

14 : On nature's beauty and ordinary goodness

TODAY AGAIN, the sun sets over the ocean. Tonight the sky will be dusted with stars. The crickets will sing and the tiger will turn its head. Beautiful! But natural beauty is, after all, just beauty. There is no goodness in it, or evil. It has been said that the ancient Greeks worshipped the goodness of beauty while the Hebrews worshipped the beauty of goodness. But the truth is that only in human works can beauty and goodness be united, so that we may see one in the other.⁵²

It's late afternoon on a Sunday. I sit in my front yard on a terrace of stone, which is cupped from the street by a weathered cedar fence covered in ivy. It is fall. The air is fine. Three large oak trees twist up into the sky. Their bark is black and their myriad leaves stand silhouetted against the blue while the sun turns the trees across the street a brilliant gold. A neighbor rakes his path, *scraaaap, scraaaap*. A single-engine plane drones across the sky. A car passes; a dog barks and another answers far away. A snatch of rock-and-roll escapes from a teenager's car as he slams the door. A mother calls her child to dinner. A leaf falls on my lap.

All this is beautiful too. But beautiful in a different way, and, I want to say, better way than the stars. In the form of a painting or a piece of music, a building or a garden, beauty made by humans is more than just beauty. It is the crown of thousands of years of civilization, of law, of peace, and of a certain wisdom in design both with and against nature. This house in which I write was built, these stones were laid, and these trees were planted more than fifty years ago when the neighborhood was developed. Together with the hundreds of homeowners who have lived here, this neighborhood was laid out and constructed and planted and maintained by people who were neither angels nor creative geniuses, but who contained in their professionalism and general decency enough human goodness to make this place and this moment beautiful and good. It did not have to be so. The good they did lives on.

⁵² John Keats ends his well-known Ode on a Grecian Urn like this: "When old age shall this generation waste/Thou shalt remain, in midst of other woe/Than ours, a friend to man, to whom thou say'st, 'Beauty is truth, truth beauty,—that is all/Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.'" "Thou" refers, of course, to the urn, a human work of art; but Thou also refers to God, for whom Keats speaks.

And so, while I am deeply interested in the beauty and complexity of nature as such, and while I cannot help but recognize myself reflected in, prefigured in, and related to all forms of life, I am not touched by nature's beauty the way I am touched by the smallest act of genuine human altruism, not as impressed by Mount Everest as I am by our agreement to drive on the right, or the left. Because, for all its grandeur, Nature's beauty is actually the picture and result of fifteen billion years of randomness-leavened, micro-scaled automatism. The Milky Way, waves on the beach, the most delicate honeycombs, the Grand Canyon reflected in an eagle's eye...all these things are just cooling gas, "computer art," a gigantic screensaver.

Human art, on the other hand (and it need not be "great"), glows with a light that is no longer a simple reflection of the sun and the moon. It glows with improbable skill, with love, and with longing, as does every life-promoting act and every healing gesture. Human goodness proceeds with the kind of persistence, generosity, and "uphillness" of which the furious stars know little. All the stronger do their deeds glow when the people who act in this way—let us call them "artists of good"—imagine they are doing what anyone else would do.