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The Salvation of Europe is (Found) in Beauty?

Abstract: In this essay Dostoevsky's famous utterance, "Beauty will save the world", from his novel *The Idiot* (1869) is being analyzed, namely, by examining the interpretations of this utterance in the works of Solovyov and Solzhenitsyn. The essay also treats the problem of the old philosophical and aesthetical question about the unity of beauty, goodness, and truth, and in the end, it stresses the changes that occurred in the way beauty was comprehended in the 20th century. The paper also sets out to analyze some of the questions tied to the lost place of beauty nowadays, by offering a possible (affirmative) answer to the welcomed return of the meaning and the significance of beauty for our contemporary culture and art.

Key words: beauty, salvation, art, Europe, Dostoevsky, Solovyov, Solzhenitsyn

For us, today, to address the following question – 'Can beauty save the world?', or more specifically, but not out of courtesy to the spirit of ingrained Eurocentrism, to ask – 'Can beauty save Europe?', means to believe that Europe is the world, while at the same time, to take up, with might and care, the same, already well-trodden, paths that Dostoevsky and Sol-

zhenitsyn had traveled on, confidently; the former, under the guise of a literary expression, through the character of Prince Myshkin in the novel *The Idiot* (1869), the latter, as part of an aesthetic lecture given when accepting the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1970.

However, since Europe is not, nor can it stand as the principal metonymy for the entire world, then it

seems best, if indeed, when voicing the question – ‘Can beauty save the world?’ – to have the question itself, as well as its answer, apply to Europe too, as part of the world’s whole. Even so, to ask, at this very moment if beauty can save the world, means to take the trails of skepticism and disbelief when it comes to salvaging power of art, as many had pointed out during the course of the 20th century. Even Solzhenitsyn himself, in his now renowned Noble Lecture, would claim, by asking himself the following: “One day Dostoevsky threw out the enigmatic remark: “Beauty will save the world”. What sort of a statement is that? For a long time I considered it mere words. How could that be possible? When in bloodthirsty history did beauty ever save anyone from anything? Ennobled, uplifted, yes - but whom has it saved?” (Solzhenitsyn, 1970)

Concurrently, among those who do not believe in the redemptive powers of beauty, we can find the German philosopher Theodor Adorno, whose stance on this topic reaches its most manifest form when he asks, that after the horrors of World War II no lyric poetry be written, since it is no longer ethically or aesthetically possible to do so. His cry: “To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric (...)” (Adorno, 1967: 34)

But, if for Solzhenitsyn the utterance, “Beauty will save the world”, is more of a “prophesy” than a truth, to many of us, in reality, beauty, in the past as well as today, has provided a true and veritable salvation. One such story comes to us from Susanne Sklar, an Oxford-based scholar who studies the work of William Blake; a story which is equally simple and com-

mon, since it speaks of a gifted singer who kept on saying that if she had never taken up music, namely, if she’d never sung, then she would most definitely be using drugs to numb the pain she felt in her life, so that she could share with us a profoundly moving thought – “beauty is far greater than pain!” (Sklar, 2007) On the other hand, Susanne Sklar herself, when she spoke about a time in her own life which was riddled with problems, a time period when she too had considered suicide as an option, reminds us that precisely then she had read Dostoevsky and listened to Bethoven’s Ninth Symphony, and had beauty take over her soul, transforming her life experiences instantaneously. Hence, instead of ending her life violently, with the help of the “musically beautiful” (or as Eduard Hanslick would call it ‘Musikalisch-Schönen), she managed to save herself and discover the beauty in the world around her (Craig, 2010).

Still, it is quite clear that nowadays, at a time when the Gutenbergian galaxy has conceded its place to the McLuhan’s galaxy, a time period when “a ecstasy of communication” (Baudrillard) is taking place, and communication itself has had a profound affect on our culture, changing it from within, we do not see *beauty* for what it is at face value, we do not see the metaphysics of beauty, for we only see its physics, and mostly the way it gets represented by the mass media. The culture industry of consciousness has been with us for some time, however, this trivialization of beauty, liked to its retail and bulk sale status, needs to be treated as an object of scorn, everywhere

that would be possible and everywhere that it would make sense. Henceforth, we need to be continuously reminded of an old Mediterranean adage, which says, “Even the best wine can be thrown into the sea, but the sea will never give it back.” Yet, even today, there are thinkers who believe that true beauty bears some kind of “secret power”, and that “the experience of beauty, we may then say, consists in finding a spiritual value (truth, happiness, moral ideals) at home in a material setting (rhythm, line, shape, structure) and in such a way that, while we contemplate the object, the two seem inseparable.” (Armstrong, 2005:163)

This is why in terms of the utterance – “Beauty will save the world”, here with us, and in the greater world, today, my own reasoning is entirely contradictory. I could even accept the lucid attitude of the famed magician of the prose, as well as of the theoretical discourse, the Italian Pavarotti of semiotics and aesthetics – Umberto Eco, who in a given context, giving his answer to a question regarding the future of the book and fine literature during the time of the digital and electronic culture, says that *in the morning he is an optimist, while in the afternoon he is a pessimist!* (Eco, 1995: 96)¹ This is how I see myself answering the beauty question today, since – “Beauty saving the world”, is a rarity, for in our day and age beauty is mostly found/sought in photographs from cooking manuals, travel guides, “The Pirelli” calendars, or

“The Playboy” spread, the biographies and autobiographies of people from the world of mass and popular culture, only seen and looked for on billboards and TV screens (this would fit in perfectly with the Eco’s afternoon pessimism), however, even in such circumstances, today, true values tied to the power of beauty still hold some meaning, are upheld, are respected (this is a part of my own afternoon and evening optimism, similar but reversed relation vis-à-vis Eco’s). To expect, almost with the airs of superiority, for man to be joyful and happy, at least each afternoon during his stay on the European continent, is not that unusual, for Stendhal too, had said – “Beauty is a promise of happiness”, while Stendhal, accompanied by Dostoevsky, can promise us both happiness and salvation with the help from beauty.

If to all of this we add the reasoning, which states that the ancient interpretation of ‘beauty’, the one constantly placed together next to ‘goodness’ and ‘truth’, then indeed, the borders of Europe seem, for the past few millennia, not to have shifted outside South-Eastern Europe, since the ideas behind the three highest values – goodness, beauty and truth, have existed there since the beginning of time, and are listed as such by Plato, in *The Phaedrus* Dialogue (246 E); henceforth, as the Polish aesthetician Wladislaw Tarkiewicz tells us, these values have taken hold of the European thought. He also adds: “the juxtaposition occurred frequently during the Middle Ages in the Latin formula *bonum, pulchrum, verum*, only with a somewhat different qualification, not as three values

¹ “I shall list some problems, without pretending to propose solutions. It is pretty late in the day and I have started my twelve hours of pessimism.”

but as three ‘transcendentalia’, or supreme kinds of judgments. They have been listed again as cardinal values in more recent times, especially by a French philosopher of the first half of the 19th century, Victor Cousin. Let us bear it in mind: beauty has long been regarded by the culture of the West as one of the three supreme values.” (Tatarkiewicz, 1980:1)

On top of everything, if we add to this trinity of beauty-goodness/kindness/truth its theological dimension, as we can find in the Eastern Orthodox theological interpretation of the famous Russian philosopher and theologian Vladimir Sergejevich Solovyov, then his words about the importance of beauty, set within the context of Fyodor Mikhaylovich Dostoevsky’s stance, point out this not in the least bit inconsequential relation tied to Europe, beauty and salvation. Solovyov, henceforth, at the end of the 19th century, wrote:

Dostoevsky not only preached, but, to a certain degree also demonstrated in his own activity this reunification of concerns common to humanity – at least of the highest among these concerns – in one Christian idea. Being a *religious* person, he was at the same time a free *thinker* and a powerful *artist*. These three aspects, these three higher concerns were not differentiated in him and did not exclude one another, but entered indivisibly into all his activity. In his convictions he never separated truth from good and beauty; in his artistic creativity he never placed beauty apart

from the good and the true. And he was right, because these three live only in their unity. (Solovyov, 2003: 16)

The verses from John Keats’ “Ode on a Grecian Urn” (1820), today, almost two centuries later, echo as far-removed remnants behind the idea of the unity between truth and beauty:

Beauty is truth, truth beauty, — that is all
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know. (Keats, 1919)

However, today, at the onset of the 21st century, beauty is less and less tied to the fundamental values in the world and of some kind of a world salvation, for it, beauty that is, becomes an ephemeral and borderline region of man’s reality. Even so, why shouldn’t we count on, or believe in the return of all that had once held central value in European culture, aesthetics or theory of art. Perhaps it is high time that beauty regain its former position of a foundational and universal value, and thus escapes from the trivial world of everyday speech, from the height of the billboards where she reigns unequivocally, from the proximity of the TV-screens where she dominates the advertisement space, the soap operas or the pulp fiction films. To escape, so that we could use her to cross over the borders of immanence, which, in turn would afford us another post-metaphysical entry in the already forgotten transcendence.

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Иван Џепароски

Спасот на Европа е во убавината?

Резиме: Во овој есејот се разгледува прочуениот исказ на Достоевски од романот „Идиот“ „убавината ќе го спаси светот“, потоа авторот пристапува кон толкувањата на овој исказ што ги наоѓаме во делата на Соловјев и Солженицин. Есејот се занимава, исто така, со старото филозофско и естетичко учење за единството на убавината, добрината и вистината и на крајот укажува на промената што се случува во однос на разбирањето на убавината во 20. век. Текстот анализира и повеќе прашања врзани за изгубеното место на убавината во нашево време, но и нуди можен позитивен одговор во однос на посакуваното враќање на смислата и на значењето на убавината за нашата современа култура и уметност.

Клучни зборови: убавина, спас, уметност, Европа, Достоевски, Соловјев, Солженицин