ??)

She explains further in this passage:

The man whose soul remains oriented towards God while a nail is driven through it finds himself nailed to the very centre of the universe; the true centre, which is not the middle, which is not in space and time, which is God. In a dimension which is not spatial and which is not time, a totally other dimension, the nail has pierced through the whole of creation, through the dense screen which separates the soul from God. (Weil, 1959, 93)

Despite the suffering and abandonment (because of it?), for Weil, this is something very beautiful:

We know quite well in what likeness this tree is made, this tree which has grown within us, this most beautiful tree where the birds of the air come and perch. We know what is the most beautiful of all trees. "No forest bears its equal." Something still a little more frightful than a gibbet – that is the most beautiful of all trees. (Weil, 1959, 92).

Perhaps Weil is thinking of the Anglo-Saxon poem: "The Dream of the Rood" in which the Cross is described as:

a most wondrous tree  
born aloft, wound round by light,  
brightest of beams. (Rood, 4ff)

The dreamer continues as follows:

I saw glory's tree  
honored with trappings, shining with joys,  
decked with gold; gems had  
wrapped that forest tree worthily round.  
Yet through that gold I clearly perceived  
old strife of wretches, when first it began  
to bleed on its right side. With sorrows most troubled,  
I feared that fair sight. I saw that doom-beacon  
turn trappings and hews: sometimes with water wet,  
drenched with blood's going; sometimes with jewels decked. (14 – 23)

In conclusion, then, I do feel that beauty is saving the world. Beauty is a sacrament which helps us to be open to the Spirit. The beauty I am talking about does not exclude pain and even horror. The challenge, as I see it, is to keep loving even when God's beauty takes on a violent and terrifying form.

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love, that God does it out of love. Such a person becomes an angel."

[I apologise that this piece is rushed and not really finished.]

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