

Beauty: An Essential Characteristic of Civilized Culture

Kevin L. Cope

That offbeat gothic comedy serial of the 1960s, *The Addams Family*, would seem to be the last place to look for an understanding of “beauty” capable of withstanding erosion by the cynically diluted materialism of our time. The impish critique of normative values that characterized that ingenious show and that continues to characterize its cinematic sequels would seem an unlikely platform for the analysis of the arts or the improvement of connoisseurship. When probing a potentially disorienting issue like the redevelopment of a culture in which beauty is a central concern, popular perversities like *The Addams Family* sometimes make important, oddly encouraging points. Looking past the inverted “situation” that made this program one of the most innovative “sitcoms” of the television age and looking at what actually happens within individual episodes, viewers may quickly find evidence for the resurgence of beauty in even hostile situations. The Addamses dress exquisitely if not eccentrically; they practice an odd sort of landscape gardening; they maintain a variety of collections; they display

canvasses and esteem portraiture; they venerate the culinary arts. They spend almost all their time in the pursuit not only of happiness, but also of beauty. One encouraging point made by such programming is that beauty is not only part of or an abbreviation for large social and economic processes but is both inescapable in and central to cultural activity of all kinds, including those that call for hardheadedly political or economic rather than aesthetic approaches. The farther revolutionary thinkers or materialist philosophers or experimentally-minded artists stray from beauty, the more likely beauty is to reappear in unexpected, often assertive ways, as occurs when the creators of *The Addams Family* begin with a satiric reduction of gothic horror and with a relentless burlesque of what American conservatives call “family values” but end up representing an affectionate, stable family that prides itself on its aesthetical pursuits.

Beginning with this idea of the inevitability of beauty—its tendency to come into the center of attention when least expected or even when shunned—this essay will attempt to diagnose and explain the aversion to beauty that plagues contemporary cultural establishments (museums, universities, professional organizations). It will consider the vitality of beauty in a variety of literary and artis-

KEVIN L. COPE is Professor of English at Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge, and the author of numerous books and articles in eighteenth-century literary studies. He earned his doctorate in literature from Harvard University.

tic contexts from which the popular critics of our day would exclude it. Finally, it will discuss why beauty is an essential, definitive feature of civilized culture.

Power: Its Discourse and Its Art

The twenty-first century is already defining itself as a period of disempowering expertise. A visit to any new housing development, for example, will show that the simple action of planting a few shade trees or of scattering a few grass seeds has been “upgraded” into the “installation of plant materials” by (moderately skillful) “professionals” who “contract” to do what is optimistically called “landscaping.” Analogously, sweating on the treadmill has given way to consultation with “personal trainers” while playground fun has been “enhanced” into “play dates” for children who enroll in “activity centers.” These examples suggest how, in our beauty-starved times, those with cultural aspirations seek to beautify their experience (by presenting it as more glitzy and professionalized than anything that has gone before) while disabling themselves (by affirming their inability to plant a tree or to run a lap or to play in the park).

Similarly self-defeating expert “discourses” have come to dominate the academic analysis of culture and thereby to gain a foothold in the education of future generations. One should not be too quick to lay all the blame on recent times: the twentieth century as a whole has gradually relocated cultural activity from private persons and into universities, museums, libraries, and other habitats for institutionalized professionals. It is easy to forget that, little more than 100 years ago, most collectible art was held in private hands and the few university English Departments that existed counted as innovations. The trend toward the cloistering of cultural activity in public institutions dominated by syndicates of professionals has accelerated during the last

few decades, spurred on by the professionalization of humanities funding, whether in the emergence of international mega-foundations such as the Ford Foundation or the Rockefeller Foundation or the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation or in the growing influence of state-sponsored funding agencies such as the National Endowment for the Humanities or the Alexander von Humboldt Stiftung or the numerous arts councils administered by individual states. Quietly overlooked in this fluorescence of “support for the arts” is the degree to which individual citizens as well as individual writers and artists become beholden and thereby obsequious to funding cartels. It is true that the arts have always been supported by the rich and famous or vetted by the influential. Without the papacy there would have been no Sistine Chapel; without Tudor support, Shakespeare would have looked elsewhere for funding and would have written otherwise than he did; despite his satiric inclinations, Horace relished Augustus’s nod. The difference between old-style patronage, with its potential for tyranny and censorship, and our contemporary charity- or cartel-driven arts funding might be abbreviated in a phrase like “invisible industrialism.” Whatever its faults, the patronage system stresses the ambitions, whimsies, idiosyncrasies, and occasionally tastes of magnates or strongmen, thereby unwittingly promoting variety in the arts. Modern grants panels, on the other hand, encourage artists and writers to follow a largely hypothetical idea of national, “cutting-edge” taste, to produce proposals and works intended to please anonymous panels of judges drawn from across the nation or to attract at least some support from some audience in any conceivable venue. Such a system is “industrial” in that it tends to produce the largest possible volume of the most standardized art that will be the least unnerving to the greatest number of those people who

have the means to acquire or appreciate it. It is “invisible” in that the most frequently recruited judges, although unofficially known to everyone, are represented as somewhat ghostly, itinerant, national entities who hover in the mists of anonymity—as “panels of nationally recognized experts.” That such a model is “industrial” is not an indication that the art arising from it is popular or accessible. Rather, this model serves specific privileged consumers: those who have the economic or educational or cultural means to browse in the cultural market. Remarkably and sadly, American conservatives often imitate this “invisible industrialism” by creating their own expert panels and by attempting to define a somewhat abstract national conservative taste. Whether from the left- or right-wing cultural camps, the art and literature that emerges from such a support system is usually characterized by instrumentalism rather than aestheticism, whether (on the left) the promoting of the (extra-artistic) achievements of this or that underprivileged group or (on the right) inculcating moral values.

It is not surprising that, in such a context, the topic of *power* should become a preoccupation of critics of literature and the arts. The cliché strategy at this point in a typical conservative diatribe would be to deliver an indictment against Michel Foucault, the prominent French cultural historian who phrased into easily repeatable form a set of modern mantras about culture being a discourse of power in which artistic products such as poems or paintings encode “power relations.” Foucault’s primary contribution to “cultural criticism,” the doggerel chant that art is about the inscription of authority on the body of an oppressed people, has inflicted considerable damage on the study of culture. What is more dangerous, however, is the myopia that Foucaultism seems to induce: the apparent inability or perhaps unwillingness to regard

Foucault’s thought as itself an expression of the increasing powerlessness of humanists, especially of professional scholars. In the early 1990s, Brian McCrea, writing in his *Addison and Steele are Dead*, suggested that the quantity of published research is steadily increasing because humanities scholars cultivate ambiguity rather than seek answers to scholarly problems.¹ Open-ended ambiguity, McCrea continued, promotes the continual production of scholarly essays and thereby justifies salary increases for “productive” faculty members. Ambiguity, which leads to caution rather than resolution, licenses inaction, thereby making the declining social status and diminishing power of humanists not only tolerable but—in the way that *The Addams Family* draws beauty from horror—remunerative.

Foucault is not the only professor or prophet to substitute an aesthetically cleansed “discourse” for a beautiful poem, play, painting, or pirouette. Such operations are now routine in the current selection of literary or art-historical critical regimens, regimens that seem as numerous and yet as interrelated as the monastic orders of the Catholic church. New-historicism, postcolonial criticism, feminism, queer theory, eco-criticism, and a host of hybrid movements share in a seemingly esoteric “discourse” which “problematizes” the “production” of literary or artistic “commodities,” commodities which are first stripped of their aesthetic, religious, philosophical, or other interpretative resonances and are then regarded as tokens in a vast process of cultural exchange and economy. The immediate purpose of such critical movements is to legitimize their favored group, practice, or ideology, whether to demonstrate that statuary witnesses to the wondrousness of homosexuality or to suggest that painting serves as propaganda for colonialist exploitation or to show that literature reports on the progress of

women and women's rights. The fact that some of these interpretations are manifestly contradictory—for example, equal veneration of all cultures cannot be reconciled with western-style feminism—is seldom mentioned. The use of the arts, with all their inconsistencies, to vindicate this or that lifestyle is seldom wholly successful. Critics must often content themselves with achieving the secondary goals of disorientation and “problem-ization,” of suggesting that, lurking somewhere behind the glitzy veneer of a masterpiece, there is a deep and dark problem or secret for which the work in question serves as a mask or encoded image. This seeking of secondary goals might be seen as a species of distraction, of contentment with deflecting attention from the aesthetic properties of works so as to draw attention to favored issues of agendas. Occasionally such deflection is pursued for its own sake, without a clear purpose, as when critics exclaim that we need to get away from the traditional methods of interpretation but neglect to mention what we need to do instead. The degree to which mainstream critical practice allegorizes the economic basis of the humanities and likewise the degree to which it replicates the architecture of professional advancement in universities and other cultural institutions is omitted from such “cultural critiques.” Beauty is dispensed with as what former presidential candidate Al Gore might call “an inconvenient truth.”

The curiously self-exposing if not self-defeating tendencies of “post-Marxist” cultural criticism can be seen in its own treatment of its own beauties and wonders. The “cultural studies” of the later twentieth century took “expansion of the canon” as a rallying cry. The goal: to “include” in the classroom and in published research an array of “marginalized” authors who allegedly had been pushed out of the “canon” by certain diffuse malevolent influences, many of them members of

the “DWEM” (“dead white European male”) tribe. Presumably the cast of marginalized, minority, and women authors would include writers and artists whose skills had been overlooked and whose accomplishments *as artists* had been obscured by unjust neglect and choosy prejudice. Quickly, however, the question of competence—specifically of recovering valuable, *beautiful* works—gave way to a quota system in which every course or every essay needed a minimum representation of authors belonging to underprivileged groups. The question of artistic accomplishment was eclipsed by the need for representation—for power. The result today is the establishment of a “second canon” comprised of the works of certified neglected persons who are fewer in number than those who were previously enrolled in the standard canon and curriculum. A review of the critical literature in my specialty field, eighteenth-century studies, for example, will show that the rush to “include” politically palatable female authors such as Aphra Behn and Eliza Haywood has resulted in the removal of writers such as Anne Finch and Hannah More. By substituting a political category such as “representation” for aesthetic judgment, the number of allegedly marginalized persons represented in teaching and research has ended up going down.

The question of quantity, of whether the current palette of materialist critical ideologies will produce a greater or lesser number of topics for critical debate or will draw our attention to more or fewer authors, bears directly on the question of beauty. Beauty, after all, depends in part on profusion. Few among even the most materialist of critics would dispute, for example, that symmetry is an indispensable attribute of many of those artifacts that world cultures deem attractive. Only a madman would suggest that, say, Notre Dame or Chartres cathedrals would be more beautiful were they miraculously

shorn in half so as to show off only a single left or right half of their symmetrical façades rather than multiple towers and steeples. Most everyone has run across discussions of fancy and imagination, faculties that neoclassical theorists such as Sir Philip Sydney, John Dryden, John Locke, Immanuel Kant, and Samuel Taylor Coleridge charge with producing an abundant flow of images and other materials for subsequent selection, chiseling, polishing, and refining by the more selective faculties of reason or judgment. That no one, not even the most left-wing critics, seems to have challenged the notion that fanciful abundance is helpful to art is surely an indication that profusion and populousness are antecedents to if not components of beauty and that, therefore, a critical methodology that reduces rather than increases representation—that throws out many old authors while assimilating only a few new ones—is unlikely to promote the appreciation of beauty.

Probing the relation of profusion to beauty opens up the possibility of a more general understanding of beauty in relation to modern critical practice. Two millennia have passed since the ancient Greek philosophers first attempted to define “beauty.” That difficult project continues, in large measure because “beauty” belongs in the expansive category of “something more.” If profusion contributes to beauty, beauty is nonetheless something more than that; if Keats’s *Ode on a Grecian Urn* is a beautiful work, it is less than beauty itself; if we ask what it is that makes Alexander Pope’s *Essay on Criticism* such a delight, we are answered by neoclassical critics who locate its beauty in a certain *je ne sais quoi*, a certain undefinable something that soars above what we usually know. This sense of an exquisiteness beyond technical explication stands in contrast to the industrial model of remunerative academic criticism, which is why beauty, in an era of

underfunded universities, has become the least valuable of academic resources.

Culture is Only a Minimally Magic Word

The reduction and abstraction of the new left-wing canon—the establishment, in any one discipline or any one period, of a small number of celebrity excluded persons who serve as stand-ins for all other neglected authors—follows on the reductive abstraction of “literature” or “art” into “culture.” Although the heady days when English departments were renaming themselves “departments of cultural studies” are gratefully past, the invocation of the word “culture” as a stand-in for literature, art, philosophy, or religion is nowadays so common as to escape notice. Whenever there is an institutionalized aversion or a mandatory euphemism, there should be suspicion. The dissolution of “art” into the abstraction “culture” should raise questions. Whereas a phrase like “literature and art” references both objects (novels, statues, operas) and epiphenomena (say, the experience of beauty or a feeling of aversion), the not-so-magic word “culture” hovers somewhere between theory and practice, alluding to something that everyone is assumed to know about (because everyone is a member of some culture) but without much in the way of empirical content (where or what exactly is “culture”?) and without any implied reference to metaphysical standards (one may judge art by some objective measure but one dare not, in our relativistic times, pass judgment on a culture).

“Culture,” then, in the academic or professional sense—as a material-economic process that sweeps up most everything that people do—contrasts with the more commonsensical understanding of culture as an array of artifacts that have been produced with the intention of eliciting aesthetic reactions from some specified audience. “Culture” in the highly extrapo-

lated academic sense functions to eliminate the quasi-metaphysical aspects of the artistic process or experience, whether by suggesting that religion is just another cultural product to be consumed by a naive audience unaware of its tendency to encode power relations or by eliminating the artistic part of art—by implying that the aesthetic response to art lacks immaterial components and that beauty is just another commodity along with hay, steel, rubber, or uranium.

In their fight to keep beauty in the news if not in the minds and hearts of citizens, conservative critics often go wrong by tacitly adopting similarly sloppy ideas about “culture.” Typically, groups like the National Association of Scholars (“NAS”) or the Association of College Trustees and Alumni (“ACTA”) present themselves as the conservators of last resort, as Noah’s Arks of culture into which, period by period, famous artists and writers march two-by-two (or more often one-by-one), taking their places in the cultural equivalent of a genetic reserve. Passengers on the Ark include such winning combos as Shakespeare and Milton or Proust and Joyce or Chaucer and Notre Dame (one need not be a human being to belong!) or Michelangelo and Rembrandt or Tchaikovsky and Mozart. The result of this “Ark maneuver” is a highly abstracted notion of “culture” that stresses representation more than beauty and that depends on the very same nineteenth-century lionizing of “the greats” that ultimately elicited the critiques of Marx and Lenin. Exactly as happens when feminists close out a dozen diverse women authors in order to focus on Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, conservatives fixate on the superstars of the old canon while quietly extinguishing the many lesser lights that compose the great traditions.

Although conservatives present themselves as committed to ideas, in practice they discuss examples, especially such exemplary geniuses as Shakespeare,

Milton, and Chaucer. Today’s conservatives prefer defending the greats to parsing the underlying principles that account for their greatness. Conservatives thus make themselves vulnerable: when a chink is found in the armor of Shakespeare, whether a racist comment or an aesthetic blunder, the whole body of exemplary Shakespearian work is tainted. The obvious argument, that the idolized Shakespeare realized his ideals imperfectly, is forgotten. There are many reasons that conservatively inclined writers prefer examples over concepts. American conservatism harkens back to the empirical movement—to Thomas Hobbes and John Locke and Adam Smith—with its aversion to abstractions and its concern for tangible evidence. The commonsensical character of the American people, remarked upon by such diverse writers as Alexis de Tocqueville and Mark Twain, resists airy and impractical abstractions from the aesthetic orb. The working-class clientele of evangelical conservatism has declared its suspicions of aesthetics since the time of Oliver Cromwell and John Bunyan. The hyperprofessionalization and overspecialization of research—the fact that political commentators seldom have the requisite time or training to step outside of “political science” to reconnoiter the theory of the arts—also diminishes the sophistication of debates.

Conservatives concerned with or for the arts have thus ended up imitating the political left in a mistaken strategy: that of creating metaphorical museums to contain various beauties rather than allowing beauty to contain their museums. A list of great works is assembled and then regarded as a cultural institution in its own right—as a gallery. It is reasonable enough to counter leftist cultural theorists by insisting that a few great works—a tragedy by Shakespeare and a painting by Rembrandt and perhaps a tune or two by Mozart—be included in humanities curricula and receive due attention from

researchers. In the end, however, a preoccupation with a cast of superstar artists or authors comes at a high price: the tacit admission that beauty is related to representation and that, if we allow a Western masterpiece or two into the museum, we may as well make a gracious concession or two and go on conceding that a jumble of aboriginal artifacts might well qualify as beautiful, too, at least to some specialized beholders. An analogous error is routinely committed by conservatives who hope that a “silent” or “moral” or any other kind of “majority” will obtain quantitative superiority in legislative chambers but who are less eager to probe the basis of the American or other democratic systems.

America, after all, has never had a true conservatism or an *ancien régime*. For most Americans, “conservatism” refers to a “pop” blend of John Locke’s social contract theory, F. A. Hayek’s political philosophy, occasional comments from Newt Gingrich, and a subscription to the Conservative Book Club. The kind of “conservatism” at play when the literary canon was being written—Robert Filmer’s or King James II’s or Robert Bellarmine’s often misunderstood notion that the *making* and the *legitimizing* of the law, including its *origination* in divine revelation, is grander than and indeed the basis of both law and institutions—has never had much traction in the egalitarian American heartland.

One good reason for untangling the contemporary conservative attitude toward the arts is the need to resolve some apparent inconsistencies in the conservative movement. On the one hand, conservatism is at least nominally committed to conservation, to preserving assorted traditional values and institutions. On the other hand, it seeks to minimize government interference and thereby reduces the mechanisms by which such conservation might be implemented. This apparent contradiction is easily managed

in old-world conservatism like that that emerged at the Restoration of Charles II, in which (in theory) the sovereign maintained specified institutions and blocked the passing of intrusive laws, propping up cultural institutions while providing recourse for those seeking protection from government interference. The curious fact that the Vatican has ended up as the world’s most extravagant museum is also a case in point: there, the firm grip of the papacy on its specific assigned domain of spiritual governance seems to free up operating space for the most diverse sort of connoisseurship (as well as for a charming Italian eclecticism, so different in tone from the American obsession with “the canon”). With its admittedly admirable commitment to the limitation of government and its secularist aversion to the kind of divine-right rule of the sort advocated by Robert Filmer, American conservatism is always nervous about who or what is going to preserve cultural institutions and therefore tries to take shelter in the aforementioned “museum” mentality, in fortifying idealized institutions for the protection of the Western heritage.

Conservatives with cultural interests would do far better to affirm the vitality of beauty as a principle or goal or standard of judgment than to focus on defending this or that author. They should remind those with an intuitive but perhaps undisciplined grasp of art that *there is* something that makes and measures the beauties of all authors, that not only are there beautiful works but also aesthetical principles that superintend individual productions. The analogous ethical argument, that cultures are not just metaphorical “museums” in which there are many equally appreciable “commodities” but are rather arrays of works that can be judged good or bad in respect of independent principles, would then not be many steps away.

*A Few Works,
A Few Cultures, Fewer Ideals*

Scholars disdainful of Western culture have a way of blending extreme empiricism with inverted generalizations. Their usual strategy is to grab a line or passage or painting, identify some morally or politically dubious element within that passage, and then declare the work as a whole to be little more than propaganda for some horrid program such as colonialism or the slave trade. An inverted generalization often follows in which all other societies seem better than the odious West (although no example of a sin-, shame-, or guilt-free society is ever brought forward). The various frames of judgment in which the offending passage might be more favorably understood are bypassed as obstacles to what is taken to be the real, concealed meaning of the text. Simultaneously, a world full of cultures is implicitly presented as globally better than (or as globally victimized by) the offensive Western world. Beauty, one of the more delicate components of a literary or artistic experience, is easily pushed out of the way by such brute-force techniques.

It takes only a few examples to show how this infelicitous mixing of detailed scholarship and sweeping if inverted generalization leads first to misunderstandings of the world cultural legacy and then to faulty political ideas. One author who has sustained an especially serious beating during the age of multiculturalism and postcolonial theory is Alexander Pope, known to most undergraduates as the puckish and yet pugnacious author of neoclassical bagatelles such as *The Rape of the Lock*. Pope, who built both his persona and his literary reputation on disengagement—on his proud possession of friends among both the Whig and the Tory parties and on his retirement from the urban culture and political razzmatazz of London, in the latter of which Pope, a Catholic celebrity in anx-

iously Protestant Georgian England, could take no material part—has lately been trounced as an apologist for British imperialism and as a celebrant of almost everything naughty that the British empire sponsored. Of special concern has been his poem *Windsor Forest*, in which Pope uses the artfully groomed landscape around Windsor as the setting for a discussion of English history, beginning with the ferocities of the Norman conquest, proceeding to the benign reign of the dowager Stuart queen, Anne, and then expounding an elaborate allegory between this managed forest and the culturally active (as well as just) political state. Despite its social-historical topic, Pope's poem contains many finely wrought, beautiful lines such as his characterization of the political and commercial uses of oak:

Let India boast her plants, nor envy we
The weeping amber or the balmy tree
While by our oaks the precious loads
are borne,
And realms commanded which those
trees adorn.²

Among contemporary critics, the knee-jerk reaction to such lines is to blast Pope's commercialism, colonialism, imperialism, ecological ineptitude, and general hideousness. Pope is guilty of everything from clear-cutting forests to pillaging the Third World to endorsing unbridled globalism to Harrod's style merchandising. A more temperate consideration of the poem as a whole and of the pastoral genre to which it belongs will show that Pope is less concerned with the moral implications of trade than with accomplishing a variety of aesthetic feats: condensing the manifold acts and roles of a tree, from seedling to mast, into a mere forty syllables; experimenting with alternative, kinder and gentler subject matter for the heroic verse that, in Homer's time, was limited to topics like war, raven, rage, and revenge; connecting the neo-

classical verse tradition, with its emphasis on ease and clarity, to the metaphysical tradition of earlier poets such as John Donne or George Herbert, with their oxymoronic and paradoxical imagery; and adapting the ideas of ancient poets to the interests of more modern times. A person who reads and understands Pope in all his artistic as well as in his political contexts learns to view and to think about an object or an issue from manifold perspectives, a skill that is essential to good governance and leadership; a person who reads the blanket critical condemnation of Pope is asked to neglect a range of evidence and to concentrate on a specific political agenda.

A less familiar but equally compelling example might be Guido Reni's once famous painting, *Aurora*. As late as the early twentieth century, Reni's *Aurora*, a large-scale baroque masterpiece showing the golden solar chariot rushing into the morning skies accompanied by an entourage of prancing mythological personages, was among the most celebrated and visited paintings in Europe, with queues forming for its every exhibition. Today, the painting remains in good condition but hidden away in a small urban palace chapel open to the public only two hours per month. Unlike Alexander Pope's poetry, which teases modern leftists by eliciting beauty from political incorrectness, Reni's *Aurora* lacks even the pretense of deeper meaning. It celebrates light, motion, action, confidence, and grandeur—and, as a result, has fallen into almost complete neglect among art historians, who join with their literary colleagues in debating social ills more often than beauty. The shuttling of this grand painting into a (admittedly very large) closet suggests a *de facto* censoring of the art-historical tradition and a bowdlerizing of college curricula.

The relevance of such artifacts from bygone days to the question of contemporary political leadership may seem elu-

sive. Both examples point up a willing suspension not, as Samuel Taylor Coleridge has it, of disbelief, but of *belief*, of openness to the full experience of and full information concerning these important artifacts and, by extension, concerning most everything else. The curriculum that leads to the rustication of works like *Windsor Forest* or *Aurora* is also the curriculum—and the society—that is reluctant to draw back and consider the full scope and background of important issues. A person educated on principles that exclude the understanding of these or any other works is a person who lacks the flexibility to make hard decisions in the face of mixed evidence or conflicting demands. And that is one good reason why beauty is essential to a civilized society: in accustoming its audience to judgment, it not only trains the critical faculties but also reveals—measures and judges—the limits of the political. It shows off the relative superiority of values that have not been determined by political negotiations or economic processes or “cultural discourses.” Beauty and the ability to judge it are especially critical in our overly tolerant time, when the reluctance to be anything other than pluralistic endangers the coherence and indeed the very identity of Western civilization. Judging art by standards that are more than political opens the possibility of comparisons between cultures and political groups that may unsettle easygoing anthropological relativism and cheap pop-culture ideas about tolerance.

This reticence to judge makes itself most clear in the hypocritical reluctance to make judgments about the relative accomplishments or merits of cultures or movements. In the contemporary university, a course in tribal cultures can often count toward the completion of general education requirements in exactly the same way that a course in Western civilization would count. There can be no doubt that all cultures in all parts of our

globe have produced laudable artifacts; by the same token, it is comically hypocritical for professors earning four times the median salary in the richest nation on earth and priding themselves on the designer appointments of their homes to pretend that the itinerant Berbers or the struggling Eskimos have produced art rivaling that of Voltaire or Chaucer or I. M. Pei. And this is why *beauty* is so vigorously avoided in today's cultural institutions: because, although we probably never shall know all that beauty is, beauty nevertheless highlights the process of *judgment*. Judgment makes some artists, writers, critics, or cultures look better than others, with the predictable result of envy among those who don't make the cut. A great irony of modern "culture" is that the egalitarian mentality of relativist or sociological criticism serves not to redistribute but to concentrate wealth, prestige, and, in sum, the perquisites of elitism among a privileged caste of cultural professionals. The result is an ugly picture—which is why beauty is not in it.

Coda: Designs, Intelligent and Otherwise

Whatever beauty might be, its experience implies judgment, which in turn implies a judge. Whether or not "beauty" is comparable to "the good" in requiring some sort of evaluation, "beauty" in our time tends to come in private form while "the good" occurs in a public venue. True, many ancient cultures committed a far greater share of their resources than do we to the production of publicly beautiful phenomena, whether tragic plays or metropolitan temples or astounding pyramids; today, however incorrectly, most laymen view "the good" as something that can be easily objectified and decided upon in public venues by judges, legislators, or jurors but regard "beauty" as something best decided upon by individual persons, whether visitors quietly wandering in a museum or loners whiling

away the evenings watching "Bravo" or "Ovation" or other cultural networks. For all practical purposes, "beauty" in our time is associated with specifically *personal* judgment, that delicately balanced combination of the objectively measurable with the idiosyncratic.

It is in this spirit of objectivity-hungry idiosyncrasy that "conservative connoisseurship" clumsily operates today. In America if not also in Britain, this individualism can almost always be traced in some way, whether historically or theologically or psychologically, to the Puritanism that animated many of the "pilgrim" colonists and that agitated the more progressive "conservatives" among the "founding fathers" of the later eighteenth century. In practical terms, the aversion to beauty that has arisen in American "cultural studies" programs resonates of the anti-religious, specifically anti-evangelical biases in the left-dominated humanities academy. Private judgment seems dangerously close to the "inner light" that drew on Governor Bradford or to the Pentecostal frenzies that stir up the latest batch of Protestant sects. America, of course, abounds with literature and art that has nothing to do with Puritan or post-Puritan mentalities. The Art Deco residences of Los Angeles, the Greek Revival buildings festooning Washington, the paintings of Andy Warhol—all are anathema to latter-day Puritanism. It is the reception or criticism or general editorializing about art works that, in contemporary conservatism, tends to slip into the Puritanical concern with the objective spiritual condition of subjectivity-absorbed individuals.

An earlier section of this essay warned against the dangers of putting beauty *in* rather than *under* and *around* and *above* and *at the foundations of* the "museum": of getting caught up in the statistics of representation rather than in the fundamental defense of poesy in general. So it is that we now see a curious variety of "ontologi-

cal curatorship” arising in the various cultures of conservatism: the conflation of cosmology and design, of the universe or even of God Himself and beauty, *in* the context of the museum. The most startling example is surely the newly opened Creation Museum in Petersburg, Kentucky, a richly-endowed, highly popular attraction presenting a series of displays showing how scientific evidence allegedly verifies the literal meaning of the Book of Genesis and other Biblical accounts of the earliest days. Corroborating the “intelligent design” movement—the latest version of the “argument from design,” in which the beautiful engineering of the universe argues for the existence of a designer—the Creation Museum attempts to equate totality with design, to link up God and His universe with beauty, then to enclose the whole in a finite number of exhibits within large but certainly not limitless floor space. One unexpected result is that God, like Pope’s Windsor Forest, starts to pick up a mock-heroic ambience when overwrought dioramas try to put beauty on display rather than to be beautiful. The putative scientific and religious purposes of the museum recede into the background as highly wrought displays draw attention to the drama, proportion, design, and, in sum, art of the creation—as the Creation Museum proves itself a gallery rather than a laboratory or science classroom or temple. The boxing away of universal

design in a medium-sized facility in the distant suburbs of Cincinnati suggests the opposite of what its curators intend, which is, presumably, to show off the fullness, extensiveness, magnificence, and finally beauty of God’s creation. It epitomizes the mistake that many conservatives make by trying to pin down beauty in this or that work rather than accepting the support of the preponderance of evidence: of the highly diverse body of creative work that is very seldom radical, only occasionally liberal, and, by and large, more pretty than ugly.

Which brings us, once again, to *The Addams Family*. Lurch, the Addams’s butler, could drive an antique car without becoming a dilettante or antiquarian; Gomez, the twisted *paterfamilias*, could perform on the harpsichord without becoming a Bach groupie; Uncle Fester could illuminate light bulbs without becoming a one-man *Mark Twain*—or, *Better, Thomas Edison—Tonight!* sort of show; Wednesday, the daughter parodically named after a Hollywood celebrity,³ could cultivate her interest in the French Revolution (and its guillotines) without being trapped in a museum or nervous about defending her lifestyle. Living well while enjoying the benefits of capitalism and fulfilling the obligations of connoisseur-patrons was the theme of this remarkable show; if conservatism is to reclaim beauty and its handmaid art, it would do well to reclaim a bit of the Addams’s *brio*.

1. See Brian McCrea, *Addison and Steele are Dead: The English Department, Its Canon, and the Professionalization of Literary Criticism* (Newark, DE, 1990). 2. Alexander Pope, *Windsor Forest*, lines

29B32; quoted from Joseph Black *et al.*, *The Broadview Anthology of English Literature*, Vol. 3 (Peterborough, 2006), 436. 3. *I.e.*, after Tuesday Weld.