

Does Beauty Have a Place in Liberal Education?

This lecture was delivered at the Santa Fe campus of St. John's College on July 1, 2009.

DOES BEAUTY HAVE A PLACE IN LIBERAL EDUCATION? I want to offer several reasons today for why we might say “no.” This is mainly to start a conversation about what stronger reasons there could be for saying “yes.” But I do have a secondary aim, which might be called deflationary. For in reflecting on this question, in talking with several tutors and students about it, in reading college lectures and literature from the past that pertain to it, it has struck me that we at St. John's are more likely to be enthusiasts for beauty than skeptics of it. Yet much of what we say on beauty's behalf gives us better cause to renounce it than to embrace it. Or so, at least, I shall argue in what follows.

I

Let me begin, then, by looking skeptically at a first example of our enthusiasm. This comes from an address delivered at a conference on liberal education held at St. Mary's College back in 1965. The author of the address was a St. John's tutor of the time, Robert Bart. The subject of his address, as indicated by its title, was the place of literature in liberal education. Yet Bart was moved at one point to broaden his scope on beauty's behalf, as follows:

Beauty is a mark of what may be understood, so that we should try to establish it everywhere in the curriculum. **It is beauty that moves us in our search for truth; the pleasure we take in it is the pleasure that comes from fulfillment.** There is beauty in mathematics, in physics, and in the other disciplines whose achievements are presented with that clarity of evidence, that consonance of parts, that unity that characterizes beauty everywhere. Beauty belongs to Ptolemy and Newton, to Euclid and Apollonius much as it does to Homer and Dante.¹

My skepticism, in this case, comes from the sentence I have put in bold. For in what sense, exactly, does beauty move us in our search for truth, if our pleasure in beauty comes from fulfillment rather than desire? How can our search for truth be sustained by an experience of beauty, if we are not merely stirred by it but satisfied by it? Suppose too—as I will throughout this lecture—that beauty is indeed a mark of what may be understood: characterized by a clarity of evidence, a consonance of parts, and a unity which gives proof of it in Newton as much as Dante, in Euclid as much as Homer. It looks, then, as if beauty offers us not simply an experience of satisfaction, but also an object of contemplation, that our search for truth may never provide. So why should beauty push us any farther in pursuit of the truth, rather than persuade us there is something better than the truth to pursue—namely, beauty? Beauty could still be a mark

¹Robert Bart, “Literature in the Liberal Arts Curriculum,” in *Proceedings of the Colloquium on the Liberal Arts Curriculum* (St. Mary's College, March 25th–27th 1965), 16.

of what may be understood, but the sort of mark that dissuades us from trying to understand it. Beauty might even convince us that persevering in the search for truth involves a kind of attachment to the world, even entanglement in the world, from which the liberated mind is freed—and freed in the experience of beauty. But beauty, then, would seem less likely to have a place in liberal education than to pose a problem for it, or even danger to it, if this education is predicated on the search for truth, regardless of how beautiful or fulfilling its prospect.

This is not to deny that beauty might gain a kind of place in liberal education by posing just this problem or danger. After all, it can then provoke the very sort of reflection on both that I am pursuing in this lecture. But this is not the conception of beauty's place asserted by Bart in the passage above. Nor do I think it the place embraced by enthusiasts for beauty in general, and it is the enthusiast in us all that I wish to address today. The question that concerns me, then, is not what might be interrogated in our experience of beauty, but rather what, if anything, is *intimated* in that experience. I wonder not what we can ask of beauty, as it were, but rather what beauty asks of us. Insofar as beauty can be a subject of reflection and conversation, its place in liberal education seems to me unquestionable. But this, I think, is because beauty in that respect can play the role of a beginning or origin in our engagement with the world. It is less clear to me, however, where beauty stands as a feature—even achievement—of perception and experience, when in that respect beauty seems to play the role of an end, or consummation, in our engagement with the world. What is beauty's place in liberal education, I want to ask, not as a matter of speech, but instead as a matter of silence?

My skepticism, then, is directed not at what we might learn by considering what beauty is, or how we are moved by it. It is rather directed at what we can learn from beauty itself, *as* we are moved by it, particularly if this movement is best characterized, again, as a pleasure that comes from fulfillment. For this, I think, makes our experience of beauty less like motion on the way to some further end, or what Aristotle would have called *κίνησις*, and more like what he calls *ἐνέργεια*, or activity, whose end already lies within. But if activity in this sense is what being moved by beauty *is*; if beauty thus lies at the end, and not merely the beginning, of our experience of it, then it becomes harder, it seems to me, to see why this experience should *induce* further learning rather than inhibit it.

There is a related issue regarding music's place in liberal education, which I consider similarly ambiguous, and therefore potentially clarifying of the question I wish to raise about beauty's place. Suppose I become familiar with a Mozart piano concerto. There are certainly questions that can arise for me through my engagement with it, but it is less clear that these could ever be questions that arise for the concerto, as if to guide it as it unfolds; or even in what sense there could be questions for the concerto as it unfolds. For the concerto "speaks," if at all, in tones rather than words, and thus without the outward reference that words inherently possess, and perhaps that questions paradigmatically possess. There is a thus plausible difference in kind, I think, between what it means to

raise and address a question about the world as we inhabit it—which would include my experience with the concerto—and what it means to compose and develop a theme in a musical work, not to mention what it means to *be* that theme in the work. Even more generally, there seems to me a plausible difference in kind between wisdom on matters of the deepest concern and what we might call mastery over matters of the highest delight. And it would be absurd, in this sense, to consider Mozart the equal of Plato, or Plato for that matter the equal of Mozart. For there is no univocal way for the words of the one to be equated with the tones of the other, and even difficult, I think, to compare the splendors of their respective achievements.

But because of music’s silence about the world in this tonal respect, which yet gives to music a capacity for beauty all its own, it is music, I think, that provides the most challenging test for the enthusiast’s embrace of beauty in liberal education as expressed by Bart in this first example of it. We can rightly wonder just what, if anything, is being further asked of us as thinkers or inquirers, by a musical work that already gratifies us as listeners. This is especially so in an art where gratification offers a plausible sign of the achievement, and not simply possibility, of understanding. For in a very simple sense, as the pianist and writer Charles Rosen has reminded us, “understanding music simply means not being irritated by it or puzzled by it.”² “More positively,” so Rosen elaborates, “taking pleasure in music is the most obvious sign of comprehension, the proof that we understand it.”³ But beauty, by analogy, would then be a mark of what *may* be understood, in being the very sign that it *has* been understood. And there would thus be nothing in our experience of beauty strictly left for us to understand.

II

I now turn to a second example of our enthusiasm. This comes from the current *Statement of the St. John’s Program*, where, among other matters, we speak of what makes for a great book. And two of its traits, we claim, are truth and beauty—or, more exactly, the truth that every great book seeks, and the beauty that every great book attains. Beauty would then have a place in liberal education insofar as the great books that possess it have a place. At present, we mention this beauty in a single sentence of a paragraph that begins as follows:

The books speak to us in more than one way. In raising the persisting human questions, they lend themselves to different interpretations that reveal a variety of independent and complementary meanings. **And while seeking the truth, they please us as works of art with a clarity and a beauty that reflect their intrinsic intelligibility.** They are, therefore, properly called great, whether they are epic poems or political treatises, and whether their subject matter is scientific, historical, or philosophical.⁴

²Charles Rosen, *The Frontiers of Meaning* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1994), 3

³Ibid.

⁴From *Statement of the St. John’s Program 2009–2010*, p. 6.

I see two problems with the sentence in question, which I have again put in bold. First, what could we mean by the intrinsic intelligibility of great books? I'll return to this issue in a moment. But second, even if great books have intrinsic intelligibility, in what sense could their possession of it bear on their way of seeking the truth? How does the truth as we claim this is pursued by every great book culminate in the clarity and beauty that we claim is displayed by every great book? Why should the artifacts that we might say best document our search for truth appear clear, beautiful, and intelligible to us, rather than obscure, or awkward, or puzzling?

We offered an answer to such questions, as it happens, in college catalogues of the now distant past. But we did so by attributing the cause of a great book's beauty to one compositional art, and its orientation towards the truth to another such art. Before 1968 we spoke of great books as having to be, on the one hand, "works of fine art, the clarity and beauty of which reflect their intrinsic intelligibility," while also having to be, on the other hand, "masterpieces in the liberal arts, seeking truth with adequate means." Before 1955 this distinction was further explained, under the heading of "What Makes Great Books," as follows:

The first criterion is that **a classic must be a masterpiece in the liberal arts**. Its author must be a master of the liberal arts of his time, and his work must exemplify the direction of those arts of thought and imagination to their proper ends, **the understanding and exposition of the truth** as he sees it.

The second criterion follows from the first, namely that **a classical book must be a work of fine art. It must have that clarity and beauty on its surface which provides an immediate intelligibility and leads the mind of the reader to its interior depths of illumination and understanding**. This is of first importance in teaching, and its principle is almost universally violated in the textbooks that have developed in the ordinary elective system. The great books were written for the ordinary intelligent public, and they therefore have the seductive charm of works in the fine arts. They are intrinsically interesting and their disciplines are accepted with pleasure.⁵

⁵This last sentence originally read "They are intrinsically interesting and they impose their disciplines with pleasure." In the first catalogue on "the New Program" from 1937, these first two criteria were the last two, and more briefly formulated as follows: "The fourth criterion is that a great book must be a work of fine art; it must have an immediate intelligibility and style which will excite and discipline the ordinary mind by its form alone. Fifthly, a great book must be a masterpiece of the liberal arts. Its author must be a master of the arts of thought and imagination whose work has been faithful to the ends of these arts, the understanding and exposition of the truth." There is a variant of this from our 1955 Self Study I have found nowhere else:

First, it [a great book] must be a masterpiece in the liberal arts. The author must possess and his work must exemplify those intellectual arts and habits the student is supposed to acquire—rigorous and honest thinking, imagination, and effort to

On this account, then, liberal art and fine art work in tandem to produce any great book, but for distinct ends. The evidence of beauty in the book will reflect one accomplishment in composition, while its communication of truth will reflect still another. But truth, in this sense, will not then culminate in beauty so much as run parallel to it. And if beauty and truth require separate arts of the author to achieve, why should they not impose equally separate challenges upon the reader to discern? To perceive beauty would then be one thing, while to discover truth would be something else—working again in parallel at best. There is also nothing in our account—save its bare assertion that our second criterion for a great book follows from our first—to explain how perceiving beauty might help us discover truth rather than distract us from it. Nor do we explain how a great book can lead its reader to its interior depths by means of a surface immediately intelligible to the mind rather than one more puzzling to it. Why is the mind, in this way, not granted so plain a satisfaction in the surface of the work as to discourage, not invite, any further delving into the work? Beauty’s power to satisfy us where we stand, it seems, is again being made the unexplained basis of a power to move us somewhere beyond.

But this returns me to the initial matter of what we could mean by the intrinsic intelligibility of a great book, not to mention the clarity and beauty that we claim reflects this intelligibility. In what sense is Kant’s first *Critique*, or Hegel’s *Phenomenology*, so clear and beautiful as to be intrinsically intelligible? And every reader can surely form her own list of likewise forbidding works, even using such a list to argue for a surface in the greatest books that is nowise clear, nor beautiful, nor intelligible; but indeed obscure, awkward, and puzzling—just as we might expect in the surface, as it were, of any search for truth. What is therefore meant by intelligibility in this context, I think, can be no dubious insistence on the plainness of meaning in great books. Instead, I suspect, we are making a more compelling claim about the impression great books give, even at their most obscure, of meaningfulness. And the greatest books, we might suppose, are those works most able to convey from depth to surface a sense of wholeness or completeness. They would be the texts that most seem to possess, even at first encounter, a genuine beginning followed through to an equally genuine end, which promises even the most perplexed reader an object—we might even call this a world—that can be surveyed and explored. If intelligibility meant wholeness in this sense, then we could identify the beauty of a great book with the impression it gives, even at first glance, of being a whole—a difficult whole, perhaps, but a whole nonetheless.

But in this case, then, I am skeptical about my own use of the word “genuine” to characterize the beginning and end made by great books. For these seem just

transcend the merely factual and historical, and, above all, the direction these to the end of learning and communicating the truth.

Second, it must be a work of fine art. It must possess a clarity and grace that tempt the mind of the reader to yield willingly to the discipline of its logic and to explore the intricacies of its thought. [*The St. John’s College Program: A Report* (St. John’s College Press: Annapolis MD, 1955), 45]

as clearly fabrications as finalities. They make the work artfully whole rather than naturally so. In more sophisticated language, we might call them the *frame* of any fictive act. By this I mean the way that a painting, for example, is given a set of spatial boundaries that frame what the painting depicts, separating this depiction from what surrounds it in space—for example, as it hangs on a wall. In this same way we could say that a poem, or novel, or piano concerto for that matter, is given a set of temporal boundaries that frame and separate its content from what surrounds it in time—for example, as the work might be read or listened to between breakfast and lunch. Even a mathematical proof, or philosophical argument, could be said to be framed in this way by its premises and conclusion. And we might even broaden the notion of frame—though here I only mention it—to include our approach oftentimes to natural beauty, where we cut the bloom off a rose, for example, to crown a well-placed vase. But in the case of our full-blown artifacts, at least, we can distinguish the way that the work might hang on a wall, or lie on a table, to be perused between breakfast and lunch, from the way that the work’s *meaning* never hangs on a wall, nor lies on a table, nor comes into being only between breakfast and lunch. The work itself may always reside in the middle of things, as just one more object we find *with* us in the world. But the meaning of the work never resides in the middle of things, but instead makes for a kind of beginning and end, or whole, within that middle. And this wholeness renders the work something other, and more, than just one more object we find *with* us in the world. Art, in this sense, makes the work into something that can stand before us, and not simply beside us.

But the very means, then, by which we might suppose the greatest book is made splendidly whole, seems also a way it is made radically false. For it is given both a beginning and an end by art that not only complete and perfect the work, but also liberate it, in a sense, from the surrounding world, and even from the way we ourselves inhabit that world. For we, too, seem never in life at the beginning or end of things, but always among them in a kind of “middle.” And we engage with the world, in this sense, circumspectively rather than contemplatively. But, after a fashion—and I am arguing here that this is a strictly falsifying fashion—art can put us outside this world and into the world of the book, so that we might now contemplate, or at least circumnavigate, what it is, in the living of life, we can only inhabit, and at best—in the here and now—confront.

This same framing effect, moreover, seems implicitly at work in any imagined state of affairs, as well as in the negation we might entertain of any actual state of affairs. Hence our refusal, with all due respect to Keats, to equate beauty and truth. For in contrast to truth—and as neatly captured by our word “fiction”—beauty seems readily emancipated from the conditions of its actuality in the world, and granted a kind of presence, even life, in the realm of the imagination. The imagination allows us to envision what is strictly false with more unity, clarity, and intelligibility than we could ever hope to find in what is true, which in being true is thereby rooted in the world, in ways often hidden, puzzling, and manifold. The danger of an enthusiasm for beauty in general,

then, is that it can tempt us to prefer, to what is true, what it is we wish were true, confining our theoretical interest in the world to only those truths about it that are easy or pleasant to contemplate, or even extinguishing any theoretical interest in the world altogether, as we spend our leisure in fictions rather than facts. This inclination towards the readily beheld can even extend to the fictions themselves, where we find ourselves preferring the simpler pleasures of a pop song, for example, to the deeper satisfactions afforded by a fugue of Bach's. But every such fiction, once we become sufficiently enthused, can begin to feel more liberating, or at least consoling, than the facts could ever be. And before long we may even start to conflate our fictions with the facts, or mistake what we wish were true for the truth itself.

This line of thought might suggest that the danger of beauty in great books is that their artful wholeness will turn some of us who study them into dreamers. But I think the real danger lurks deeper, where the wholeness of great books turns all of us who study them into readers. This is all the more a danger insofar as reading such books can seem precisely the point. Yet I have already claimed a sense, related to beauty, in which we can rightly doubt the place of music in liberal education, in distinguishing what it means to raise a question from what it means to compose a theme. And similarly I would claim a sense, again related to beauty, in which we can rightly doubt the place of great books in liberal education, now in distinguishing what it means to pursue the truth from what it means to interpret a text.

I can clarify this sort of doubt about great books by pressing the analogy to music. Music has often been regarded—to indulge my earlier language—as the most fictive of artifacts in the absoluteness of its frame. The composer and writer Edward Cone captures this sense of music neatly enough in his remark that “whatever music may be about . . . the “whatever” begins only when the music begins, and ends when the music ends.”⁶ What happens in a musical work, in other words, goes no farther than its temporal frame. For this forms the boundary, we might say, between silence and sound—or even between nothing and something, in an art where sound is all. A musical work might thus be said to *compose* the world it contains, rather than reveal it in the manner of a window, and as we experience such revelation in a novel, or play, or painting. A sign of this difference lurks in Cone's use of the word “whatever” for music's subject. For this reflects the perennial difficulty of saying, or even knowing, just what music might be *about*, even when—or especially when—we find music deeply meaningful. This suggests there is indeed something more world-like than window-like in the impression that music makes. Another sign of music's world-making power lies in a feature peculiar to tones that I mentioned earlier—the way that tones, unlike words, lack outward reference. Indeed, the way that tones refer inward rather than outward even liberates music, insofar as we hear it as music and not merely sound, from its dependence on the very instruments that give it voice. Hence the simple but striking description of music's emergence

⁶Edward T. Cone, *Musical Form and Music Performance* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1968), 15.

from sound given by the philosopher Roger Scruton, when he writes: “No longer does it seem as though the middle C that sounds is caused by someone blowing on the clarinet. Instead we hear it as a response to the B that preceded it, and as though calling in turn for the E that follows.”⁷

What, though, does any of this have to do with great books? Just this. In Scruton’s very description of music’s coming-to-be as a world unto itself, I think we can infer what might be called a musical danger in the beauty of great books as we study them—a danger that grows, the more studious about the books we become. For our encounter with these books will indeed become musical, in this sense, when it no longer seems as though the sentence we read is caused by any truth about the world to which the sentence refers; but instead we interpret it as a response to the sentence that preceded it, and as though calling, in turn, for the sentence that follows. Our very concern, then, to follow the text, be guided by the text, stay rooted in the text, will involve a way of confronting the text as if it composed, rather than revealed, the world it contains. And we are likely to be led to any one sentence in the work more convincingly by the other sentences in the work than by any world beyond the work that makes the sentence true. Instead of striving, then, to *think* the book into being, as it were, by understanding the world in a way that invites us to write the very work we are reading, we can more cautiously try to read the book as we find it—an already-written thing.

But then, it seems to me, there would indeed be a beauty in great books—their artful way of being whole—that gives them the power merely to replace, rather than overcome, the inherited or unexamined opinions that might have possessed us once upon a time. Invited by the book’s example to make a beginning or end in thought of our own, we will be tempted to allow this beginning to be made instead by the book, and dutifully follow the book to its equally dictated end, making all the difficulty in thought a matter of grasping what is happening in the work, rather than what is happening in the world the work is about. But as compositions in this self-contained sense, great books would arguably have as little place in liberal education as the beauty that thereby banishes them.

III

I now turn to a final example of our enthusiasm. This comes from the Mission Statement that prefaced our most recent “self-study” of the college’s Annapolis campus back in 2003:

Since philosophic questions are at the root of our activity [i.e. “radical inquiry,” according to the preceding paragraph in the Mission Statement—*D.H.*], and since wonder stimulates such questions, **we also nourish the capacity to wonder. We recognize the importance of being struck with the depth of insight contained in an elemental concept, the beauty of an argument, or the**

⁷Roger Scruton, *The Aesthetics of Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 19.

unity of thought underlying different modes of knowledge.

The disciplined rigors of class work are in the service of these moments, for when ideas move us deeply and turn us toward enlightenment, real education begins, and an independent desire to learn takes root.⁸

At first glance, this passage would seem to offer a convincing rejoinder to my skepticism about how our experience of beauty, if it indeed brings intelligibility to the mind and fulfillment to the soul, could ever move us in our search for truth, especially if this intelligibility and fulfillment are tied to the compositional form of a book. And the rejoinder, in a word, is “wonder.” On this account, that is, the beauty that we encounter in the greatest books—which I take to encompass the depth of insight, beauty of argument, and unity of thought mentioned here—might be said to cause in us an experience of wonder, which provokes the very questions—philosophic questions—that move us in a search for truth.

But even if beauty and wonder can be linked this way, I think my question remains. For why should wonder in this sense provoke philosophic questions rather than put them to rest? Why are we not struck into a satisfied silence, for example, by the depth of insight in a concept, or the beauty of an argument, or the unity of thought in different modes of knowledge? The issue is sharpened when we compare our account with the famous one given by Aristotle near the beginning of his *Metaphysics*. For he too locates the source of philosophic questions in our experience of wonder, but for reasons that seem more to oppose than support what we claim in our account. Consider the following two passages from the *Metaphysics*:

διὰ γὰρ τὸ θαυμάζειν οἱ ἄνθρωποι καὶ νῦν καὶ τὸ πρῶτον ἤρξαντο φιλοσοφεῖν, ἐξ ἀρχῆς μὲν τὰ πρόχειρα τῶν ἀτόπων θαυμάσαντες, εἶτα κατὰ μικρὸν οὕτω προϊόντες, καὶ περὶ τῶν μειζόνων διαπορήσαντες, οἷον περὶ τε τῶν τῆς σελήνης παθημάτων, καὶ τῶν περὶ τὸν ἥλιον καὶ <τὰ> ἄστρα, καὶ περὶ τῆς τοῦ παντὸς γενέσεως. (982^b12–17)

For by way of wondering, people both now and at first began to philosophize, wondering first about the strange things near at hand, then going forward little by little in this way and coming to impasses about greater things, such as about the attributes of the moon and things pertaining to the sun and the stars and the coming into being of the whole. (Sachs translation)

ἄρχονται μὲν γὰρ, ὡς περ εἶπομεν, ἀπὸ τοῦ θαυμάζειν πάντες εἰ οὕτως ἔχει, καθάπερ <περὶ> τῶν θαυμάτων ταυτόματα ἢ περὶ τὰς τοῦ ἡλίου τροπὰς ἢ τὴν τῆς διαμέτροθ ἀσυμμετρίαν (θαυμαστὸν γὰρ εἶναι δοκεῖ πᾶσι τοῖς μήπω τεθεωρηκόσι τὴν αἰτίαν, εἴ τι τῷ ἐλάχιστῳ μὴ μετρεῖται). δεῖ δὲ εἰς τοῦναντίον καὶ τὸ ἄμεινον κατὰ τὴν παροιμίαν ἀποτελεωτῆσαι,

⁸*Liberal Education in a Community of Learning: Draft of a Self-Study* by St. John's College, Annapolis, Maryland for the Middle States Commission on Higher Education and the American Academy for Liberal Education (February 19, 2003), 1.

καθάπερ καὶ ἐν τούτοις ὅταν μάθωσιν· οὐθὲν γὰρ ἂν οὕτως θαυμάσειεν
ἀνήρ γεωμετρικὸς ὡς εἰ γένοιτο ἡ διάμετρος μετρητή. (983^a12–21)

For everyone begins, as we were saying, from wondering whether things are as they seem, such as the self-moving marvels, or about the reversals of the sun or the incommensurability of the diagonal (for it seems amazing to all those who have not yet seen the cause if anything is not measured by the smallest part). But it is necessary to end in what is opposite and better, as the saying goes, just as in these cases when people understand them; for nothing would be so surprising to a geometer as if the diagonal were to become commensurable. (Sachs translation)

There is first, I think, a significant difference in the objects of wonder mentioned in the respective accounts. The solstices, marionettes, and diagonals of Aristotle's account seem to be, first and foremost, outcomes of being, or what it is we encounter in a world—whether this world be cosmic, theatric, or geometric. And in the limit case suggested by Aristotle in the first passage quoted, it would be the coming into being of all there is that provokes our wonder. By contrast, the concepts, arguments, and modes of knowledge of *our* account are first and foremost outcomes of thinking, or what it is again we encounter in *books* about a world—such as in these pages of the *Metaphysics*, where solstices, marionettes, and diagonals—even the universe itself—are conceived, reasoned about, and known in the mode of a wonder-inducing object. And if there is a limit case implied by our account, I suggest it would be the coming into being of *a text about* all there is that provokes our wonder.

But there are still further contrasts to notice in the appearance and effect of wonder itself. For in Aristotle's account, this seems to be something puzzling in a phenomenon to be addressed, but in our account something pristine in an idea to be appreciated. And where wonder arises for Aristotle, in a sense, to be overcome, wonder arises for us, it seems, to be embraced. Following Aristotle, we might have said it is the *absence* in what we encounter as wondrous that moves us forward on the path to enlightenment: the sun appears to reverse direction in the sky at a solstice for no evident reason, causing us to seek that reason. And once we discover it, the object of our wonder is made apparent to us, its reason now evident, causing our wonder at it to disappear. But following our account, we should rather say it is the *presence* in what we encounter as wondrous that moves us forward on the path to enlightenment: a sentence in a text now seems rich with meaning where before it meant little at all. And while in this discovery the object of our wonder is again made apparent to us, this is now because its significance is evident, causing our wonder at it to appear. Where Aristotle thus speaks of a wonder banished by our enlightenment, we speak of a wonder nourished and enriched by it. Another analogy to music suggests itself to summarize the contrast, between one account of philosophic wonder rooted in the experience of dissonance, and another rooted in the experience of consonance.

But then, I think, we can rightly ask why consonance, in this sense, should have become more intelligible to us than dissonance as a source of philosophic

questions. Why, in this statement of our purpose as an institution of liberal education, do we locate the roots of philosophic reflection more firmly in the perfection of a finished text than in the puzzle of an unfinished, ongoing world outside any such text? Why have we conceived philosophic wonder itself, rather extravagantly, to be something like an admiration—even awe—of the artful comprehension we can find in our books, when we might have understood it more prosaically, with Aristotle, to be something like the native curiosity we can find in ourselves, regarding the causes of what we can find in our world? And why, finally, do we speak as if the very substance of liberal education depended more on what its students can be invited or inspired to think than on what they might be driven or compelled to think?

To all these questions, I suspect there is a single answer. And this answer, in a word, is beauty—or in four words: our enthusiasm for beauty. I hesitate to say that in this final example of our enthusiasm, we find ourselves banishing philosophy from liberal education even in speaking so eloquently of its importance. But I do worry we have granted beauty a place that beauty is better denied, at least if the reasons I have offered us today for skepticism on this question are any good.

IV

But even if they are any good, my reasons for skepticism remain questionable. Perhaps they are most questionable in that all my reasons make certain assumptions about the nature of liberal education itself. But are they correct? In the first part of my lecture, for example, I assumed with Robert Bart that liberal education is predicated on the search for truth. But is it? And in the second part of my lecture, I further assumed with our present-day Program statement that we read great books in this search for truth because they, too, seek the truth, in what we might call an original and exemplary manner. But do they? Finally, in the third part of my lecture, I assumed with our most recent self-study in Annapolis that this search for truth, in which great books become our teachers and companions, finds its source and significance in a certain activity of questioning, which is rightly called *philosophic*. But does it?

In fact, a simple way of summarizing the argument of my lecture is by a hypothesis: that beauty will lose a place in liberal education to whatever extent philosophy gains one. But this suggests another hypothesis: that beauty will gain a place in liberal education to whatever extent philosophy loses one. Does *philosophy*, then, have a place in liberal education? I'm not about to burden you with yet another lecture arguing that the answer to this question is "no." But let me conclude this lecture by offering one reason for being doubtful of it—a reason that might give us more confidence in beauty's place. For it would seem that philosophy's place in liberal education is justified principally on a *negative* rather than positive understanding of what it means, through philosophic questioning, to be liberated. For this is an understanding, as typically expressed, of what, through philosophic questioning, we are liberated *from* rather than liberated *for*, since it is indeed by questioning, rather than by answering, that we are

liberated on this view at all. In the usual Socratic formulation, for example, we say that such questioning liberates us from any opinion we hold that would otherwise go unexamined; from any belief we cherish that would otherwise go unchallenged; from any conviction about the world that would otherwise remain *merely* a conviction—which is to say, a prejudice.⁹

More generally, we could say that such questioning liberates us from how things *seem*, in the very recognition of their seeming, prompting a search for how things really *are*. We turn against opinion, in this sense, in the pursuit of knowledge, or truth. But what if there were no way to be guided in life save by how things seem? What if it were impossible, that is, to live by any truth that failed to have some relation to us, some bearing on us, some *meaning* for us—even at the risk of being distorted or falsified in the connection: like parallel tracks that appear to converge to a point on the horizon? Perhaps what guides us in life, if indeed it can guide and not merely intrude upon life, must always be *more*—and even *other*—than the truth. Perhaps even Meno was right about the futility of philosophic questions, which is to say: questions about the way things are in themselves. For how can we ever discover the way things are in themselves, when the discovery will make them something for us, and no longer what they are in themselves? And even if Meno was wrong, it still looks, on this argument, as if we cannot escape appearances in our quest for the realities

⁹Consider these paragraphs from the 2009 commencement address in Annapolis, delivered by a tutor and outgoing Assistant Dean, Anita L. Kronsberg—they provide an especially eloquent example of how we identify liberation with the questioning of opinion:

Perhaps the most consistent way in which your courage has been called upon has been the ceaseless demand to examine, revise, and at times abandon your opinions. We talk so frequently about examining our opinions and preconceptions that we can forget how truly difficult this is. Nonetheless it is this practice, more than any particular discipline, that is at the center of what is liberal and liberating in this endeavor. Unexamined opinions enslave human thought and the human spirit, and at this college we have woven traditions and practices into our daily life that help us protect ourselves against this real evil. A tradition observed with vitality conveys the germ of an institution from the hands of one generation to those of another. We have, for example, a tradition of requiring anyone who lectures here to engage in a question period (it appears from this tradition that a commencement address is not a lecture). While it would not do us any harm to allow the occasional guest lecturer to escape unscathed by our questions, if we were to allow ourselves to deliver up our opinions to one another without expecting that those opinions will be examined thoroughly, we would eviscerate the College. The tradition of question periods is one vital reminder of this.

Most of the time we subject our opinions to this scrutiny with real enjoyment. That is another measure of the vitality of the College and its traditions. I am sorry to say that no permanent shield from attachment to old opinions can be conferred upon you with your degree. There is a proclivity in most of us to love our opinions from which lifelong vigilance is the only protection. What is good is difficult, and questioning the opinions we cherish is among the most difficult things to do. It requires courage, and when you leave this college it will require more courage, for you will often be without communal encouragement to it. But you will carry with you a disposition to seek out this and other forms of what is good, and this is a resource.

behind those appearances; and that we live from beginning to end in what we might call a world of meanings rather than truths. One could even argue that we only live in a world at all—which is to say, a place that is ordered and whole—if it be composed of meanings rather than truths.

I don't claim this is the case, but suppose it were the case: what, then, would it mean in such a world to *be* free, and to *become* free? In a world of meanings, in other words, what would a liberal education finally accomplish? One simple answer—behind which stood a more positive sense of liberation—is, in a word, *literacy*: the ability to read this world of meanings with understanding. The focal activity of liberal education would then involve not an inquiry into how things are in themselves, but rather an induction into how things are for us. It would be an education, so we might say, of enchantment rather than disillusionment, for the sake of becoming cultured rather than enlightened. For the aim would be to inhabit rather than transcend the appearances, and to cultivate more than challenge the artifacts of those appearances—inclusive of our opinions, our beliefs, our convictions about the world, so that they might be possessed rather than escaped.

Suppose all this were the case. We can then see how beauty might have a central place in liberal education, and even be thought its goal: to make the way things seem to us, finally satisfying to us, and thereby reconcile us to lives that cannot be liberated from the way things seem and remain lives at all. The great books we study would then encompass those appearances, in what we might again call an exemplary and original manner. And the effort to read those encompassing appearances would justify, in turn, what we continue to call the liberal arts—characterized in our Program Statement as the activities of “discussion, translation, writing, experiment, mathematical demonstration, and musical analysis.” For these would be the activities whereby we learn just *how* to read our books, and thus accomplish the goal of liberal education by again gaining *literacy* in the meanings we inevitably live by. And while this view of liberal education needn't deny the existence of any truths beyond those meanings, it *would* have cause to deny a place in liberal education to any *search* for such truths. For again, on the positive sense of liberation that animated this view, an understanding of the meanings *themselves* would be truth enough.

But this is just one rejoinder to my earlier arguments against beauty's place in liberal education. Perhaps we will discover others in the question period. Thank you.

—Dan Harrell