

Beauty, Aldous Huxley

BEAUTY

I

THERE is a sea somewhere—whether in the lampless crypts of the earth, or among sunlit islands, or that which is an unfathomable and terrifying question between the archipelagos of stars—there is a sea (and perhaps its tides have filled those green transparent pools that glint like eyes in a spring storm-cloud) which is for ever troubled and in travail—a bubbling and a heaving up of waters as though for the birth of a fountain.

The sick and the crippled lie along the brims in expectation of the miracle. And at last, at last . . .

A funnel of white water is twisted up and so stands, straight and still by the very speed of its motion.

It drinks the light; slowly it is infused with colour, rose and mother-of-pearl. Slowly it takes shape, a heavenly body.

O dazzling Anadyomene!

The flakes of foam break into white birds about her head, fall again in a soft avalanche of flowers. Perpetual miracle, beauty endlessly born.

II

STEAMERS, in all your travelling have you trailed the meshes of your long expiring white nets across this sea, or dipped in it your sliding rail, or balanced your shadow far far down upon its glass-green sand? Or, forgetting the preoccupations of commerce and the well-oiled predestination of your machinery, did you ever put in at the real Paphos?

III

IN the city of Troy, whither our Argonautical voyages had carried us, we found Helen and that lamentable Cressid who was to Chaucer the feminine paradox, untenably fantastic but so devastatingly actual, the crystal ideal-flawed; and to Shakespeare the inevitable trull, flayed to show her physiological machinery and the logical conclusion of every the most heartrendingly ingenuous gesture of maidenhood. (But, bless you! our gorge doesn't rise. We are cynically well up in the damning Theory of woman, which makes it all the more amusing to watch ourselves in the ecstatic practice of her. Unforeseen perversity.)

Fabulous Helen! At her firm breasts they used to mould delicate drinking cups which made the sourest vinegar richly poisonous.

The geometry of her body had utterly outwitted Euclid, and the Philosophers were baffled by curves of a subtlety infinitely more elusive and Eleusinian than the most oracular speculations of Parmenides. They did their best to make a coherent system out of the incompatible, but empirically established, facts of her. Time, for instance, was abolished within the circle of her arms. "It is eternity when her lips touch me," Paris had remarked. And yet this same Paris was manifestly and notoriously falling into a decline, had lost whatever sense or beauty he

once possessed, together with his memory and all skill in the nine arts which are memory's daughters. How was it then, these perplexed philosophers wondered, that she could at one and the same moment give eternity like a goddess, while she was vampiring away with that divine thirsty mouth of hers the last dregs of a poor mortal life? They sought an insufficient refuge in Heraclitus' theory of opposites.

Meanwhile Troilus was always to be found at sunset, pacing up and down the walls by the western gate—quite mad. At dusk the Greek camp-fires would blossom along Xanthus banks—one after another, a myriad lights dancing in the dark.

As when the moon, refulgent lamp of night,

O'er heaven's pure azure spreads her something light.

He would repeat the simile to himself, but could never remember the correct epithets. Not that they mattered—any more than anything else.

#### IV

THERE are fine cities in the world—Manhattan, Ecbatana and Hecatompylus—but this city of Troy is the most fabulous of them all. Rome was seven hills of butcher's meat, Athens an abstraction of marble, in Alexandria the steam of kidney-puddings revolted the cœnobites, darkness and size render London inappreciable, Paris is full of sparrows, the snow lies gritty on Berlin, Moscow has no verisimilitude, all the East is peopled by masks and apes and larvæ. But this city of Troy is most of all real and fabulous with its charnel beauty.

"Is not Helen the end of our search—paradisal little World, symbol and epitome of the Great? Dawn sleeps in the transparent shadow of roses within her ear. The stainless candour of infinity—far-off peaks in summer and the Milky Way—has taken marvellous form in her. The Little World has its meteors, too, comets and shadowy clouds of hair, stars at whose glance men go planet-struck. Meteors—yes, and history it has. The past is still alive in the fragrance of her hair, and her young body breathes forth memories as old as the beginning of life—Eros first of gods. In her is the goal. I rest here with Helen."

"Fool," I said, "quote your Faustus. I go further."

#### V

FURTHER—but a hundred Liliputian tethers prevent me, the white nerves which tie soul to skin. And the whole air is aching with epidermical magnetism.

Further, further. But Troy is the birthplace of my homesickness. Troy is more than a patriotism, for it is built of my very flesh; the remembrance of it is a fire that sticks and tears when I would pull it off.

But further. One last look at Troilus where he stands by the western gate, staring over the plain. Further. When I have learnt the truth, I will return and build a new palace with domes less ominously like breasts, and there I will invent a safer Helen and a less paradoxical Cressid, and my harem will be a library for enlightenment.

#### VI

HERE are pagodas of diminishing bells. The leopard sleeps in the depth of his rosy cavern, and when he breathes it is a smell of irresistible sweetness; in the bestiaries he is the symbol of Christ in His sepulchre.

This listening conch has collected all the rumours of pantheism; the dew in this veined cup is the sacrament of nature, while these pale thuribles worship in the dark with yellow lamps and incense.

Everywhere alchemical profusion—the golden mintage of glades and ripples, vigils of passion enriched with silver under the fingers of the moon; everywhere lavishness, colour, music; the smoothness of machinery, incredible and fantastic ingenuities. God has lost his half-hunter in the desert.

But we have not come to worship among these Gothic beeches, for all their pillars and the lace-work of their green windows. We are looking for other things than churches.

## VII

TREES, the half-fossilised exuberances of a passionate life, petrified fountains of intemperance—with their abolition begins the realm of reason.

Geometry, lines and planes, smooth edges, the ordered horror of perspectives. In this country there are pavements bright and sleek as water. The walls are precipices to which giants have nailed a perpetual cataract of marble. The fringes of the sky are scalloped with a pattern of domes and minarets. At night, too, the down-struck lamps are pyramids of phantom green and the perfect circle they make upon the pavement is magical.

Look over the parapet of the Acropolis. The bridges go dizzily down on their swaying catenaries, the gull's flight chained fast. The walls drop clear into the valley, all the millions of basalt blocks calcined into a single red monolith, fluted with thirstily shining organ pipes, which seem for ever wet. There are no crevices for moss and toadflax, and even the claws of the yellow lichen slip on its polished flanks.

The valley is all paved and inlaid with rivers of steel. No trees, for they have been abolished.

"Glorious unnature," cries the watcher at the parapet. His voice launches into the abyss, following the curve of the bridges. "Glorious unnature. We have triumphed."

But his laughter as it descends is like a flight of broken steps.

## VIII

LET us abandon ourselves to Time, which is beauty's essence. We live among the perpetual degenerations of apotheoses. Sunset dissolves into soft grey snow and the deep ocean of midnight, boundless as forgetfulness or some yet undiscovered Pacific, contracts into the green puddle of the dawn. The flowers burn to dust with their own brightness. On the banks of ancient rivers stand the pitiful stumps of huge towers and the ghosts of dead men straining to return into life. The woods are full of the smell of transience. Beauty, then, is that moment of descent when apotheosis tilts its wings downwards into the gulf. The ends of the curve lose themselves parabolically somewhere in infinity. Our sentimental eyes see

only the middle section of this degeneration, knowing neither the upper nor the lower extremes, which some have thought to meet, godhead and annihilation.

Old Curiosity Shops! If I have said "Mortality is beauty," it was a weakness. The sense of time is a symptom of anæmia of the soul, through which flows angelic ichor. We must escape from the dust of the shop.

Cloistered darkness and sleep offer us their lotuses. Not to perceive where all is ugly, eaten into by the syphilis of time, heart-sickening—this is beauty; not to desire where death is the only consummation—wisdom.

Night is a measureless deep silence: daybreak brings back the fœtid gutters of the town. O supreme beauty of a night that knows no limitations—stars or the jagged edges of cock-crowing. Desperate, my mind has desired it: never my blood, whose pulse is a rhythm of the world.

At the other extreme, Beatrice lacks solidity, is as unresponsive to your kisses as mathematics. She too is an oubliette, not a way of life; an oubliette that, admittedly, shoots you upwards into light, not down to death; but it comes to the same thing in the end.

What, then, is the common measure? To take the world as it is, but metaphorically, informing the chaos of nature with a soul, qualifying transience with eternity.

When flowers are thoughts, and lonely poplars fountains of aspiring longing; when our actions are the poem of which all geographies and architectures and every science and all the unclassed individual odds and ends are the words, when even Helen's white voluptuousness matches some candour of the soul—then it will have been found, the permanent and living loveliness.

It is not a far-fetched, dear-bought gem; no pomander to be smelt only when the crowd becomes too stinkingly insistent; it is not a birth of rare oboes or violins, not visible only from ten to six by state permission at a nominal charge, not a thing richly apart, but an ethic, a way of belief and of practice, of faith and works, mediæval in its implication with the very threads of life. I desire no Paphian cloister of pink monks. Rather a rosy Brotherhood of Common Life, eating, drinking; marrying and giving in marriage; taking and taken in adultery; reading, thinking, and when thinking fails, feeling immeasurably more subtly, sometimes perhaps creating.

Arduous search for one who is chained by his desires to dead carcasses, whose eyes are dimmed with tears by the slow heart-breaking twilights full of old family ghosts laid in lavender, whose despair cries out for opiate and anodyne, craving gross sleep or a place on the airy unsupported pinnacles which hang in the sterile upper chambers of ether.

Ventre à terre, head in air—your centaurs are your only poets. Their hoofs strike sparks from the flints and they see both very near and immensely far.

The end