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# How Do We Keep Desire from Passing with Beauty?

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# How Do We Keep Desire from Passing with Beauty?

Pamela L. Caughie  
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On the day of her party in June 1923, Clarissa Dalloway worries about her attraction to beauty in the face of a political and humanitarian crisis:

He [Richard] was already halfway to the House of Commons, to his Armenians, his Albanians, having settled her on the sofa, looking at his roses. And people would say, "Clarissa Dalloway is spoilt." She cared much more for her roses than for the Armenians. Hunted out of existence, maimed, frozen, the victims of cruelty and injustice (she had heard Richard say so over and over again)—no, she could feel nothing for the Albanians, or was it the Armenians? but she loved her roses (didn't that help the Armenians?).<sup>1</sup>

This passage resonates with our contemporary situation, evoking as it does the recent fighting in Kosovo, which was in the news when I proposed an MLA paper for the panel on "Theorizing Beauty," as well as recent writings that explicitly or implicitly link beauty with social justice. By way of answering my title question—"How do we keep desire from passing with beauty?"—I want to discuss several works that reiterate Clarissa's question, especially in relation to the crisis of responsibility that is said to follow in the wake of postmodern theories and cultural criticism.

In an early feminist article published in 1977, Clarissa's question—"but she loved her roses (didn't that help the Armenians?)"—is taken seriously, perhaps for the first time in Woolf criticism, by Lee Edwards. Arguing that forms of social organization foster particular values, Edwards asserts, "the politics of *Mrs. Dalloway* are such that life is possible only when roses, parties, and joy triumph over war, authority, and death."<sup>2</sup> Edwards admits that most readers would likely agree with this statement yet would be skeptical of the claim that throwing parties and admiring roses offer a viable political response to social injustice. Yet the solution, Edwards argues, to the crisis of feeling that leads to Septimus Smith's death (a crisis brought on in part by a particular notion of masculinity and a social order structured to maintain it) is a mode of being that enhances feeling and a mode of action that harmonizes multiple feelings rather than promoting some and banishing others (p. 172). That solution is figured in Clarissa's party, a form of social organization that fosters the values of spontaneity, variability, and joy over the abstractions, hierarchies, and authoritarian values promoted by the dominant culture. How does this help the Armenians? Usually, the

question of how to help the Armenians would be answered by money, letters, acts of Parliament, or even war to oust the agents of oppression and establish a more just social order, Edwards says (p. 175). An alternative would be a politics that allowed the joy of Clarissa's party to extend beyond the single house and the specific occasion. Would that help the Armenians? "Maybe," Edwards answers (p. 176). But whether or not that joy and beauty would help the Armenians, one thing is certain: "we damn ourselves if, in constructing a view of the world we deny a connection between politics and feelings . . . and so create a politics lacking both beauty and joy" (p. 177).

Twenty-two years later, Elaine Scarry returns, in a sense, to Edwards's argument. Scarry, I imagine, would like to answer Mrs. Dalloway's question in the affirmative—yes, Clarissa, your admiration of roses does help the Armenians—for the argument of Scarry's recent book, *On Beauty and Being Just*, is that the love of beauty increases one's desire for social justice. How does beauty contribute to justice? For one, beauty is generative; it makes us want to reproduce it, to extend it, like Clarissa's party, beyond the particular site or moment. It arouses in us a kind of "perceptual care," Scarry says, that works against what she terms "lateral disregard," the notion that our attraction to one form of beauty (say, roses) blinds us to others (for example, cacti).<sup>3</sup> For another, beauty and justice share roots in the concept of fairness. Quoting John Rawls's definition of fairness as "a symmetry of everyone's relations to each other" (p. 93), Scarry argues that beauty gives rise to the desire for symmetry and proportion that are attributes of fairness in both its aesthetic and its legal senses.<sup>4</sup> "It is the very symmetry of beauty," Scarry writes, "which leads us to . . . the symmetry that eventually comes into place in the realm of justice" (p. 97). The "perceptual care" that comes from attending to the beautiful object—whether a bird's song or a parliamentary debate—allows one to notice the absence of symmetry, subtlety, and fairness in unjust social and political relations.

But can we be wrong about beauty, as we can be wrong about what is just when dealing with other people? "Being in error," Scarry writes, is one of the "abiding structural features" of beauty (p. 28):

. . . beauty, sooner or later, brings us into contact with our own capacity for making errors. The beautiful, almost without any effort of our own, acquaints us with the mental event of conviction, and so pleasurable a mental state is this that ever afterwards one is willing to labor, struggle, wrestle with the world to locate enduring sources of conviction—to locate what is true. (p. 31)

This is one reason that beauty is radically decentering, Scarry says. It moves us, so to speak; beautiful objects are, in her words, "wake-up calls to perception" (p. 81). And that just might help the Armenians.

To pursue Scarry's line of thought, let us consider a passage from another Woolf novel. In Part I of *To the Lighthouse* Lily Briscoe shares with William Bankes her painting of Mrs. Ramsay reading to James. Mr. Bankes's taste in painting runs to landscapes; Lily's painting "ma[ke]s no attempt at likeness": "the picture was not of them."<sup>5</sup> Yet her aesthetics does value symmetry, balance, and proportion—"a light here required a shadow there" (p. 53)—the very qualities of beauty that Scarry says allows its appreciation to carry over into social justice. As Mr. Bankes admits, he is unprepared to appreciate Lily's art since "all his prejudices were on the other side" (p. 53), the side of mimetic representation. Still,

Mr. Bankes was interested. Mother and child then—objects of universal veneration, and in this case the mother was famous for her beauty—might be reduced, he pondered, to a purple shadow without irreverence. . . . He took it scientifically in complete good faith. . . . The question being one of the relations of masses, of lights and shadows, which, to be honest, he had never considered before, he would like to have it explained—what then did she wish to make of it? And he indicated the scene before them. She looked. She could not show him what she wished to make of it, could not see it even herself, without a brush in her hand. (pp. 52-53)

Has Lily succeeded in getting Mr. Bankes to see the beauty of her painting? Has his sense of the beautiful been laterally distributed to include abstract art, so that the balance and symmetry of the painting might be extended to the social sphere? The question sounds odd, even irrelevant. For Lily does not, any more than Matisse, as Scarry points out (p. 33), want to save lives through her art; her painting is not social or political in that sense. Nor does she seem concerned that Mr. Bankes judge her painting beautiful. Yet the painting succeeds in another way, by bringing two very different people together. As with Clarissa's party, what matters for Lily is that intimacy has been established, if only for a moment, and we might well agree that that kind of intimacy in itself can have broader social and political implications.

Scarry, however, wants less to convince us of the beauty of any particular kind of art or foliage (to teach us to love the palm tree as she has learned to love it) than to restore aesthetic appreciation to the humanities. For Scarry's book responds to the turn in literary studies from criticism to theory, or from aesthetic appreciation to cultural critique. "The vocabulary of beauty," she writes, "has been banished" in the humanities over the past two decades, though it flourishes, she says, in the sciences where truth is the object (p. 52).<sup>6</sup> Where humanists have turned from evaluating a work of art in terms of its truth and beauty, scientists often talk in terms of a beautiful theory, Scarry says. The question for scientists is whether the beauty of a theory is incidental to or indicative of its truth (p. 52).

I want to return to the charge that beauty has been banished from literary studies, but first I want to pursue its relation to truth. Let us turn again to a passage from Woolf, this time from Part II of *To the Lighthouse*, the section often seen as linking the pre- and post-World War I sections of the novel:

At that season those who had gone down to pace the beach and ask of the sea and sky what message they reported or what vision they affirmed had to consider among the usual tokens of divine bounty—the sunset on the sea, the pallor of dawn, the moon rising, fishing-boats against the moon, and children making mud pies or pelting each other with handfuls of grass, something out of harmony with this jocundity and this serenity. There was the silent apparition of an ashen-coloured ship for instance, come, gone; there was a purplish stain upon the bland surface of the sea as if something had boiled and bled, invisibly, beneath. This intrusion into a scene calculated to stir the most sublime reflections and lead to the most comfortable conclusions stayed their pacing. It was difficult blandly to overlook them; to abolish their significance in the landscape; to continue, as one walked by the sea, to marvel how beauty outside mirrored beauty within.

Did Nature supplement what man advanced? Did she complete what he began? With equal complacency she saw his misery, his meanness, and his torture. That dream, of sharing, completing, of finding in solitude on the beach an answer, was then but a reflection in a mirror, and the mirror itself was but the surface glassiness which forms in quiescence when the nobler powers sleep beneath? Impatient, despairing yet loth to go (for beauty offers her lures, has her consolations), to pace the beach was impossible; contemplation was unendurable; the mirror was broken. (pp. 133-34)

The mirror has been broken ostensibly by the war. One might say that the unjust relations in the social sphere have broken the mirror-like reflection between the beauty of nature, on the one hand, and truth and justice on the other. Yet in this exemplary modernist work, it could just as well be the concept of art or language as mirroring the world that lies broken. If representation is no longer understood to be a mirror-like reflection of the external world (as, say, in Lily's painting), what does this mean for the relation of beauty to truth? Is the beauty of a work of art or a piece of writing—a novel, a poem, a theory—a reflection of its truth-value?

Martha Nussbaum seems to have no doubt that the beauty of a theory is an index of its truth, at least in the discipline of philosophy, and in this she differs from Scarry, who argues not that beauty reflects truth but that beauty “ignites the desire for truth” (p. 52). In her review of Judith Butler in *The New Republic* (February 1999), Nussbaum links Butler's writing to quietism and, worse, evil: “Judith Butler's hip quietism is a comprehensible response to the difficulty of realizing justice in America,” she writes. “But it is a bad response. It collaborates with evil.”<sup>7</sup> (This is not a pretty review.)

What is so bad about Butler's feminist politics, according to Nussbaum, is that Butler forsakes attention to the material reality of women's lives for rhetorical analysis. Butler's writing represents, for Nussbaum, a "disquieting trend" in feminist theory, that is, "a type of verbal and symbolic politics that makes only the flimsiest of connections with the real situation of real women" (p. 38). The term "verbal politics" implies that Butler's politics is "only words." Nussbaum's argument, then, would seem to go against Scarry's. Justice, for Nussbaum, would seem to lie in action, not in the beauty of a painting or a text.

Yet it is not just any verbal politics that Nussbaum attacks. Nussbaum's argument focuses specifically on the kind of prose Butler writes. She begins her review by criticizing the "thick soup of Butler's prose," her "ponderous and obscure" style (p. 38). Butler's "verbosity," Nussbaum says, "bullies the reader" (p. 39) in that she or he must expend so much energy in deciphering the prose that there is little left for contemplating its truth. Worse, Nussbaum suspects that Butler's style is a deliberate attempt to keep readers from contemplating the truth of what she says, suggesting that there is nothing behind the words to support any claim to truth. Nussbaum, as one of "the bullied readers of Butler's books,"<sup>8</sup> is forced to rewrite Butler, to put what Butler has said in other words—Nussbaum's words—to try to tease out what might have been meant. When she does so, Nussbaum discovers that Butler's ideas are familiar, even shopworn. (Not surprisingly. Once you drain off the thick soup, you are left with only a few noodles.) Butler's greatest sin, it seems, is less what she has said than that she might have said it better. Saying it better would mean making it clear, writing in a prose style that is more a translucent broth than a thick soup. That kind of prose is itself a model of equanimity, of equality between writer and reader, says Nussbaum; thus, it establishes on the level of the writing the just relations one would hope to establish in real life.<sup>9</sup> In this one sense, Nussbaum and Scarry would seem to be making similar arguments.

For Nussbaum as for Scarry, faulty syntax is not just indicative of failed logic (as in a lapse of parallelism that undermines the symmetry of an argument) but of a flawed sense of justice and a moral failing as well. Nussbaum says Butler's bad writing collaborates with evil. Hume's prose style, in contrast, demonstrates "a gracious spirit" that "respects the reader's intelligence" (p. 40).<sup>10</sup> Similarly, Scarry argues that the proclamation "We hold these truths to be self-evident" is just precisely because it scans (p. 102). Its verbal symmetry materializes the symmetry of just social relations, makes the beauty of justice, which is after all an abstraction, available to sensory perception (p. 106). Beauty produces justice because it creates in us a moral sensitivity to imbalance and injustice. The fact that the "we" in this statement, which ostensibly refers to all Americans, actu-



ally refers specifically to white men of property would not, in Scarry's view, undermine her argument that love of beauty leads to social justice, for one could argue that the original intention of the drafters of the Constitution embodied in this balanced prose has eventually been extended laterally to bodies neither white nor male.

Scarry's argument at least has this advantage: it would restore literature and composition teachers to the center of liberal education. Thus, it has a certain political utility at a time when English departments are in a state of decline, as Robert Scholes, among others, has recently argued.<sup>11</sup> As the ones who teach students to appreciate the beauty of a well-turned phrase and to strive to reproduce that balance and clarity in their own writing, we help the Armenians. It is an attractive argument. But it betrays a nostalgia for a notion of pedagogy and liberal education that, as I argue elsewhere, has passed.<sup>12</sup>

Pedagogy in literary studies, as Carolyn Porter has pointed out, has traditionally been based on a liberation politics on the one hand and an aesthetic formalism on the other.<sup>13</sup> According to the first perspective, literature represents the world outside the text and expresses the writer's attitudes and feelings. Thus, the study of literature has a moral and political imperative: it conveys knowledge about others living in a world apart and thereby promotes cultural literacy and democratic values. Art bears a reflective relation to the real. According to formalist aesthetics, on the other hand, literature is not about life; rather, it is a special kind of language act that is distinct from ordinary or scientific language. The purpose of studying literature is to sensitize us to the experience of language itself, not simply to what it represents. The mirror is broken.

Far from competing with each other, these two views have actually sustained a certain notion of liberal education: liberal education promotes the social and political values of a democracy (and thus the attention to diversity in the liberationist model) and transmits the universal moral truths on which that democratic society is based (and thus formalism's concern with common texts and shared standards). The integrity of our profession—its moral rectitude as well as its respectability—has long depended on the compatibility of these two apparently competing pedagogies. It is these pedagogies that were challenged by the emergence of theory and cultural criticism three decades ago. Catherine Belsey wrote in 1980: "Only by closing the doors of the English department against theoretical [and I would add, political] challenges from outside can we continue to ignore the 'Copernican' revolution which is currently taking place, and which is radically undermining traditional ways of perceiving both the world and the text."<sup>14</sup>

The Copernican revolution Belsey refers to is the theory—or, more pre-

cisely, the structuralist—revolution. Jacques Lacan attributes a “revolution in knowledge” to Saussure’s formula for the sign (Signifier over Signified) because it held that meaning was differential not referential: “No meaning is sustained by anything other than reference to another meaning.”<sup>15</sup> This theory of language shifts the locus of evaluation from the meaning, truth, or beauty of the “thing itself” to the place of the sign in a system of differential relations. But more is at stake here than a choice between two notions of language (referential or differential, Cartesian or structuralist). What is at stake in the theory revolution is not just a different response to literature but a new responsibility. For this revolution breaks what George Steiner calls “the classic contract between word and world.”<sup>16</sup>

In his 1978 essay, “On Difficulty,” Steiner has already addressed the charge that Nussbaum (and, to a lesser extent, Scarry) brings against contemporary theory that seems inattentive if not downright hostile to beauty (and, by implication, truth) and thus indifferent to social justice. Rather than assume, as Nussbaum does, that difficulty is necessarily bad, that language should be transparent, Steiner asks what we mean when we say a poem or, in Butler’s case, a piece of prose is difficult. At one crucial level, Steiner writes, “this is a question about language itself”: “What is signified by the pragmatic experience that a lexically constituted and grammatically organized semantic system can generate impenetrability and undecidabilities of sense?” (p. 18). (That is a sentence worthy of Butler herself.) The notion that difficulty means interference with communication, a failure to clarify one’s meaning, is a Cartesian reading of opaqueness (p. 18). This classic view, Steiner says, activates a metaphor of separation and transfer between word and meaning, intention and utterance that sets up a contract of ultimate intelligibility between writer and reader; thus, interference is negative. Rather than accept this notion of language, Steiner answers his question—“What do we mean when we say [a piece of writing] is difficult?” (p. 18)—by establishing a taxonomy of difficulty. There are *contingent* difficulties that can be resolved through the work of elucidation or “looking [things] up” (p. 23); *modal* difficulties that arise when one does not feel compelled by the work to respond to it; and *tactical* difficulties created by the writer’s intentions, say, when the difficulty is intended for stylistic effect or to protect the writer’s anonymity. “Each of these three classes of difficulty,” writes Steiner, “is part of the contract of ultimate or preponderant intelligibility between poet and reader, between text and meaning” (p. 40). Yet “there is a fourth order of difficulty which occurs where this contract is itself wholly or in part broken” (p. 40). That fourth type, which he terms “ontological difficulty,” implicates this very notion of language as communication. Steiner locates ontological difficulty in poetry at the turn of the century, produced within the crises of idioms and values that came

with new technologies, the rise of mass and consumer culture, and an increasingly democratic and literate society. Such writing, Steiner says, “generates the poetics of ‘dissemination’ . . . that we find in Derrida and the current school of semiotics” (p. 46).<sup>17</sup> As Steiner puts it (in a sentence that brings to mind Lacan): “It is not so much the poet who speaks, but language itself” (p. 46). Steiner ends his essay by raising the question of whether such difficulty “is a transient phenomenon or represents some ultimate break in the classic contract between word and world” (p. 47).

The last two decades have shown that this phenomenon is no passing fad, however much Nussbaum suggests it is in her numerous references to the “young women” to whom Butler’s writing appeals (a feature of Nussbaum’s review that Jane Gallop noted in her 1999 MLA paper, “Good Theory, Bad Writing”), as if their youth were an index of their ephemerality and the ephemerality of Butler’s writing. On the contrary, one could argue (as I have) that the shift from literary to cultural studies has been an effort to institutionalize this revolution in thinking about language. If contingent difficulties were the focus of an earlier hermeneutics, ontological difficulties have been the concern of poststructuralists and cultural critics. This revolution in language has implications for our thinking about the subject, and thus for our thinking about ethics, for the issue here is less the banishing of beauty than the crisis of responsibility that follows in the wake of the many changes our profession has undergone in the past two decades.<sup>18</sup> The new responsibility I spoke of earlier presents us with a moral imperative to give up the subject of Enlightenment humanism that, as Lacan says, “renders modern man so sure of being himself even in his uncertainties about himself” (p. 311).

This disruption of the integrity of the subject is found not just in the (post)structuralists but in J. L. Austin’s linguistic theory as well. What Austin’s theory of the performative does—and this is far more radical than Nussbaum’s understanding of the performative as meaning simply that words function as actions rather than as assertions (p. 40)—is to undercut the “solid moralist” who believes that “accuracy and morality alike are on the side of the plain saying that *our word is our bond*.”<sup>19</sup> To say the performative does not refer to something outside of language or express something inside the speaker’s head, and thus that it cannot be evaluated in terms of accuracy or truth in any simple way, and then to suggest, as Austin ultimately does, that all speech acts are performatives insofar as they are conventional, is to drive a wedge between word and bond, thereby undercutting our habit of attributing meaning to the speaker alone.<sup>20</sup> The necessary connection between clarity and meaning, between meaning and intention, can no longer be assumed—not because language bears only the flimsiest connection to the real, material world, but because assessing the

truth or falsity of a statement and attributing intentions can never be done outside the performative dimension of language. If we no longer believe in the classic contract between word and world, if we no longer believe that “accuracy and morality alike are on the side of the plain saying” (p. 10), then it becomes all the more imperative that we take responsibility for our modes of inquiry rather than assume certain kinds of inquiry are, by their very nature, ethical or evil, as Nussbaum assumes Butler’s quietism is inherent in her prose style (p. 44). We cannot control the reception of our writing any more than we can control the trajectory of our desires, yet our writing does reveal an implicit ethics and commitment in its *performance*—but only if we accept a different notion of writing from the classic contract that Nussbaum upholds.

Nussbaum’s commitment to the classic contract is evident not only in her criticism of Judith Butler but in her reading of Virginia Woolf. In the last chapter of *Sex and Social Justice*, Nussbaum reads Part I of *To the Lighthouse* as an inquiry into the classic philosophical problem of knowing other minds. According to Nussbaum, Lily learns to give up the desire for full knowledge of Mrs. Ramsay that she wants early on—the desire to possess Mrs. Ramsay that is, Nussbaum says, a desire for power—for the more modest and ethical desire to know “one thing or another thing” about someone else.<sup>21</sup> The expressions Nussbaum uses, such as “Lily quickly recognizes,” “Lily soon discovers,” and “there appears to be wisdom in Lily’s shift” (p. 365), attest to Nussbaum’s strong conviction that knowing another means accepting the other as a fully separate person. Moreover, to know that one cannot fully know another is a sign of one’s moral integrity. “Knowledge,” Nussbaum asserts, “is a function of character” (p. 371). Not surprisingly, perhaps, the philosopher Mr. Ramsay, despite his bullying nature, is Nussbaum’s example of the truly ethical person in that he accepts Mrs. Ramsay as a separate person apart from him. Never mind that “to pursue truth with such astonishing lack of consideration for other people’s feelings,” as Mr. Ramsay does, is, for Mrs. Ramsay, “an outrage of human decency” (p. 32). The kind of trust and generosity Mr. Ramsay exhibits in his reading of Sir Walter Scott he transfers to his relations with Mrs. Ramsay, Nussbaum says, and that trust “is admirable as an ethical norm even if we would prefer to see it realized in the context of greater justice” (p. 372). (Here it is Mr. Ramsay’s character that lends to Scott’s novels a certain ethical valence, not, as Scarry would have it, the beauty of the novels that leads Mr. Ramsay to be generous.)

For Nussbaum, literature offers lessons in moral living, provides us with occasions for exercising our moral judgment. The ethical norm is not so much established through the force of Woolf’s writing as it is illustrated in the course of her narrative. Literature has no performative force; it makes

nothing happen through its mode of writing but only through its message. Although Nussbaum distinguishes between words that express our thoughts and words that function as “agents,” what she means by the latter is how words reveal the motivations and desires of the speaker that lie behind the language. In other words, what Austin terms the constative function of language is the norm for communication in *Sex and Social Justice*. What makes Mr. Ramsay such a generous reader is that he “does not read . . . in the manner of a skeptical theorist of interpretation” (p. 371). Likewise, the joy of Woolf’s prose lies in its clear communication of ethical norms, norms that the philosopher Nussbaum happens to share.

To believe that fiction gives us versions of real-life events so that we can hone our skills in making ethical and just decisions is to assume that ethics and justice exist before the law, outside the force of language and representation. If fiction is the mirror of life, if language communicates normative values, then we can judge characters as we judge people, holding them up to the same moral standards. But if fiction is understood as representational and conventional, if language is understood as performative rather than constative, then we must learn to read people and events as we learn to read characters and writing. Textual analysis, or verbal politics, I argue, becomes an ethical imperative. We learn how to negotiate the force of language and law.

Rather than assume that the difficulty of Butler’s prose is bad and interferes with meaning, we can understand the nature of the difficulty as “ontological,” in Steiner’s terms, a difficulty that implicates the very function of language as communication. For example, Butler’s rhetorical analysis of the U.S. Supreme Court’s ruling on hate speech (*R.A.V. v. St. Paul*) in *Excitable Speech* shows how the ruling equated (that is, saw as morally equivalent) the burning of a cross on a black family’s lawn and a speech against a tax on gasoline delivered in a public park.<sup>22</sup> Both are protected as free speech. This moral leveling process is achieved rhetorically by the written decision in that it ignores the race of the family targeted by hate speech and it separates the content of the message (its expression of racism, protected by the First Amendment) from the vehicle of expression (the burning cross that signifies a history of racist violence in the U.S.). This kind of analysis is what Nussbaum means by Butler’s “verbal politics,” implying that her politics lies in rhetorical analysis rather than in social action. Yet such analysis not only exposes a particular notion of justice but implicates language itself as the very force of justice, not simply its vehicle of expression. Justice, Butler shows, exists elsewhere than where we have commonly seen it: not in the beauty and logic of a well-written decision based on supposedly neutral standards or normative values, but in the avowedly partial decision that responds to particular social and historical

conditions in which the act is embedded. Butler's analysis, I would argue, produces what Scarry terms "the small flex of the mind" (p. 51) that creates the mental agility to see and to value differently than we have before.

So if bad writing might do some good, we might want to question the underlying premise in Scarry's and Nussbaum's arguments. Is it true that postmodern theory and cultural criticism have banished beauty and with it a commitment to social justice, creating a crisis of responsibility? Well, one can hardly deny that the vocabulary of beauty has not had much currency lately. When I was a graduate student in the mid 1980s, I used to raise eyebrows even then when I proclaimed *The Rainbow* by D. H. Lawrence the most beautiful novel in the English language. Today, I could no longer make such a statement, not because it would be politically incorrect, but because it would be critically irresponsible, or rather irresponsible to the social relations in which Lawrence's writing is embedded. For an example, let me turn to another text by Lawrence, the novella "The Woman Who Rode Away." Published in 1925, it is the story of an American woman who seeks out the Indians living in the mountains of Chihuahua for her own spiritual renewal only to be captured and ultimately sacrificed by the natives. The narrative ends with the old chief's knife poised above the woman's naked body as the Indians wait for the last rays of the setting sun to enter the cave where the sacrifice will take place: "Then the old man would strike, and strike home, accomplish the sacrifice and achieve the power. The mastery that man must hold, and that passes from race to race."<sup>23</sup> The last line scans, it has a certain beauty, it even could be described as radically decentering in that the narrative attempts to extend the beauty and truth of the native cosmology to Western culture as an antidote to its crass materialism. But read in the context of the 1920s, implicated as the text is in the cultural anxiety aroused by the emergence of the New Woman, in the tourism of the American Southwest, and in the "Indianization" of Native Americans, the statement raises for me a more compelling question than that of its beauty or clarity of vision. Where do the values expressed in the narrative come from? Who would want to endorse Lawrence's vision of cosmic unity and sexual harmony? Where does the responsibility lie for such a vision?

For me, beauty can no longer be—if it ever actually was—the single, overriding criterion by which we judge a work of art. I suppose this makes me, in Scarry's words, an opponent of beauty, an ugly position to be in. Scarry says opponents of beauty value only those perceptions that produce discomfort because they open one's eyes to injustice. This is a sad state, Scarry says, for it closes one off to the perception of beautiful sights and sounds that create pleasure and joy. Yet Scarry underestimates the rush of . . . pleasure, could we call it? that some get from the kind of moral outrage

that comes with detecting injustice. Nussbaum, one would suppose, got a certain pleasure from exposing Butler as a fraud. In fact, if everyone were a good writer, gracious, sincere, clearly expressing his or her intentions, how would a critic ever experience not just the superiority but the exhilaration that comes from exposing another? The banishing of beauty has its own pleasures.

Yet it seems to me that literary criticism of the past two decades has not so much answered Clarissa's question in the negative—no, your love of roses doesn't do a damn thing for the Armenians—as it has sidestepped the question entirely. There is no simple relation between art and social justice or between theory and politics. It is the belief that we must find a causal link that leads to such ugly charges as Nussbaum's claim that Butler's writing collaborates with evil. As Joan Scott argues in her response to Nussbaum:

To deduce politics from theory, as Nussbaum does, is to misunderstand the operations of both. The job of theory is to open new avenues of understanding, to trouble conventional wisdom with difficult questions. The job of politics . . . is to secure some end in a contested, conflictual field. Politics and theory may inform one another at certain moments with successful or unsuccessful results—the outcomes are not predictable.<sup>24</sup>

Nor can one predict that the cultivation of an aesthetic response will increase our moral sensitivity. Steiner observes in *Language and Silence* that the guards at Auschwitz listened to Bach and Beethoven as they sent the Jews to their deaths.<sup>25</sup> But the fact that there is no predictive relation does not mean there is no relation. As Edwards demonstrates, what is at one time thought to be apolitical (such as Woolf's writings of the 1920s) can come to be seen as decidedly political with a change in audience and a new motivation for writing and reading literature.

Rather than say that beauty has been banished, I would say that the notion of beauty, especially the beauty *of* language, has been displaced by the notion of desire *in* language. Beauty is an imposed notion of what is pleasing or sublime; desire is dynamic, something that happens between subjects. To understand language as a field of desire, not a medium of communication, is to break the "classic contract between word and world" that leads us to evaluate writing in terms of how closely it matches up with, or imposes a certain meaning on, reality. It is not that we no longer perceive beauty in the natural world or in the written text, but that we no longer conceive beauty as an inherent quality of the thing itself. Beauty originates in representation; it is the image that mediates our desires. The question now, post-Berger, is, who controls representation? "What matters now is who uses that language for what purpose?"<sup>26</sup>

The real conflict going on now is not between those who appreciate

beauty and those who oppose it, or between those whose moral integrity is evident in their clear prose and those who write badly and thus collaborate with evil. The real conflict is over who controls representation. But has this not long been the case in the humanistic tradition at the heart of our vocation? Rethinking accepted truths, struggling to locate new sources of conviction, offering a critique of the status quo—these are the values that still sustain humanistic inquiry even in the midst of our current anxiety over the apparent dissolution of the humanities. “The practice of humanistic service,” writes Edward Said in his 1999 MLA Presidential Address, “always entails a heroic unwillingness to rest in the consolidation of previously existing attitudes.”<sup>27</sup> That desire has not passed, only a particular notion of beauty.

The turn to theory has led many of us to rethink our learned notions of the aesthetic realm and thus to rethink where ethics and social justice take place. That is to say, the shift in critical attention from the beauty of the language to desire in language has its own moral imperative and commitment to justice. And that may or may not help the Armenians.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Virginia Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981), p. 120. The reference to the Armenians or Albanians is obscure. Woolf probably had in mind the Armenian massacres of a few years earlier. The Turkish nationalism that prevailed with the disintegration of the Turkish empire after WWI led to continued persecution of the Armenians well after the war, the kind of scenario we have seen repeated in Bosnia and Kosovo. So persistent was the genocide against the Armenians that “starving Armenians” became a cultural trope, as one historian told me, a catch phrase his mother used when he was a child to get him to finish his meals. Clarissa could well be mixing up discussions in Parliament of the Armenian persecutions with those having to do with international recognition of Albania as an independent state in 1921 or to border disputes between Albania and Greece. I can find no specific incident in June 1923 to which this passage might allude. As I was sending off this paper, however, I saw an ad in *The New York Times* (9 June 2000) testifying that 126 Holocaust scholars had recently signed a statement affirming that the Armenian genocide of WWI was “an incontestable historical fact” and calling on the governments of Western democracies to urge the government of Turkey to recognize that fact and “to finally come to terms with a dark chapter of Ottoman-Turkish history.”

<sup>2</sup> Lee R. Edwards, “War and Roses: The Politics of *Mrs. Dalloway*,” in *The Authority of Experience: Essays in Feminist Criticism*, ed. Arlyn Diamond and Edwards (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1977), p. 162. Subsequent references will be cited parenthetically in the text.

<sup>3</sup> Elaine Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), pp. 65, 80-81. Subsequent references will be cited parenthetically in the



text. Scarry's discussion brought to mind an incident I witnessed at the International Conference on Narrative held in Vancouver. On one keynote panel, a well-known Canadian theorist presented an elegant paper on Canadian opera. A well-known African novelist on the panel was supposed to respond to the Canadian theorist's paper. The novelist got up and said that she had nothing to say about this paper on opera, that the emotions evoked by that cultural form were too foreign to her for her to make any comments. There followed a series of responses from the audience basically sympathizing with the African woman and accusing the Canadian woman of being imperialist or Eurocentric in her presentation. Then Hortense Spillers got up and said to the African novelist: have you no music in your culture? Could you not draw some connection between the role of music in your culture and the role of opera in hers? Reading Scarry it struck me that this might well be an example of "lateral disregard" on the part of the African novelist.

<sup>4</sup> Given that Dr. Bradshaw in Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* is one of the guardians of Proportion as well as Conversion, proportion in and of itself is not necessarily a value. One must ask, whose notion of proportion is going to count? Proportion toward what end?

<sup>5</sup> Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981), p. 52. Subsequent references will be cited parenthetically in the text.

<sup>6</sup> Scarry's argument might well be extended back a few more decades to the turn of the last century, for as Mark Edmundson argued in his 1999 MLA paper, "Thirteen Ways of Looking at Beauty," Nietzsche and Freud were both dubious about the union of truth and beauty, sensing that the analytic spirit was antithetical to the love of beauty.

<sup>7</sup> Martha C. Nussbaum, "The Professor of Parody," *The New Republic*, 22 February 1999, p. 45.

<sup>8</sup> At the 1999 MLA convention, Jane Gallop gave a brilliant paper on the relationship between style and morality that offered an incisive critique of Nussbaum's review. In that paper, entitled "Good Theory, Bad Writing," Gallop used this phrase in reference to Nussbaum, turning the philosopher's words against herself.

<sup>9</sup> Nussbaum's criticism of Butler relies on the traditional, Platonic distinction between philosophy and rhetoric, a distinction called into question by contemporary theorists in a number of fields. Philosophy for Nussbaum, as for Plato, is "a discourse of equals" that shows "respect for the soul," while rhetoricians' "manipulative methods" show "only disrespect" (p. 40). For a different reading of this traditional split, see my *Virginia Woolf and Postmodernism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991), chapter 4; Susan C. Jarratt, *Rereading the Sophists: Classical Rhetoric Refigured* (Carbondale, Illinois: Southern Illinois University Press, 1991), chapter 4; and Dominick LaCapra, *History and Criticism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985).

<sup>10</sup> Of course, Hume's implied reader was white and male, and thus the contract of intelligibility between writer and reader rested on the assumed innate rationality of white men. In *Figures in Black* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), Henry Louis Gates, Jr., quotes a footnote to Hume's essay "Of National Characters" to show how his beautiful style "posited with all of the authority of philosophy the fundamental identity of complexion, character, and intellectual capacity" (p. 18). I would imagine that for Nussbaum this attitude

would be incidental to Hume's philosophical arguments, an accident of time and location and thus not relevant to his prose style.

<sup>11</sup> Robert Scholes, *The Rise and Fall of English: Reconstructing English as a Discipline* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1998). Scarry's argument brings to mind that of Stanley Fish in *Professional Correctness: Literary Studies and Political Change* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995). Both Scarry and Fish seek to restore, or at least to explain, what is distinctive to literary criticism. Although Scarry argues that the appreciation of beauty contributes to a more just society and Fish argues that literary criticism has no direct impact on the social order, both confront the political arguments made against traditional modes of aesthetic criticism.

<sup>12</sup> For a more extensive discussion of my argument here, see chapter 2 of my *Passing and Pedagogy: The Dynamics of Responsibility* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1999).

<sup>13</sup> Carolyn Porter, "History and Literature: 'After the New Historicism,'" *New Literary History*, 21 (Winter 1990), 253-81.

<sup>14</sup> Catherine Belsey, *Critical Practice* (London: Methuen, 1980), p. 130.

<sup>15</sup> Jacques Lacan, "The Insistence of the Letter in the Unconscious," in *The Structuralists: From Marx to Lévi-Strauss*, ed. Richard T. De George and Fernande M. De George (Garden City, New York: Anchor, 1972), p. 292. Subsequent references will be cited parenthetically in the text.

<sup>16</sup> George Steiner, "On Difficulty," in *On Difficulty and Other Essays* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), p. 47. Subsequent references will be cited parenthetically in the text.

<sup>17</sup> In his essay "Signature Event Context," in *Limited Inc* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1988), Derrida writes of "dissemination": "The semantic horizon that habitually governs the notion of communication is exceeded or split by the intervention of writing, that is, by a *dissemination* irreducible to *pol-ysemy*. Writing is read; it is not the site, 'in the last instance,' of a hermeneutic deciphering, the decoding of a meaning or truth" (p. 21).

<sup>18</sup> In a recent article in *The New York Times Book Review* Perry Meisel also argues that the theory revolution has not been a passing fad and argues against the popular belief that literary studies is now in disarray. "In fact," writes Meisel, "literary study in America has never been in better shape. Enriched by a variety of European methodologies since the early 70's, it has grown into a vast, synthetic enterprise characterized by powerful continuities rather than by disjunctions," in "Let a Hundred Isms Blossom," *The New York Times Book Review*, 28 May 2000, p. 27.

<sup>19</sup> J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975), p. 10. Nussbaum's limited understanding of the performative leads her to dismiss Butler's argument about Austin's use of the marriage ceremony as an example of performatives. "It is usually a mistake to read earth-shaking significance into a philosopher's pedestrian choice of examples," Nussbaum writes (p. 41). On the contrary, the reiteration of a naturalized gender relation is precisely the point in that Butler defines the performative as "that power of discourse to produce effects through reiteration," in *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York and London: Routledge, 1993), p. 20.

<sup>20</sup> Two passages from Austin are relevant here:

It is essential to realize that “true” and “false,” like “free” and “unfree,” do not stand for anything simple at all; but only for a general dimension of being a right or proper thing to say as opposed to a wrong thing, in these circumstances, to this audience, for these purposes and with these intentions. (p. 145)

What will *not* survive the transition, unless perhaps as a marginal limiting case, and hardly surprisingly because it gave trouble from the start, is the notion of the purity of performatives: this was essentially based upon a belief in the dichotomy of performatives and constatives, which we see has to be abandoned in favour of more general *families* of related and overlapping speech acts. (p. 150)

<sup>21</sup> Nussbaum, *Sex and Social Justice* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 365. Subsequent references will be cited parenthetically in the text.

<sup>22</sup> Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (New York and London: Routledge, 1997), pp. 52-65.

<sup>23</sup> D. H. Lawrence, “The Woman Who Rode Away,” in *The Woman Who Rode Away and Other Stories*, ed. Dieter Mehl and Christa Jansohn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 71.

<sup>24</sup> Joan W. Scott, Letter to the Editor, *The New Republic*, 19 April 1999, p. 44.

<sup>25</sup> Steiner, *Language and Silence* (New York: Atheneum, 1967), p. 61.

<sup>26</sup> John Berger. *Ways of Seeing* (London: BBC and Penguin Books Ltd., 1972), p. 33.

<sup>27</sup> Edward Said, “Presidential Address 1999: Humanism and Heroism,” *PMLA*, 115, No. 3 (2000), 290.