Educational Aesthetics and Restoring Our Humanity

by Stephen Richard Turley

In 1944, a book critiquing the state of British education was published entitled *The Abolition of Man*. The author was C.S. Lewis. His critique was initiated by a textbook, which he leaves unnamed, calling it *The Green Book*, written by two authors he also leaves unnamed, referring to them as Gaius and Titius. The authors of this book recount the famous visit to the Falls of the Clyde in Scotland taken by the poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge in the early 1800s. As Coleridge stood before the waterfall, he overheard the response of two tourists: one remarked that the waterfall was "sublime" while the other said it was "pretty." Coleridge mentally endorsed the first judgment and rejected the second with disgust.

Gaius and Titius then offer their own commentary on this scene: " 'When the man said *This is sublime*, he appeared to be making a remark about the waterfall . . . . Actually . . . he was not making a remark about the waterfall, but a remark about his own feelings. What he was saying was really *I have feelings associated in my mind with the word "Sublime"*, or shortly, *I have sublime feelings*. . . . This confusion is continually present in language as we use it. We appear to be saying something very important about something: and actually we are only saying something about our own feelings.' "[1]

This aesthetic encounter with the waterfall and the conflict over the transcendence or immanence of the sublime began what was to be Lewis' most profound exposition on the nature of the modern world and its devastating consequences for education and our humanity. Lewis understood the collapse of aesthetic reasoning into subjective processes as inextricably linked to the collapse of meaning in the modern age. I, too, have witnessed in my own teaching experience at both the high school and university levels how modernist assumptions have worked themselves out in our aesthetic conceptions, such that when called to give a basic account for the classical conception of Beauty, students entering my classroom consistently exemplify a complete and total devotion to aesthetic relativism. It is this link between aesthetics and modernity that I therefore wish to explore, for in doing so, I believe we can in fact locate and transform the source of the aesthetic relativism that pervades the sensibilities of our students.

This suggests to me that while we have put much thought into teaching Truth and Goodness in our classical schools, we have done so at the expense of teaching Beauty, and I am very concerned that our educational efforts are in fact being undermined by a ubiquitously present relativism coming through the back door.

An important starting point for this exploration is the role of classical *paideia* for the early Church. Werner Jaeger notes in his great work, *Paideia: the Ideals of Greek Culture*, that *paideia* had the dual meaning of education and culture, and thus *paideia* served to both articulate culture and provide the process of initiation into that culture. Beginning with St. Paul (Eph 6:4, 2 Tim 3:14-16, Heb 12:5) and developed by the patristics, the importance of *paideia* for the early Church reflected the fact that Christianity was understood not so much as a *belief* but as a way of *being*, an encounter with a genuine physical reality in the Incarnation, a shared life world that constituted a distinct culture in the Graeco-Roman world.

The importance of culture is that it substantiates what the Greeks called *telos*, the meaning and purpose inherent in the created order, and thereby provides the means by which intangible *telos* is made tangible. As the abstract transforms into the concrete through culture, we are able to have an aesthetic encounter, an embodied and sensory experience, with divinely imparted meaning. This is the classical relationship between culture and cosmos: culture awakens concretely the meaning that exists abstractly in the created order.

It is in this frame of reference that the classical conception of Beauty is situated. *Telos* is constituted by the tripartite virtues, Truth, Goodness, and Beauty, which are in turn represented

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tangibly, substantially, in our cultural pursuits (mathematics, music, architecture, geometry, poetry, literature, athletics, and politics), and held together by worship. In this context, Beauty is the manifestation of the loveliness, the delectableness, the desirableness of Truth and Goodness. Divinely infused meaning was not simply known or impartially observed, it was loved, it was cherished; meaning awakened a sense of delight within us. And this delight, this sense of the loveliness of the True and the Good, served the indispensable role of *momentum* or *motivation* in intellectual, moral, and spiritual pursuits. This is why we associate Beauty with "attraction"; through Beauty we are drawn to the True and the Good. Beauty provides us with the allure, the momentum toward the True and the Good without which the True and the Good would simply dissipate into neutrality. As evidenced in the classical formulation of "ascent" from the beautiful to the divine found in Plato's *Symposium* and *Phaedrus* or Dante's *Divine Comedy*, or Augustine's conversion account in his *Confessions*, or Jonathan Edwards' masterful analysis of the motivation of the will in every act of the mind's choosing, Beauty provides the momentum, the gravitational pull, the attraction for the True and the Good through the stages of physical, moral, and spiritual life.

Now, this classical vision of Beauty has been buried under layers and layers of modernity. With the break-up of Christendom, it became increasingly plausible to view knowledge as limited solely to that which could be verified by a *method*, namely, the application of science and mathematics. It was argued that only those things that could be verified by the empirical method were those things that could be known in a way that was completely detached from the preconceptions of the observer. Anything that was not subjected to or failed this method was reduced to the state of person-relativity and excluded from the arena of what can be known. Thus knowledge was now open to man: all he had to do, in any area of life, was to apply the method. But there was a toll that had to be paid for such promise: we collectively had to surrender the concept of meaning—*telos*—as a reality divinely embedded in a created order, since method was impervious to meaning. *Telos* simply could not be placed in a test tube.

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It is here, with this shift from divine creation to impersonal nature, that you begin to see the categories of Art and Beauty relocated from the objective world to the subjective mind. The writings of Francis Hutcheson, David Hume, and Immanuel Kant, exposit on a natural world known only by ideas that come into the mind through sense perception, including the idea of Beauty. Beauty, like meaning, is part of an overall internal subjective interpretation of an external world made up of cause and effect processes devoid of any inherent meaning. Thus, by removing meaning from the cosmos, the classical conception of Beauty withers away and dies; it simply cannot be sustained by modernist cosmological conceptions.

By separating *meaning* from *method*, the modernist experiment has in fact separated *knowledge* from *Beauty* and, in doing so, has put asunder what classical education has historically joined together. For Lewis, this dichotomy between knowledge and Beauty has devastating consequences for our humanity. Jews, Greeks, and Christians understood that the cultivation of Truth, Goodness, and Beauty in our souls was inextricably linked with encountering those tripartite virtues in the created order and substantiated in cultural pursuits, such that the severing of meaning from objective reality entails the proportionate absence of the virtues from our souls. Further, by stressing technology and science over meaning and communion in its doctrine of knowledge, the modern age robs the very conception of humanity itself of any objective meaning and purpose, thus rendering humanity inherently meaningless. Hence Lewis' title, *The Abolition of Man*.

As classical educators, we must scrutinize the extent to which we too have inadvertently perpetuated this modernist dichotomy between knowledge and Beauty. I believe it is this dichotomy that is the primary carrier for the aesthetic relativism that remains embodied by our students, not to mention us. This suggests to me that while we have put much thought into

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teaching Truth and Goodness in our classical schools, we have done so at the expense of teaching Beauty, and I am very concerned that our educational efforts are in fact being undermined by a ubiquitously present relativism coming through the back door. Truth, Goodness, and Beauty are not sequestered from one another–they need each other and they are implied in one another. And if Beauty is robbed of its transcendent nature and relocated solely within the private psychological processes, then Truth and Goodness are sure to follow.

Thus, we must ask ourselves: Are we presenting music and mathematics, Beauty and symmetry, as inseparable? Do we teach our students to see athletic skill as an embodiment of control over chaos and thus exemplative of the processes of creation? Do our science classes teach that discovery not only gives us knowledge but awakens awe and wonder integral to our knowing? Do our history classes present the totality of history as an eschatological narrative from garden to city, from creation to communion, from water to wine? Do our Bible classes present theology as rooted in *philokalia*, the love of Beauty? Do we teach our students that there is something extraordinary about the *Imagio Dei*, that we yearn for a meaning and a purpose outside of ourselves; that we long for a beauty that awakens us from our self-centered slumbers; that our hearts ache for a life filled with wonder and awe? Are we cultivating an insatiable desire in our students to encounter the True, the Good, and the Beautiful in a life-transformative way, a way that enables our souls to reach for and embrace a state of being than which none greater can possibly be thought? This is the classic view of what it means to be human, summed up in Augustine's opening prayer in his *Confessions*: "Thou, O Lord, hast made us for thyself, and our hearts remain restless until they find their rest in thee."

For Lewis, Gaius and Titius would have us believe that the purpose of education is to make men masters of method, guardians of utilitarianism and pragmatism, equipped to deconstruct human nature and cultural endeavor as empty social constructs. Standing against these dehumanizing tendencies is John Ruskin's aesthetic description of the purpose of education: "The entire object of true education is to make people not merely do the right things, but enjoy the right things—not merely industrious, but to love industry—not merely learned, but to love knowledge—not merely pure, but to love purity—not merely just, but to hunger and thirst after justice." [2]

Our task as educators is nothing less than to awaken students to the self-replenishing fountain of indescribable delights of a new creation in Christ, to give them the gift of the freedom to be human again, and in so doing, to watch their lives blossom into rational, poetic worshippers of God, and through their lives, to get a taste of what life will be like when Christ returns, when God will be all in all. This is our calling, and it is beautiful.

ENDNOTES

1. C.S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man or Reflections on education with special reference to the teaching of English in the upper forms of schools* (New York: Harper One, 1971, 1974), 2.

2. John Ruskin, *The Crown of Wild Olive: Three Lectures on Work, Traffic, and War* (New York: John Wiley & Son, 1866), 50.

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