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A Beauty by Robert Boyers

The most beautiful man I ever knew was Charles Newman, the founding editor of the journal *TriQuarterly*, a gifted novelist and man of letters. When I met him in the late 1970s he was almost forty, the possessor of a large, intelligent, perfectly ordered face in which there was no discernible trace of turbulent emotion. His hair lifted softly above an unruffled forehead, and though, as I later learned, he had recently been through a period of stress and agitation, his eyes were radiant with competence, unencumbered. What might have been taken for indifference in another countenance in his was clearly the conviction of a sumptuous sufficiency. His beauty was carried lightly, as if he had never known the need to tend or promote it. To win or shine was not his ambition. Somewhere, sometime, you felt, he had promised not to be vain. In his own beauty he had discovered an endowment not to be overvalued or abused. What came to him as a result of his beauty would be accepted gratefully, but with no accompanying sense that he had done anything to deserve it.

I had known other men who seemed to me too beautiful, men whose beauty overshadowed every other feature—of character or wit or intelligence. Charlie's beauty did seem that way to some of our friends. I'll not forget the words of a colleague who said, half seriously, not a minute after she had set eyes on him for the first time, that no man had a right to look that good. Who does he think he is? she asked. Others, by far more numerous, were impressed, struck dumb, or amused. Our friend Richard Howard declared him impeccable. He looks, Richard said, the way a man ought to look.

Of course Charlie was not for him. Charlie was for women. At the Chinese restaurant on Fifty-Eighth Street before a dance performance at Lincoln Center, the striking twenty-something who showed us to our table carefully brushed his wrist when she handed around the menus. She likes you, I said, when she had moved a few steps away, but Charlie didn't answer. He took out his pipe and began to clean the bowl as if he hadn't noticed the young woman at all.

He was between marriages then, and his new girlfriend was away at a business conference in San Francisco. Renata was her name, and Charlie had brought her to us for a "quick impression" only a week or so after they met. She was a good deal younger than he was, late twenties, but you could see that there were some miles on her, and though she said that she'd never been married, or, for that matter, in love, I guessed that she wasn't in the market for anything permanent. Charlie was for her a trophy guy. With her long, bright red fingernails, and thick, reddish-brown hair tied back in an unfashionable ponytail, she laughed a lot, and batted her eyelashes at her benevolent, blue-eyed stallion.

I figured right away that the girl in the Chinese restaurant would know what to do with Charlie, whose beauty was a match for hers, and sure enough, she struck up a conversation with him about the duck she'd sliced before his quietly admiring eyes and asked whether the martini wasn't too dry. By the time we left the place an hour later, Charlie had jotted his unlisted phone number on the back of our bill and dropped it meaningfully in front of her. I'm not in the book, he said, but you can leave me a message anytime.

This was a scenario to which we'd grown accustomed. Charlie's beauty inspired intensities of admiration and interest. Though it might occasionally seem almost too good to be true, it was not intimidating. If his was an ideal beauty, a composite endowment of physical attributes that expressed poise, well-being, and lucidity, the beauty was at the same time, surely for most observers, entirely human, approachable. It conveyed little evidence, one way or another, of inveterate kindness or sensitivity, but it bespoke a measure of alertness and vulnerability that might in the long term prove an indispensable aspect of its charm. Women especially were drawn to this beauty as to a quality inordinately precious, as if being close to it might miraculously confer upon them a sense of comparable endowment not otherwise available to them, in spite of their own substantial attributes. In the great violet eyes of the Chinese beauty brooding gamely at our restaurant table we could see an avidity almost breathtaking in its hopefulness and candor.

Of course there are those for whom beauty resides only in the eye of the beholder. On this estimation, my friend was creditably beautiful only because he clearly moved others to declare him so and to cite as evidence their own sensations of pleasure and longing. I don't know how to contend against this view of beauty, which is in its way as unanswerable as the alternate view, which insists that beauty exists as an objective fact irrespective of any particular impressions or sensations it inspires. I am tempted to cite as authority on this matter Oscar Wilde, who famously quipped that "It is only shallow people who do not judge by appearances." But appearance is not quite as self-evident a quality as Wilde supposed. In his indispensable book on beauty, *Only a Promise of Happiness: The Place of Beauty in a World of Art*, Alexander Nehamas notes that "What counts as appearance doesn't remain constant," but proposes that appearance can be reliable as a gauge when accredited by "the members of a particular group with a similar background," who will agree "immediately when presented with the same phenomenon." This was, in my experience, the case with my friend Charlie, whose appearance was reliably compelling to all who knew him. With him it was as Arthur Danto observed when he wrote that beauty is "really as obvious as blue: one does not have to work at seeing it when it is there."

I knew Charles Newman for almost thirty years, and until he grew ill in his early sixties, I met no one who did not think him beautiful. Nothing remotely theoretical or problematic about it. In this sphere, the case for the more or less self-evident has long seemed compelling, if by no means flawless. Consider, as but one famous example, a passage from the *Phaedrus*, in which Plato describes the response of a man to beauty as follows: the man, he writes, "shudders in cold fear . . . But gradually his trembling gives way to a strange feverish sweat, stoked by the stream of beauty pouring into him through his eyes and feeding the growth of his soul's wings. . . . He cares for nothing else . . . He gladly neglects everything else that concerns him." The inflamed language will no doubt seem to many of us excessive, and the superstructure Plato erects to exalt, or justify, the susceptibility to beauty—here reflected in the allusion to "his soul's wings"—may well seem irrelevant or spurious. But we ought not too readily to disdain the impression of a "stream of beauty pouring into him through his eyes." For Plato invites us to believe that there is in fact such a thing as beauty, and that beauty exists even where the theory to which we subscribe may tempt us to doubt it. Sophisticated people who pay little attention to beauty as an issue do nonetheless casually refer to the beauty of a familiar work of art—say, the Lento movement of Dvorák's "American" quartet or the *Primavera* of Botticelli, or the clean lines of a Marcel Breuer chair in a Bauhaus exhibition. When they do so, they do not think of the beauty to which they refer as in any way disputable. They believe in that which pours into them through their eyes or ears. Their ardor is real to them, and they know it to have been occasioned by something real for which they are grateful.

To be sure, there will always be persons who are indifferent to beauty, who regard it as superficial or refuse to be taken in by it. In an essay on Elias

Canetti, Susan Sontag noted that “the great limit of Canetti’s sensibility is the absence of the slightest trace of the aesthete. Canetti shows no love of art as such,” she goes on, and “he does not love anything the mind fabricates for its own sake.” Though Canetti was an “unregenerate . . . materialist,” the merely material, fleshly beauty of Charles Newman would not have seemed to him at all irresistible. Would he have agreed, in the name of a hypothetically disinterested assessment, that my friend was endowed with the attributes conventionally associated with beauty? No doubt the very idea of such an assessment, mobilized simply to arrive at an empty verdict, would have seemed to Canetti irrelevant, adolescent. By contrast, Sontag herself was an insatiable beauty lover, and often she allowed herself to swoon—playfully, openly, generously, girlishly—at the mere sight of Charles Newman as he entered an auditorium or took a chair at the dining table in my own Saratoga Springs home. A 2002 e-mail from Sontag, responding to something I’d written her about Charlie’s novel-in-progress, asks if he’s “still beautiful.”

Though I often disapproved of my friend, his beauty never seemed to me diminished by anything he said or did. Perhaps that marks a limitation in my own equipment, a flaw, or worse, in my own moral sensibility. The thing I liked least about Charlie was his way of carrying on with several women at a time and letting me in on what he was up to. In his fifties, when he was married to an obviously devoted and substantial woman, he was going around with a very attractive younger woman in St. Louis, where my wife and I often visited one of our children and his growing family. Though in New York Charlie lived with the wife—his fourth—in a highrise near Lincoln Center, he spent the spring semester each year away from her, and had made the St. Louis companion something of a significant other there. The wife apparently had no idea what Charlie was up to, and though you might say that anyone married to Charlie who remained clueless about his predilections deserved whatever he handed out, it was hard for us to be cavalier about Charlie’s cheating ways. We knew and liked Charlie’s wife. We spent time with her and were pleased that she regarded us as friends to whom she could occasionally appeal for help or advice. She was an open and sometimes ebullient woman who might well, at the start of an intimate dinner party at their apartment, entertain her guests with fifteen or twenty minutes of a piano piece she had recently mastered. She obviously liked her husband and forgave him for what she took to be merely a habit of flirtation toward available women. Why shouldn’t he flirt, the wife once asked us. He likes it, and the women all seem to like it too. The wife knew herself to be both doting and beautiful, and Charlie had given her no reason to be insecure about their future together. He drank too much, but that, she felt, at least for the first years of the marriage, had little to do with his feelings toward her.

In truth, my wife and I often felt uncertain about what to do where Charlie and Edith were concerned. In spite of everything, Charlie continued to treat his wife with courtesy and affection. Often he spoke of her professional exploits at an architectural firm with unconcealed admiration. In their company it was remarkably easy to forget, at least for a while, that Charlie was also involved with the woman in St. Louis, and likely had other women he saw from time to time in New York as well. Even in decline, Charlie dressed elegantly and seemed in every way a refined, beautifully educated specimen, in bearing impeccably upright, correct, a pure example of the *danseur noble* type we would admire together at performances of the New York City Ballet.

But Charlie’s beauty did not help us much when we were forced to confront his tall, willowy companion in St. Louis, or when he proposed that we all get together with our son and his family. Once we agreed to do this, and of course we all liked the girlfriend and thought Charlie remarkably comfortable with the situation. But later that night, on the phone, I told Charlie that none of this seemed to me a good idea, not where we were concerned. After all, we’d soon be seeing him with Edith in New York, or at our place in Saratoga Springs, and we’d have to pretend that we knew nothing about Jean.

You don’t have to pretend anything, Charlie shot back, as he did again and again when we walked around in Central Park together later that spring. It’s not as though Edith is going to ask you about my girlfriend and you’ll be forced to lie. Jesus, he went on, you don’t go around blurring everything to everyone you meet.

Bad faith, I said, reaching for a platinum-plated idea that Charlie and I had debated maybe twenty years earlier, when people still talked earnestly about such notions.

Bad faith my ass, Charlie said. Tell her anything you want. If you think Edith needs to hear from you about my love life, by all means, let her have it. It’s not as if she hasn’t harbored a suspicion or two. Might be good for her to think my best friends are looking out for her.

Sometimes you forgot that Charlie was, or could be, a gentle soul. But then you looked into those steady, steadying eyes of his and found something reassuring. Didn’t know quite what to call it, but it did, you felt, have much to do with whatever in him continued to seem ineffably beautiful. He was not, to be sure, what typically passes for a beautiful character, not if that epithet is intended to identify an exalted moral stature. At times I felt that Charlie’s beauty got in the way of any reasonable estimation I might make of him as a person, and I wondered—only a little—at my own ability to be moved, consoled, by a beauty that could seem, at such moments, mainly skin-deep.

It’s not so easy to abandon the idea that beauty can never really be skin-deep, that genuine beauty is not only unproblematic but also somehow a sign of an essential goodness. “If the goodness of your heart was visible,” Jenny Diski writes, “it would surely look like Audrey Hepburn or Johnny Depp.” There was, I felt, in my friend, some indiscernible correspondence between his looks, his demeanor, and his true self, which had to be “good” in a way not always apparent even to those of us who loved him. I would not have known how to defend this impression had I been forced to do so, and it seemed to me the sort of lazy notion I typically despised.

Useful, perhaps, to recall something from Doris Lessing which may have some bearing on the question of beauty. Lessing noted what she called “a basic female ruthlessness” in herself, and went on to disdain the notion that gender is, in its essence, “socially constructed.” How, she asked, did she acquire her husband? She stole him from another woman. And how did she feel about that? She felt, she said, that it was “my right”: “When I’ve seen this creature emerge in myself, or in other women, I have felt awe.” No need to pursue the question of what was, or was not, a “basic female ruthlessness” in Lessing. No need, in fact, to ask whether anything in Lessing’s description has more to do with women than with men. Critical, however, to consider that the awe Lessing cites—a quality others might describe as pride, pride in being what one is—may well have much to do with the experience of oneself as a being sufficient, whole, indisputable, and yes, beautiful in one’s felt disdain for standards not of one’s own choosing, as for example moral standards that have something to say about a woman’s setting out to steal another woman’s husband. Lessing’s awe rests upon an indifference to ways of feeling and judging that would interfere with the pure enjoyment or appreciation of a sublime self-approval aloof from the trivial misgivings of assorted scolds and moralists.

My friend Charlie was not—not in any way I could get terribly worked up about—a bad man. He took no special pleasure in causing pain. But betrayal was not for him—certainly in the domain of ordinary relations between men and women—an operant concept or lurking sentiment. Though he would not describe his own somewhat predatory attitude toward women as ruthless, he moved with the certain sense that he was somehow bound to behave as he did. I never heard him speak of the awe he felt at the display of his own seductive gifts, but he had about him an enviable freedom from the misgivings and reluctances that often inhibit the projects of less headstrong and confident lovers. If our sense of what is beautiful, truly beautiful, always derives from some idea or impression of what is natural, fully consistent with its own intrinsic laws, then it was legitimate for me to think of my friend as beautiful, even where his behavior seemed reprehensible.

Would I have continued to think him beautiful had he been openly or slyly flirtatious with my own very beautiful wife? No doubt my estimation of Charlie’s beauty would then have been fatally compromised, for it would surely have seemed to me unnatural for this intimate friend of ours to ignore the obvious distress to which he would have blithely subjected both of us. The attentions in that case would then have seemed to me not an expression of supreme self-confidence but of a desire to wound, and it would have seemed to my wife not merely a testament to her own

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attractiveness but a symptom of Charlie's dark and complicated relation to me. In fact, the impression of our friend's beauty would then, I suppose, have given way to an impression of him as more than a little bit fucked up, driven and unpredictable and reckless, rather than healthy in the steady pursuit of his own pleasures.

Natalie Angier, among many other science writers, has studied the correlation between health and the capacity to experience "unfettered joy." She notes that "sensations like optimism, curiosity and rapture . . . not only make life worth living, but also make life last longer." The surge of awe Lessing described in acknowledging her own right to proceed in accordance with her desires is, in this sense, rightly understood as entailing an optimism about her prospects. Lessing—so we may say—felt rapture at the absence of impediments associated with anxiety or reluctance. She seemed beautiful to herself precisely in her healthy, uncomplicated understanding of strength and appetite. Angier would appear to ratify this sense of the case when she writes that "real joy, far from being merely a lack of stress, has its own decidedly active state of possession, the ripe and gorgeous feeling that we are among the blessed celebrants of life. It is a delicious, as opposed to a vicious, spiral of emotions." If there does seem something primitive about the condition so described, health a state in which a whole range of civilized sentiments (guilt, regret, pity) are simply not in play, it aptly embodies what we witness when we are in the presence of certain kinds of beauty.

Think, for a moment, of Stendhal's extraordinary Sanseverina in *The Charterhouse of Parma*, a figure who seems to us worldly, witty, robust, and assertive, in every way a magnificent woman, indisputably beautiful while also scheming, corrupt, and openly disdainful of the standard moral sentiments. Her physical beauty we accept on the basis of the passions and transports she inspires, though, as a woman past thirty, she takes herself to be already "old" and to have passed beyond the stage at which mere looks in a woman will suffice. Stendhal is clearly in love with her, however much he pretends, playfully, to be appalled at her stratagems and duplicities. She seems to him, we feel, an epitome, the incarnation of everything that would make a woman desirable. Though she can be, at times, genuinely compassionate, she is by no means routinely so, and no one alert to the full range of her thoughts and propensities would think her conventionally nice or sweet. She is clever, to be sure, though Stendhal does not, clearly, regard her as an embodiment of spiritual beauty. Her attractiveness, all apart from the physical attributes duly noted by men and women of her acquaintance, has to do with her confident rejection of the fastidious conventions of feeling and manner associated with ordinary decent women. To be in her presence is to feel a certain uneasy gladness; our senses are preternaturally alerted to a beauty not uplifting but troubling. Though Gertrude Stein once said that to call a work of art beautiful is to say, in effect, that it is dead, there is nothing remotely dead about the Sanseverina, who is not, of course, a work of art, but who is in her way a perfected emblem of a beauty that is bracing, not at all superficial or ephemeral.

My friend Charlie was, in his way, a much more elementary embodiment of the beautiful, his physical endowments consoling, obvious. Admirers did not need, as readers of *Charterhouse* do, to overcome in themselves a reluctance to submit to this beauty. And I never felt that his beauty required of me an exercise of taste presumably lacking in others. Charlie's character simply did not play any part in our impression, perhaps because in most respects he was likeable, not at all given to the plottings and subterfuges that so preoccupied Stendhal's Sanseverina. Charlie's was a more moderate temperament. His confidence required little in the way of testing or reinforcement. Though he was a learned and sophisticated man and knew that among educated persons the concept of the beautiful had become unpopular and retrograde, he could allow himself to take pleasure in beauty where he found it and did not regard the wish to ingratiate as a despicable sentiment. Had he been asked, he would not have agreed that the easy consolation derived by others from the contemplation of his own good looks was an unworthy satisfaction. No more would he have regarded the fact that judgments of beauty are often "subjective" as a reason to doubt their authenticity.

Charlie was, in the true and somewhat old-fashioned sense of the term, an art-lover. A gifted, sometimes brilliant fiction writer and essayist, he worried over the fate of the arts in a culture he thought he had good reason to mistrust, and he devoted a controversial book-length study to what he called *The Post-Modern Aura*. There he displayed his own fondness for the difficult and his suspicion of the accessible pleasures afforded by straightforward realist fiction. He was a man in search of rarefied pleasures, and he appreciated that, in art especially, persons like himself were apt to regard as beautiful what others might regard as unduly complex or self-conscious.

At the same time, he was unapologetic about his own appetite for accredited masterpieces and insisted that beautiful was obviously preferable to ugly. Though he understood perfectly that works once thought to be awkward or ugly—from the poems of T. S. Eliot to the music of Igor Stravinsky—could in time come to seem "beautiful" by virtue of their familiarity or their status as revered modernist artifacts, he resisted the easy view that taste was merely a matter of convention and that efforts to differentiate between the beautiful and the ugly were hopelessly naïve. Though he was an adept of interpretation, he was also drawn to Susan Sontag's famously provocative assertion that it was "the revenge of the intellect upon art," and he despised what she had designated the "overt contempt for appearances" that often figured so prominently in fashionably "advanced" readings of books and other artworks. In music he preferred the ravishing to the atonal and withholding, and he saw nothing limited or embarrassing in the canvases we examined together at an exhibition of Matisse's Moroccan paintings in New York. Theoretically he was inclined to agree with the critic Clement Greenberg that beauty, as commonly understood, is mostly irrelevant to the value of art. But he was, all the same, an inveterate beauty lover, and he was loath to accept that beauty has nothing to do with the success of particular artworks.

We were not at all surprised to learn, when Charlie died in March of 2006, that he had left his money and possessions to the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center, whose programs he had enjoyed for many years. Did the beauty he found in the performances of chamber works by Schubert, Haydn, Ravel, and others inspire him to feel beautiful beyond what he felt upon casually noting his own reflection in the mirror hung above his dressing table? I would imagine so. Though Elaine Scarry may well be right when she says "it does not appear to be the case that one who pursues beauty becomes beautiful," Charlie was always inclined to Plato's view in the *Symposium* that "life is worth living only in the contemplation of beauty."

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