

The Proof of Beauty: From Aesthetic Experience to the Beauty of God

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I was feeling part of the scenery
I walked right out of the machinery
My heart going „boom boom boom“
“Hey” he said “Grab your things
I’ve come to take you home.”

Peter Gabriel, “Solsbury Hill”

Introduction

Hans Urs Von Balthasar (1904-1986) decries the forgetting of beauty in contemporary philosophy and theology. The loss of transcendental beauty implies a separation and collapse of the other transcendentals: unity, truth and goodness. According to Balthasar, Thomas Aquinas represents the climax of Western philosophy as one who is able to ground a philosophy of beauty for a theological aesthetics. Balthasar eschews any contemporary attempts to transpose Aquinas within a post-Kantian context and as a result, Balthasar’s magnificent attempt to restore beauty within his multi-volume trilogy, *Herrlichkeit*, *Theodrama*, and *Theologiké*, is not able to speak to those outside of the Christian narrative. This is because of his prior philosophical presuppositions that rely specifically on special categories (those specific to Christian theology) that do not give enough attention to general categories (those shared with other disciplines).¹ For Bernard Lonergan (1904-1984), general categories are derived from human intentional consciousness. Consonant with Balthasar’s suspicion of the philosophical turn to the subject, Lonergan labored to respond to the same turn with *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding*² and provides a Catholic

¹ Concerning this issue, see Robert M. Doran, “Lonergan and Balthasar: Methodological Considerations,” *Theological Studies* 58 (1997): 61-84.

² Bernard Lonergan, *Insight: A Study in Human Understanding*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992).

response to the post-Cartesian turn. This paper will explore how Lonergan's later thought might bear on an aesthetic argument for God's existence, which could complement the argument for God's existence developed in *Insight*, chapter 19. After all, the encounter with beauty is an encounter with a surplus of meaning that refreshes one from the instrumentalization and demands of everyday living. It reminds us, as in the words of Shakespeare, that there is "more in Heaven and Earth" than we can dream of. It awakens in us the question of ultimate meaning, which, for St. Augustine was a quest for "Beauty so Ancient and so New."³

The above quote by the singer songwriter Peter Gabriel exemplifies the close connection between aesthetic and religious experience. The song is about a man, presumably the author, who has an experience upon ascending a quiet hill during the night overlooking the city lights near Bath, England. The moon is shining; an eagle flies out of the night and a voice speaks to him. He feels connected with the beauty of his surroundings, he feels momentarily fulfilled— time stands still. He is concerned about how to communicate this to his friends afterwards. There is even the suggestion of an eschatological dimension as he ends the song "You can keep my things they've come to take me home."

Gabriel's lyrics corroborate the close connection between aesthetic and religious experience that Lonergan expounds upon in several of his works. The purpose of this paper is to articulate the aesthetic experience from the philosophy of Lonergan and illustrate how this gives way to a contemplation of beauty leading naturally (logically) to the question of God or some ultimate significance that is transcendent. Such a question is answered, one could say, in the moments of aesthetic experience, wrought with a surplus of meaning, which *de facto* imply a sense of ultimate reality in which general transcendent knowledge is reasonably deduced. However, before proceeding to the argument itself, it will be necessary to say something about the context of an aesthetic argument for God's existence.

Preliminary Considerations

First, a proof for God's existence is never meant to replace the living faith of a believer. There is an implicit assumption in our secular age that somehow the so-called „proofs“ for God's existence are meant to establish faith in the non-believer. For example, Aquinas's infamous five arguments for God's existence are often taken out of context by contemporary philosophers of religion. My first introduction to these arguments occurred as a student in an undergraduate philosophy of religion class in a secular university. The professor who introduced them to us made them sound almost absurd. During my theological education I came to realize that these arguments were taken completely out of context by the professor. The five arguments were the prolegomena to the *Summa Theologica*, intended presumably for Dominican scholastics that were beginning their theological education with this treatise. In the context of the *Summa* and consonant with the Catholic intellectual tradition, these arguments were intended

³ Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. F.J. Sheed (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2006), book 10, ch. 27.

simply to establish the reasonableness of faith rather than to establish faith itself. One could say the proofs are directed to the already converted. However, this is not to say that such proofs could not deepen the faith of the existing believer.

It is one thing to establish the existence of God, it is quite another to find fulfillment of one's existential longing in an ongoing relationship with a transcendent being. In other words, simply establishing the existence of God does not necessitate the personal relationship with him/her that the Judeo-Christian tradition emphasizes. The notion of *Deus otiosus* implies the existence of God as one who remains at a distance, uninvolved. This notion of God would hardly quell the restless heart of Augustine. He declares such restlessness in the beginning of the *Confessions*.⁴ In Chapter 10 he identifies eternal beauty as the term of his longing. Only the beauty of God could quell Augustine's restless heart, or, to put it in Lonergan's terminology, beauty is the fulfillment of Augustine's conscious intentionality.⁵ Therefore, I would argue that one of the reasons that „proofs“ for God's existence fail to prove or convince is that our expectations for them are too high. Establishing the existence of God is not that difficult, but finding fulfillment and meaning, which I presume is what many, if not all human beings desire, is the more difficult task. To expect the proofs for God's existence to fulfill the restless heart is to demand too much from them. By contrast, the major revealed religions promise the hope of such fulfillment.

This is not to say that such proofs do not support those who are seeking to believe either consciously or unconsciously. For example, a friend of mine who was a self-described “militant atheist” eventually came to believe in God through the study of physics. In his studies he began to realize that the complexity of the object of physics and the nature of the universe lent itself to questions of mystery. One could say he was coming to a belief in God through a contemporary argument from design. This led him to read Etienne Gilson's *Being and Some Philosophers*, and from there, to reading G.K. Chesterton and C.S. Lewis. My friend returned to the faith of his Catholic upbringing. When faced with the complexity and wondrous design of the universe, he eventually realized it would be unreasonable not to conclude the existence of some ultimate intelligent being, rather than presume that the universe is randomly organized through chance.

Second, one must ask: why an aesthetic argument for God's existence? The main reason is that the capacity for aesthetic experience extends to all human beings. We presume, as Aquinas states, that “everyone loves the beautiful.”⁶ Therefore, since aesthetic experiences are open to all human beings, one is justified looking at the nature of those experiences and raising the question: do such experiences indicate or imply some ultimate ground of beauty in which all created beauty is but a participation?

⁴ Augustine, *Confessions*, book 1, ch. 1.

⁵ Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990), 105.

⁶ “Unde omnis homo amat pulchrum.” Aquinas, *Psalmos Davidis Expositio*, 25, 5, quoted in Armand Mauer, *About Beauty: A Thomistic Interpretation* (Houston: Center for Thomistic Studies, 1983), 6, 19, n. 1. See also *Sum. theol.* 2a-2ae, q. 145, a. 2, ad 1.

The reader may realize I am making some assumptions here. That is, I am presuming the content of an aesthetic experience to be beauty. In contemporary philosophy, aesthetics has been reduced to perception, that which the Greek etymology of the word *aesthesis* connotes, *to perceive*. In other words, aesthetics speaks to the perception of colors, sounds, etc, but not the ordering of such in a way that is beautiful. Consequently, in our current context, the science of aesthetics does not necessitate the existence of beauty. It is common for books on aesthetics to not even mention the word beauty. Moreover, there is the whole problem of the relativism that permeates and extends to aesthetics as exemplified in the common adage, “Beauty is in the eye of the beholder.”⁷

Balthasar was well aware of the modern legacy of the eclipse of beauty.⁸ For him, the loss of beauty in our modern era is one of the most significant problems of our time, the implications of which spill over into every aspect of human living. The loss of beauty entails the loss of truth (leading to relativism), the loss of goodness (effecting immorality and violence), and the loss of unity (a fragmentation of knowledge). Beauty has a certain priority among transcendentals because it holds the others together. The loss of beauty also affects existence and being so that one could say we are witnessing a residual effect of the loss of beauty in the ecological crisis.

Balthasar traces much of the modern philosophical loss of beauty to Kant. So much so, that Balthasar’s *magnum opus*, his trilogy, *Herrlichkeit*, *Theodrama*, and *Theologik* are written in direct response to Kant’s three critiques respectively. However, where Kant treated judgments of the beautiful in his third critique, Balthasar presents his treatment of the beautiful in *Herrlichkeit*.⁹ By doing so, Balthasar is emphasizing the priority of beauty among the transcendentals and correcting the problem that Kant leaves us with—the subjectivization of aesthetic judgments. However, Balthasar traces the forgetting of beauty further back than Kant. It begins with the downturn in metaphysics following its climax in Aquinas. However divided Aquinas scholars may be on whether or not Aquinas viewed beauty as a transcendental property of being, Balthasar is clear that Aquinas’s metaphysics is the only one that provides the proper balance of the transcendentals: unity, truth, goodness, and beauty.¹⁰ As

⁷ See Arthur C. Danto, *The Abuse of Beauty: Aesthetics and the Concept of Art* (Peru, IL: Open Court Publishing 2003).

⁸ See my summary of this in John Damosky, “Philosophy for a Theology of Beauty,” *Philosophy & Theology* 19/1-2 (2007): 7-35.

⁹ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*, trans. Oliver Davies, et al. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1982-1991).

¹⁰ On the issue of transcendental beauty in Aquinas I am in agreement with Franz Kovach who Balthasar relies heavily upon for his own analysis. Concerning Aquinas’s thought, Kovach states, “This system of transcendentals, as can be readily seen, does not contain transcendental beauty, since the derivation is to be found in a relatively early work of Thomas Aquinas, *De veritate* (On Truth). Later on, probably while writing his commentary on Pseudo-Dionysius’s *On the Divine Names*, Thomas clearly expresses his belief in the transcendence of beauty by declaring with Plato that every being is both good and beautiful; also, that the beautiful is convertible with the good; and the beautiful and the good are really identical and only logically distinct. . . . Is there a place in the above Thomistic system for transcendental beauty? . . . The truth is that there definitely is room for

Aidan Nichols states in his commentary on Balthasar's aesthetics, "St. Thomas's general ontology—as the precious setting for an aesthetics at once metaphysically adequate and biblically controlled—is, in Balthasar's view, the door on which the division of the ages (ancient from modern) itself turns."¹¹ Heretofore ancient philosophy may have been either consciously or unconsciously trying to achieve this balance, but modern philosophy is incapable of achieving it for Balthasar. The latter predicament explains why Balthasar was suspicious of the so-called „transcendental Thomists," for example, Karl Rahner. Balthasar believed the modern turn to the subject was a wrong-headed; any attempt to integrate Thomas's thought with such a turn would lead to the problems inherent in what Michael Polanyi describes as the "doctrine of doubt": relativism, skepticism and subjectivism.¹²

This leads us to the third point, why invoke Lonergan's thought for an aesthetic argument when he begins his philosophical enterprise by turning inward to the subject, that is, the subject's intentional conscious operations?

I have argued elsewhere, *pace* Balthasar, that while Aquinas may indeed represent a climax in Western philosophy, this climax is one that pertains to what Lonergan identifies as *a second stage of meaning*.¹³ This stage is initiated by a systematic exigence that begins with the pre-Socratic move from explanations in terms of *mythos* to explanations in terms of *logos*. This second stage of meaning climaxes with the ontology and metaphysics of Aquinas and subsequently begins its demise with the thought of Scotus. It is interesting that both Lonergan and Balthasar, independently of each other, interpreted this demise in Western philosophy flowing principally from Duns Scotus. For Lonergan, Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* was aimed at Scotus's philosophy of mind. In turn, while Lonergan may be sympathetic towards Kant's motivation for the *First Critique*, Lonergan seeks to provide a corrective to the „agnostic" epistemology which we inherited from Kant.

Contrary to Balthasar's suspicion of the turn to the subject, I concur with Lonergan that the movement inaugurated by Descartes, Kant and Hume represents the beginning of the third stage of meaning. The third stage of meaning for Lonergan occurs when the critical exigence emerges, where a turn to conscious intentionality is required in order to critically differentiate the realm of common sense from the realm of theory, and to relate the two realms to one another. Furthermore, I have argued that Lonergan's *Insight*, as analogous to Aquinas, represents a climax of the third stage of meaning because the turn to one's conscious intentionality culminates in the self-affirmation of the knower, hence correcting the wrong-headed turn to the subject. Therefore, given Lonergan's indebtedness to the thought of Aquinas, the former represents a

transcendental beauty in Thomas's system." Francis J. Kovach, *Philosophy of Beauty* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press 1974), 241-2.

¹¹ Aidan Nichols, *The Word has been Abroad: A Guide Through Balthasar's Theological Aesthetics* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1998), 145.

¹² Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1962), 269-272.

¹³ See Dadosky, "Philosophy for a Theology of Beauty;" Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, 90ff.

transposed Thomistic philosophy for a recovery of beauty in the third stage of meaning. This interpretation of Aquinas preserves Balthasar's affirmation of the Thomistic achievement but it also challenges him to revisit the possibility of recovering beauty in more contemporary philosophy.

Still, there is a sense where Lonergan is open to Balthasar's indictment against Western philosophy and theology for not taking beauty into account. Lonergan does not explicitly speak of beauty in his philosophy; one might even be justified in saying he ignores it. There is no reference to beauty as a divine attribute in his argument for God's existence. In the chapter on religion in *Method in Theology*, Lonergan refers to Friedrich Heiler's seven common characteristics of the world's religions.¹⁴ Lonergan mentions these seven characteristics, one of which includes supreme beauty. However, when he applies Heiler's characteristics to his own notion of unrestricted being-in-love, he does not mention beauty. It is almost as if he glosses over it unconsciously. Is this neglect of beauty enough to indict Lonergan of Balthasar's criticism of aesthetic forgetfulness? As compelling as it may seem, I think not. Recall that of the transcendentals (beauty, truth, goodness and unity), Lonergan's achievement lies in his contribution to restoring the transcendental *truth* within Western philosophy, that is, if one accepts the argument laid out in *Insight*. Later, he devotes more work to the good in *Method in Theology*, but not with the same depth and precision of truth in *Insight*. Scholars continue to follow Lonergan's lead and develop his notion of the good.

With respect to the true, however, Lonergan recovers the ability to affirm oneself as a knower, to assert the truth in one's statements. Consequently, this brings with it the possibility of aesthetic judgments, although Lonergan does not arrive at this juncture. In other words, to affirm that something is true is to affirm that it exists; therefore to affirm that something is beautiful is to affirm that the beautiful „thing“ exists. Hence, if one accepts Lonergan's epistemology worked out in *Insight*, then it follows that one is able to establish a ground for making true aesthetic judgments.¹⁵ One must still work out more precisely the nature of such judgments and their relation to the good or judgments of value. All this to say that even though Lonergan does not deal explicitly with the notion of beauty in his work, and in some cases even ignores it, his contribution to the recovery of beauty is significant. A theology of beauty will need to make use of Lonergan's modernized Thomistic epistemology and metaphysics—the only existing epistemological alternative to the doctrinaires of doubt. On this basis, I have called for a minor-major revision to Lonergan's philosophy that can work out more precisely the nature of aesthetic judgments and in this way provide the philosophy for a theology of beauty.

¹⁴ Friedrich Heiler, "The History of Religions as a Preparation for the Co-operation of Religions," in *History of Religions*, eds. Mircea Eliade and Joseph M. Kitagawa (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959), 142-160. Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, 109.

¹⁵ I am currently working on a book, tentatively titled, *The Eclipse of Beauty and its Recovery: Philosophy for a Theology of Beauty*, that will address this issue.

Finally, the patience of the reader is requested in order to say something about the role of experience in the arguments for God's existence since it will have a bearing on aesthetic experience and the extrapolation from such experience to the argument for God's existence. In his book, *Existence of God*, the philosophical theologian Richard Swinburne argues for the existence of God based on the fact of religious experiences.¹⁶ By virtue of a *principle of credulity*, Swinburne argues that if we experience something as present, then most likely it is present. Therefore, the „presence“ as experienced in a religious encounter can give us knowledge of God's existence. Atheists have responded to say they experience God as absent and therefore God does not exist. Indeed, prima facie there are a lot of problems in deriving the existence of God from one's religious experience. There are the problems of the subjectivity of one's experience, of artificially induced religious experiences, not to mention the conflicting claims of religious experiences worldwide. Still, one wonders that if the experience of a witness in court provides sufficient evidence to convict a defendant, then why are we so reluctant to trust transformative religious experiences? What are we to make of the claims of those who have had near-death experiences? Can their testimonies lend empirical evidence to transcendent reality?

I do not have an answer to this question but I do have firsthand contact with a person who had a provocative near-death experience. When I was an undergraduate at Northern Kentucky University, the chair of the Art Department at the time, Howard Storm, reported having such an experience. His colleagues were aghast and surprised because Storm had a reputation as a militant atheist and diehard materialist. Yet part of his near-death experience involved an encounter with a being he calls „Jesus.“ Storm's account of his experience is atypical because it is quite lengthy and it also involves a negative experience of what he describes as „Hell“—a place of violence rather than of „hot coals.“ Storm's experience made a significant impression on my own life, for I was struggling with my own beliefs at the time and was flirting with agnosticism. Finding his university life to be spiritually barren after his dramatic experience, he left it behind and now serves as a minister in the United Church of Christ in downtown Cincinnati. At one point, Storm recounted his story on nationwide television and the famed author Anne Rice was moved by his experience. Her encounter with Storm's account perhaps supported or facilitated her own recent conversion to Christianity. Rice's conversion to Christianity is probably the most significant cultural conversion of recent times.¹⁷ Once she discovered Storm she was „desperate“ to get his story in print and it was published by Doubleday.¹⁸ If one considers how Storm's experience has affected others, there is some kind of credence operative in the concreteness of these experiences.

¹⁶ Richard Swinburne, *Existence of God*, revised edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

¹⁷ See Anne Rice, *Called out of Darkness* (New York: Random House, 2008).

¹⁸ Howard Storm, *My Descent into Death: A Second Chance at Life*, with a forward by Anne Rice (New York: Doubleday, 2005).

It goes without saying that many religious experiences could be explained scientifically, however, to reduce such experiences to scientific explanations is to miss a significant aspect. The point is that these experiences can be transformative and in certain cases the transformative effects can affect individuals, communities, and even history. Consider the effects of the mystical lives of Theresa of Avila, Ignatius Loyola and Catherine of Siena, not only on the Western world, but upon history. To explain the mystical dimension of these people's lives in terms of the rapid release of brain chemicals cannot account for the effects of the historical influence of these mystics. The argument from religious experience is related to the aesthetic argument because for Lonergan, aesthetic experience is closely related to religious-mystical experience. My point is that accounts of religious experiences have consequences that are often dramatic. Such consequences cannot be accounted for in reductionist interpretations of the experiences.

Aesthetic Experience in Lonergan

We get the basic clue of what characterizes aesthetic experience for Lonergan by his notion of the aesthetic pattern of experience in *Insight*¹⁹ and in his definition of art as the "objectification of the purely experiential pattern" in *Topics in Education*.²⁰ For Lonergan, the „pure“ of pure experience means something very specific. When he uses the expression „pure pattern of experience“ he does not mean that it is pure in the sense that the experience is free of all socially learned/constructed meanings. Rather, he means it is pure in the sense of being free from instrumentality, e.g., the differentiations of common sense and theory.

The aesthetic experience for Lonergan can be construed from several perspectives: (1) the potential for aesthetic experience in human beings as elemental meaning; (2) the creative work of the artist in trying to objectify or incarnate the aesthetically patterned experience symbolically in works of art; and (3) the mediation of the artwork to the observer in order to bring them into an experience of elemental meaning.

I will focus on the first one, the potential for aesthetic experience in all human beings. In *Insight*, Lonergan speaks of the aesthetic pattern of experience. This pattern is characterized by spontaneity and liberation that is conducive to creative expression. As a pattern of experience, he places it between the biological pattern and the intellectual pattern. If one considers the caricature of the starving artist then this would make sense. The aesthetic pattern subsists through the basic meeting of the biological needs. Consequently, however, destitute societies that are struggling for basic vital needs may not be able to experience this pattern because they are simply trying to stay alive. Of course,

¹⁹ Lonergan, *Insight*, 207-209.

²⁰ Bernard Lonergan, *Topics in Education*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993), 211. He gleaned this definition from his reading of Suzanne Langer, *Feeling and Form: A Theory of Art* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953), 40.

there are rare exceptions of creative geniuses who emerge from the margins of society sometimes as prophets giving hope to their society and to the world.

In contrast, the intellectual pattern requires a further instrumentalization of consciousness in order to direct inquiry into some given data in a systematized way. Think about how the bored student finds release by doodling while listening to a tedious lecture that requires intellectual concentration. So the freedom one experiences in the aesthetic pattern of experience is a release from the instrumentality that one experiences by living constantly in the intellectual pattern and the practical pattern of getting things done. In the aesthetic pattern one encounters the surplus of meaning that cannot be exhausted by the worlds of theory and practicality. The sudden beauty of a sunset is quick to assuage the weary driver sitting in a traffic jam. The driver is momentarily lifted out his or her predicament in a reminder that there is much more to life than the hustle and bustle of everyday living.

In his later work, Lonergan characterizes elemental meaning in terms of patterns of experiences in which the subject-object distinction has not yet arisen.²¹ One is swept up in a moment by a symphony, a dance or beautiful scene. Most of us experience this from time to time throughout the course of our everyday existence. At times these experiences can be momentous and life changing. The task of the artist is to „objectify“ these experiences of elemental meaning, where „objectify“ simply means to make this reality manifest symbolically in works of art. In contrast to the world of theory where precision and technical language dominate, the world of the artist is one of images and symbols because these allow for multivalent expression which is more fitting to express elemental meaning. Symbols can express contradictions, especially with respect to affectivity, in a way that theory cannot. Hence, one could say that artists live close to the world of symbols and images. Their consciousness is differentiated in such a way that they can apprehend the surplus of meaning in existence and express it symbolically more readily than others.

One could think of elemental meaning occurring within intersubjective relations as well. Two lovers consummating their relationship in fidelity and commitment become like one, at times in ecstasy. Indeed, for Lonergan, being-in-love is closely connected with the aesthetic experience. There is a surplus in the encounter with the other in love that is better expressed in poetry and song than in theoretical constructs. This is the case not only for human lovers but for those who fall in love unrestrictedly, that is, for those who fall in love with God. In the more dramatic instances, such as the Spanish mystics, poetry and song speak to the ineffable reality one encounters in this loving relationship. Moreover, in the experience of falling in love with God, one could say that the encounter is one of elemental meaning. It is elemental in the sense that the „object“ that one encounters is not clearly apprehended. Yet the effect of the encounter is transformative. Lonergan borrows a phrase from Nietzsche to

²¹ See Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, 61-63.

describe it; it is “a transvaluation of values.”²² Moreover, this surplus of meaning one encounters in a religious-mystical experience is one where the person experiences a “basic fulfillment” of their conscious intentionality.²³ Such fulfillment is the kind that can calm the restless heart of Augustine. This fulfillment is not necessarily present in an aesthetic encounter, but it can be.

Returning to Solsbury Hill

Let us read Peter Gabriel’s “Solsbury Hill” as an example of an aesthetic and religious-mystical experience. First, the author ascends the hill on a beautiful evening; he “feels part of the scenery.” His consciousness moves out of the ordinary patterns of living to an aesthetic pattern. His experience is *elemental* in that as a subject he is not distinct from the „object“ of his surrounding natural environment. Second, there is the freedom from instrumentality of consciousness. He states that he “walked right out of the machinery.” This indicates that his consciousness is momentarily freed from the regular instrumentality of perhaps the dramatic pattern of personal relations, the practical patterns of the workday world, and the intellectual pattern of theory. In other words, he walked right out of the machinery of his consciousness as instrumentalized by the cares and responsibilities of ordinary living. Third, his heart is going “boom, boom, boom.” His physical reaction is presumably affective as well. He is aware that something momentous is occurring, something out of the realm of ordinary experience. He is experiencing the surplus of meaning as mediated through the conditions of this mysterious night. Finally, he feels drawn to leave everything behind him: “Grab your things I have come to take you home.” This is where his experience moves more towards an explicitly religious dimension. Assuming that the voice is coming from an authentic source, we presume he is feeling a basic fulfillment. So much so, that he is feeling the temptation to leave it all behind. His comments are akin to those who report near death experiences and claim that they feel like they have “gone home.”²⁴ In other words, they feel so fulfilled in their encounter that they do not desire to be anywhere else, even if they have children and family back in their earthly life. This personal eschatological dimension indicates that their conscious intentionality is being filled to the brim, so to speak. The transvaluation of values would be implied in the songwriter’s willingness to consider leaving it all behind, since we do not know what his personal circumstances may be. That is, his conscious intentionality is finding immediate fulfillment and he is being pulled in the direction of radical self-transcendence. The aesthetic experience has crossed over into an experience of ultimate reality, not one that he could produce naturally on his own, and while he is concerned that his friends will not understand, he remains convinced.

²² Ibid., 106.

²³ It should be stated as well that not all religious-mystical experiences are consoling, in fact, they can be terrifying in some instances.

²⁴ Raymond Moody, *Life After Life: The Investigation of a Phenomenon—Survival of Bodily Death* (New York: Bantam, 1975).

The Aesthetic Argument

As I proceed with the argument I am requiring some presuppositions from the reader. First, I presume with Aquinas that “Everyone loves the beautiful.” Further, I agree with those interpreters of Aquinas that beauty is a transcendental property of being along with unity, goodness, and truth. With that said, I would put forth an argument for the existence of God from the aesthetic experience based on Lonergan’s *Insight*.

Lonergan appropriates Aristotle’s notion of *wonder* into what he elaborates in *Insight* as the detached, pure, unrestricted desire to know. However, the unrestricted desire to know pertains to the intellectual pattern of experience and is the source or operator for that desire as manifested in questions for intelligence and reasonableness, at least when unobstructed by obscurantism. Subsequently, he referred to a quasi-operator, or symbolic operator that corresponds more with the affective dimension of the human being; in this way it functions analogously at the level of experience or elemental meaning.²⁵ In terms of beauty, one could say we all have a natural unrestricted desire for beauty. Why is it unrestricted? Because with every encounter of beauty, be it a sunset, a work of art, or another human person, sustained attention gives rise to simultaneous feelings of impermanence and incompleteness. Repeated listening to a beautiful melody is eventually exhausted and while the desire for ever new beautiful music persists, the pleasure of the originating moment of the initial encounter cannot be sustained. In the most beautiful of landscapes there is an awareness of the transience of beauty. Edgar Allan Poe captures this experience brilliantly in “The Poetic Principle:”

An immortal instinct deep within the spirit of man [sic] is thus plainly a sense of the Beautiful. This it is which administers to his delight in the manifold forms, and sounds, and odors and sentiments amid which he exists. . . . We have still a thirst unquenchable, to allay which he has not shown us the crystal springs. This thirst belongs to the immortality of Man [sic]. It is at once a consequence and an indication of his perennial existence. It is the desire of the moth for the star. It is no mere appreciation of the Beauty before us, but a wild effort to reach the Beauty above. Inspired by an ecstatic prescience of the glories beyond the grave, we struggle by multiform combinations among the things and thoughts of Time to attain a portion of that Loveliness whose very

²⁵ There is an implicit suggestion in Lonergan’s thought of an additional operator to the unrestricted desire to know. He refers to it in several places: as a quasi-operator (“Mission and the Spirit” in *A Third Collection: Papers by Bernard J.F. Lonergan*, ed. F. E. Crowe [Mahwah, NY: Paulist Press, 1985], 30), a symbolic operator (see “Philosophy and the Religious Phenomenon,” *Method: Journal of Lonergan Studies*, 12/2 [Fall 1994]: 134), and the *élan vital* (“Reality, Myth, Symbol,” in *Myth, Symbol and Reality*, ed. Alan M. Olson [Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1980], 37). Robert Doran attempts to clarify and synthesize these references in terms of a psychic operator. See his *Theology and the Dialectics of History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990), especially 663-64.

elements perhaps appertain to eternity alone. And thus when by Poetry, or when by Music, the most entrancing of the poetic moods, we find ourselves melted into tears, we weep then, not as the Abbate Gravina supposes, through excess of pleasure, but through a certain petulant, impatient sorrow at our inability to grasp now, wholly, here on earth, at once and for ever, those divine and rapturous joys of which through the poem, or through the music, we attain to but brief and indeterminate glimpses.²⁶

Even if the aesthetic moment persists, as when we can listen to favorite music repeatedly, there is an incompleteness to it—the pleasure wanes and we pine for fresh experiences. Our desire for beauty cannot be exhausted in a single encounter, a moment of beauty recedes and we anticipate another, and if we are fortunate, the moments are held together like a pearl on the strand of the necklace of our life experiences. Still one must wonder if this desire for beauty is insatiable. Can we anticipate some type of permanent fulfillment and satisfaction in the feeling for beauty? Or does the impermanence of beauty somehow lend to our appreciation of it? Likewise, if we are to presume that there is an unrestricted desire for beauty, might we be legitimate in presuming an unrestricted act of beauty—an *Urgrund* of beauty in which the entire created order is beautiful by virtue of its participation in this ground? The anticipation of such fulfillment to the desire of beauty is spoken of by the philosopher C.E.M. Joad:

In the appreciation of music and of pictures we get a momentary and fleeting glimpse of the nature of that reality to a full knowledge of which the movement of life is progressing. For that moment, and for so long as the glimpse persists, we realize in anticipation and almost, as it were, illicitly, the nature of the end. We are, if I may so put it, for the moment there, just as a traveler may obtain a fleeting glimpse of a distant country from an eminence passed on the way, and cease for a space from his journey to enjoy the view. And since we are for the moment there, we experience while the moment lasts that sense of liberation from the urge and drive of life, which has been noted as one of the special characteristics of aesthetic experience.²⁷

Let us turn again to the notion of aesthetic experience. These experiences are beautiful insofar as the integrity of the forms, the various plays of light, and our awareness of its fleetingness combine to give us pause to reflect and appreciate the beauty. There is a surplus of meaning in the experience of the

²⁶ Edgar Allan Poe, “The Poetic Principle,”
<http://xroads.virginia.edu/~HYPER/POE/poetic.html> Accessed October 21, 2008. See also Jacques Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism*, note 73. Available on line
<http://www2.nd.edu/Departments/Maritain/etext/artfn.htm#73>

²⁷ C. E. M. Joad, “A Realist Philosophy of Life,” in *Contemporary British Philosophy: Personal Statements*, Second Series, ed. J. H. Muirhead, (New York, Macmillan, 1925), 188; also cited by Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism*, Ibid.

beautiful. In Chapter 17 of *Insight*, Lonergan distinguishes between a *known* and the *known unknown*.²⁸ In the intellectual pattern, the latter two pertain to our knowledge and ignorance respectively. In the dramatic pattern, the known unknown can be charged with affectivity to give one a sense of mystery—of unplumbed depths. In turn, there is a correspondence between the two operators of the *unrestricted desire to know* and the *psychic-affective quasi-operator*. There is the possibility of two “spheres” of consciousness with their “variable content”—the sphere of the “domesticated, familiar, common,” and the sphere of the “ulterior unknown, of the unexplored and strange, of the undefined surplus of significance and momentousness.” These two spheres can be quite distinct, “as separate as Sundays and weekdays,” or they can “interpenetrate,” as when life is viewed with “the glory and freshness of a dream” in the young Wordsworth.²⁹

In his lecture, “Time and Meaning,” Lonergan gives a more explicit indication of what he has in mind with respect to the two spheres: They can “interpenetrate, and that interpenetration is something like what is described by Wordsworth in his „Intimations of Immortality.“” In this way one can say with Lonergan that “Everything is open to the divine, a manifestation of the divine.”³⁰ Hence, our encounter with beauty, opens us up to this surplus of meaning.

We have suggested that there is a natural disposition with everyone to appreciate beauty and this appreciation is experienced as temporal and transitory. The question emerges, is there an unrestricted act of beauty, or *Urgund*, that is permanent and in which all creation is beautiful by participation? The surplus of meaning in aesthetic experience reminds us that there is more to living than is exemplified in intellectually and practically instrumentalized consciousness. Such surplus raises the question within us of some ultimate meaning or perhaps some ultimate ground of beauty. In other words, aesthetic experience provides a context for the question of „God“ to arise. As fulfilling these moments can not only give rise to the question, they may also lead to a subjective confirmation of ultimate significance. We can extrapolate from the experience to affirm the existence of an ultimate ground of beauty.

Such an argument is exemplified by the example of the conversion of the famous Russian Orthodox theologian, Sergei Bulgakov (1871-1944). His conversion from Marxist atheism to Christianity was affected by two pivotal experiences he had contemplating the beauty of the Caucasus Mountains and later contemplating a piece of religious art.³¹ I conclude with his account. The first experience occurred in 1896:

I was twenty-four years old. For a decade I had lived without faith and, after stormy doubts, a religious emptiness reigned in my soul. One evening, we were driving across the southern steppes of Russia. The

²⁸ Lonergan, *Insight*, 555.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 556.

³⁰ Bernard Lonergan, “Time and Meaning,” in *idem, Philosophical and Theological Papers 1958-1964* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996), 119.

³¹ Sergei Bulgakov, *Sophia: The Wisdom of God* (Hudson, NY: Lindesfarne Press, 1993), viii-x.

strong scented spring grass was gilded by the rays of a glorious sunset. Far in the distance, I saw the blue outlines of the Caucasus. This was my first sight of the mountains. I gazed with ecstatic delight at their rising slopes. I drank in the light and air of the steppes. I listened to the revelation of nature. My soul was used to the dull pain of seeing nature as a lifeless desert and of treating its surface beauty as a deceptive mask. Yet, contrary to my intellectual convictions, I could not be reconciled to nature without God.

Suddenly and joyfully in that evening hour my soul was stirred. I started to wonder what would happen if the cosmos were not a desert and its beauty not a mask or deception—if nature were not death, but life. What if the merciful and loving Father existed, if nature was a vestige of his love and glory, and if the pious feelings of my childhood, when I used to live in his presence, when I loved him and trembled because I was weak—what if all this were true. . .

O mountains of the Caucasus! I saw your ice sparkling from sea to sea, your snows reddening under the morning dawn, the peaks which pierced the sky, and my soul melted in ecstasy. . . . The first day of creation shone before my eyes. Everything was clear, everything was at peace and full of ringing joy. My heart was ready to break with bliss. There is no life and no death, only one eternal and unmovable now. *Nunc dimittis* rang out in my heart and in nature. And an unexpected feeling rose up and grew within me—the sense of victory over death. At that moment I wanted to die, my soul felt a sweet longing for death in order to melt away joyfully, ecstatically, into that which towered up, sparkled and shone with the beauty of first creation. . . . And that moment of meeting did not die in my soul, that apocalypse that wedding feast: the first encounter with Sophia. That of which the mountains spoke to me in their solemn brilliance, I soon recognized again in the shy, gentle girlish look on different shores and under different mountains.³²

The “shy girlish look” he refers to speaks to his second major aesthetic-religious experience which occurred in Dresden in 1900. His encounter with Raphael’s *Sistine Madonna* drew him further away from his atheism and closer to theism:

I went to the art gallery to do my duty as a tourist. My knowledge of European painting was negligible. I did not know what to expect. The eyes of the Heavenly Queen, the Mother who holds in her arms the Eternal Infant, pierced my soul. There was in them an immense power of purity and of prophetic self-sacrifice—the knowledge of suffering and the same prophetic readiness for sacrifice that was to be seen in the unchildishly wise eyes of the Child. . . I cried joyful, yet bitter tears, and with them the ice melted from my soul, and some of my psychological

³²Ibid.

knots were loosened. This was an aesthetic emotion, but it was also a new knowledge; it was a miracle. I was still a Marxist, but I was obliged to call my contemplation of the Madonna by the name of “prayer.”³³

By 1908 Bulgakov³³ had converted to Christianity. In 1918 he became an Orthodox priest. From these accounts we can see how Bulgakov became increasingly convinced of the existence of God thereby leaving his Marxist atheism behind. This was due in large measure to aesthetic-religious experiences that functioned for him as „proof“ for God³³’s existence.

³³Ibid., x-xi.