

“... so that God may become beautiful!”

Life-shaping within the horizon of art

Wolfgang Vorländer¹

“Lord, my God, you are very magnificent; you are beautifully and splendidly adorned”, is how the psalmist addresses God in praying Psalm 104, 1.

If God is beautiful, then, regarding life-shaping in divine form, it is necessary to think about... – I hesitate to pronounce the word, for I know that even some of my closest friends will then put the shutters down and turn to the next chapter – the word: Aesthetics! What most people know about the term aesthetics are the misunderstandings and misinterpretations that it has been subjected to. But this is precisely why we should speak about it. That’s why I’ll begin my sentence again:

If God is beautiful, then, regarding life–shaping in divine form, it is necessary to think about aesthetics; then following Christ, worshipping God or sensitivity to the Spirit take on an aesthetic element.

But “aesthetics” – and “aesthete” even more so – is in common parlance more of a jibe. To be an aesthete – you need at the least a light spleen. The aesthete is considered remote – or slightly enraptured. At a cool distance from the general community and from the unadorned banalities of life, he is dedicated to the fine arts, to musing or other fantasies, and perhaps even has a whimsical penchant for the ideal, fussy, with clean-scrubbed fingernails and a book of verse under his arm. An owl, in other words, who could have been caricatured by the painter Spitzweg, if he hasn’t already done so. Of no use for anything or to anyone apart from himself, a social parasite...

But if life is pondered and shaped in the light of the Spirit, so that life becomes a product of the Spirit – and if this Spirit is the power of God’s self-glorification in His creatures and in His creation – then the category of the aesthetic, of the sentient, of the beautiful and formed, of art and symbolism, suddenly becomes an essential spiritual principle which corresponds to openness for God’s Spirit. – In using these words we are course still at a preliminary stage: the terms “beautiful” and “art” in particular require further clarification.

Another widespread misunderstanding of aesthetics sees it as a concern with an abstract, unreal, one-sided spiritual world of harmony and intactness; a world which exists only in thought or illusion, i.e. a deception – in a dream image in which one can take refuge in order to escape having to stand up to the true face of the earth and life.

Are aesthetics compatible with the cross of Christ? This is the critical test. For anyone reflecting on the Spirit without facing this cross and building on it degenerates into paganism and fails to partake in God’s revelation. But aesthetics, even though they – also! – have something to do with beauty, have nothing to do with aestheticism and a perception of reality conveniently reduced to the harmonious and unblemished. Aesthetics, if God is taken as the starting point, have an exceptionally strong link with the suffering countenance of the earth and the groaning of creation, with the misery of the human race and the woundedness of creatures. For it is precisely on *this countenance* of course that a light and brightness falls

¹ Wolfgang Vorländer: Der Heilige Geist und die Kunst zu leben, 1996, Aussaat-Verlag: Neukirchen-Vluyn, S.34-40)

from above. For Christ, who is “above”, is simultaneously the Christ who descended to the deepest depths, to the ugliest ugliness and to the most impoverished poverty. It is for the sake of this Christ that the Spirit becomes the power of glorification, for He aligns everything into the perspective of the love of God incarnate in Christ. “Does one love that which is beautiful, or does that which is loved become beautiful? It is part of man’s weakness that he often needs the beautiful so that his love can be ignited. God’s strength, in contrast, is that His love creates the beautiful where there was nothing beautiful before or nothing at all.” (Kurt Marti).⁷⁾ – Aesthetics come into being where something is dipped into the love of the triune God. ...

... So if we speak about aesthetics, we mean that God is reflected in life, that He makes life a mirror of Himself, and in His whole, all-transforming beauty! This beauty of God, the praise of which fills the hymns, visions and confessions of the Bible, is expressed with the Hebrew words “hadar” (= brilliance, transcendence, glory) and “kabod” (glory). – But which of us has ever had a glimpse of this glory? We are not the angels in heaven. This is why the aesthetics of life-shaping in divine form have a problem relating to this heavenly glory of God. But there is possible way of perceiving God’s beauty which is accessible to us, namely in its *condescension* (coming down) in creation and, above all, in the existence of Israel, which culminates in the incarnation of Christ and his cross. It is this, the beauty of the *love* and *mercy* of God, the beauty in which He turns to the sinner and looks on him as His ally, his partner in the Covenant. It is inside the horizon of this historical revelation of God that, according to *Gerhard von Rad*, “the most elevated statements of beauty in the entire Old Testament” are found.⁹⁾ God’s beauty consists here in His love for the ugly and lost, whom he accepts, heals and raises into fellowship with Himself. This is the starting point of the aesthetics of Spirit-worked life-shaping.

Now, the Greek word *aisthesis* originally meant “sensual experience, emotion, feeling”. Aesthetics have a connection with the senses, waken our senses, heal our senses. In this regard, Jesus must be seen as the epitome of the aesthete: He gives back to people their senses! But the One who opens the eyes of the blind heals not only senses, does not only restore their ability to experience and perceive, but rather also gives, along with this, sense itself, meaning! “No sense without senses! ... The less sensuality, the less life” (Kurt Marti)¹⁰⁾ – and conversely! The aesthetic principle of Spirit-filled life-shaping is therefore: Live with healed senses and with the gift of sense (meaning). For this is the creative work of God’s Spirit in us: He opens our senses for God and thus for the gift of our life, which is loved by God. He also lets the love of God shine on us in the midst of misery, weakness and poverty and causes us to flourish in this love. In this sense, the Spirit of God makes us *beautiful*, beautiful in the love of the Father.

But, in the wakening of our senses and in the gift of a deep sense to life, the question of the corresponding shaping of life must now really be asked. Thus, through receiving the beautifying love of God, an active element takes on a role. This element is the activity of God’s Spirit, which not only leads us to inward certainty of being loved, but simultaneously, in a creative, authorial activity without end, shapes our life and develops it in such a way that it reflects, more and more, God’s beauty and love. This initially happens in that He wakens us to deeper *joy in life*, for God Himself is the friend of life and rejoices in our life. Out of joy in life, however, the strength to shape life grows. And with that we are moving within the horizon of *art*.

“Art” in German (“Kunst”) originally comes from “knowing/being able” (kennen/können), but is also connected with “bold” (“kühn”), which in turn is from a root meaning “knowing, experienced, wise”. Against the background of “knowledge, wisdom,

insight”, the sense of “art” as “ability, skill, dexterity” developed. Finally, this led to “art” as “a creatively shaping concretisation of inner and outer experiential matter in a work transcending this matter, felt by the recipient to be of artistic value” – such is the definition in the German Brockhaus encyclopedia. The root of art is considered to be “creativity, the authorial power of the artist”. If the Spirit of God is the “*Creator Spiritus*”, if He has the attributes – as we saw in our Biblical/historical overview – of authorial power, of creativity, then it more than obvious that the Spirit and art stand in the closest of relationships. The creation is a work of art by the Spirit, and our life should not be any less so.

Only clowns, lucky beggars or expressly superficial fellow citizens would say “life requires no skill(art)” [German: “Kunst” = skill/art]. The heck it doesn’t! But will it become a work of art? A work of art as “a creatively shaping concretisation of inner and outer experiential matter in a work transcending this matter”? It can only become this if it is lived in the strength of the creative Spirit.

As a “work of art”, it calls for “craftsmanship with artistry”, calls for “knowledge, wisdom and insight”, “ability, skill and dexterity”. What do all these have to do with it? It is a matter of the knowledge of the sources from which our life is fed. With that, our thoughts return to the Spirit as the power of creation and re-creation of all things, who lends not only the life force of creatures, but above that gives us a share in the “powers of the world to come”. Whoever knows of this promise treats his life differently and gains creative space to shape his life. We speak then not of “I am alive”, but of “I have the privilege of living”! Life is then no longer a matter of letting oneself go, but of artistic craftsmanship which glorifies God. It is then precisely in the troughs of life, in the defeats and blows of fate, in misfortune and suffering that a *resurrection* in the power of the resurrection of Christ, that creative breakthroughs and new direction can come. The love of God leads precisely amongst the splits, valleys and ruins of life to the aesthetic principle of Spirit-worked life-shaping. In the “Liturgy over the Ruins of Jerusalem”, which we can learn nowhere better than from the prophet of the exile, Deutero-Isaiah, we get to know the creative power of the Spirit, in which God becomes beautiful. For “*the glory of the Lord shall be revealed*” – where? In human life, which “*is like grass, and all its goodness like the flowers of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God remains forever*”! – Therefore say to the (ruined) cities of Judah: “*Behold, your God! He comes with strength, and His arm will rule. See, what He has won is with Him, and what He acquired goes before Him!*” (Isaiah 40, 5ff). – What a paradox! Dried grass! And it shall be the vehicle for the revelation of the glory of the Lord! For “*I will pour out water on the thirsty and streams on what is dried out; I will pour out my Spirit on your children*” (44,3). – These words are not spoken to those who have mastered the art of life, but to the guilty and the losers. Their life will become a doxology (glorifying of God) in the outpouring of the Spirit. And where it becomes a doxology, we are dealing with art and aesthetics in which God becomes beautiful and, with Him, life itself. Life within the horizon of art is life in transformation towards God.

“I heal their turning away – I love them of my own free will.
I am for Israel like dew:
let Israel bloom like a lily,
send out roots like Lebanon,
let its roots spread,
so that its splendour may be like the olive tree,
its scent like Lebanon...
I, I answer, and my eye is on him.
I am like a vigorous cypress –
it is on me that your fruit is to be found...”

Thus speaks Yahweh. After Hosea 14, 5-9

This text illuminates inimitably what we meant with our formulation "... so that God may become beautiful! – Life-shaping within the horizon of art"! God becomes beautiful: in creation and in the cross, and therefore He also wishes to become beautiful in our life.

So that God may become beautiful
God –
dew of the lily
splendour of the olive tree
sap of the cypress
when summer approaches
beauty ripens towards Him
God becomes summer beauty
where life ripens
where the trunk of the cross
flowers and becomes verdant
and as the tree of life
offers fruit
to the Eternal