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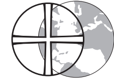

Beauty and the Eye of the Beholder: What Job Sees

MARTHA E. STORTZ

"Beauty is in the eye of the beholder." In its most hackneyed use, the proverb references the subjective nature of what is considered beautiful. What one person finds beautiful might not comport with the tastes of another. Taste impacts vision.

Beauty is in the eye of the beholder.

But the saying invites multiple interpretations. In another interpretation, the proverb refers not simply to *what* is seen but *how* one looks.[1] Vision, particularly the vision of things beautiful, depends upon the *eye* of the beholder, because people see what they want to see, often editing out all the rest. Quite literally, people find what they are looking for. For example, on his first voyage across the Atlantic, Christopher Columbus recorded sightings of mermaids, because he was certain they existed.[2] He was so convinced he was approaching the Far East that he read

[1] "Each of us is responsible for *how* we see, and how we see determines *what* we see. Seeing is not merely a physical act: the heart of vision is shaped by the state of the soul." John O'Donohue, *Beauty: The Invisible Embrace* (New York: HarperCollins, 2004), 18–19.

[2] Christopher Columbus, *The Four Voyages of Christopher Columbus*, ed. and trans. J. M. Cohen (London: Penguin, 1969).

Beauty is, as the saying goes, in the eye of the beholder. But God calls us to see the world not as we think it is but in the beauty of how God sees it. Job learns this through his dialogue with God, which assists him in moving outside of his own perspective and seeing how God intends both the human person and the world.

cloud formations piling up on the mountains of Cuba as steam, evidence of the heat-producing, gold-filled mountains of China. Columbus saw what he longed to see. Desire impacts vision.

Beauty is in the *eye* of the beholder.

Columbus's story also shows how the beholder's convictions, habits, and practices impact physical sight. An eye trained by the heart to look for mermaids finds them. An eye trained by the heart to fear strangers finds people to be afraid of. Every elderly white male is a redneck; every Latin American male, a potential member of M-18; everyone in hijab, a potential terrorist. In contrast, an eye trained to be attentive takes in detail, allowing the parts to construct an as-yet unimagined whole. An attentive gaze regards differently than a cursory glance. Character, or "the state of the soul," impacts vision.[3]

Beauty is in the eye of the *beholder*.

Taste, desire, and character all come together in the physical act of vision. The proverb digs deep in the human soul revealing a startling truth. We are what we look at, or, more accurately, we are what we attend to.

Perhaps the ancients knew well the power of attention. Vision in the ancient world was literally a matter of touch, as a light in the eye focused on an object, moving out to embrace it, and then returning to the eye to produce an image of that object for the soul to contemplate. From the fourth century, Augustine of Hippo spoke of the struggles of a friend fascinated by the carnage of the coliseum. Alypius acknowledged his addiction and worried about the state of a soul marked by violence.[4] His recovery was gradual, and it began with simply not looking, then not wanting to look, then looking at beautiful things, and finally, filling his soul with beauty. Alypius was in the garden with Augustine for his friend's conversion.[5]

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The book of Job explores questions of vision and attention, as a righteous man encounters affliction. From that point of view, what does Job see? And how does Job's vision inform our own? These questions direct this reflection, more a meditation than an argument, which considers beauty in the shadow of affliction.

[3] John O'Donohue, *Beauty*, 18.

[4] Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. R. S. Pine-Coffin (London: Penguin, 1961), 120–21.

[5] Augustine, *Confessions*, 177–79.

"But Now My Eye Sees You"

In some of the most lyrical poetry in Scripture, the book of Job tells its tale largely through dialogue. It contains lots of direct speech, and whenever Scripture presents dialogue and direct speech, readers know they should listen up. Third-person narrative delivers the necessary context—"they went here, and they did this"—but direct speech demands attention. Some of the direct speech in the book of Job involves long exchanges between Job and his friends, as they try to figure out what he might have done to deserve his sudden reversal of fortune. There are briefer exchanges between God and the Satan, here less the tempter of Genesis 3 than spokesperson for a rewards-punishment logic. The book concludes with a conversation between Job and God speaking as the voice from a whirlwind.

When the voice from the whirlwind finishes one of the longer interrogations, Job responds:

> I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear,
> but now my eye sees you;
> therefore I despise myself,
> and repent in dust and ashes.
> (Job 42:5–6)

Scholars spar over the proper translation of final phrase, "repent in dust and ashes," but it's important to note that Job gets the last words in this final conversation. After this, he speaks no further. Nor does God utter anything more to him. The divine voice goes on to chastise Job's friends Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar, each of whom has given a lengthy disquisition about why Job might have been afflicted by misfortune. Job's prayer can mitigate their punishment, but at this point in the story, neither Job's prayer nor the friends' responses are recorded. All conversations cease.

Though it carefully documents Job's return to his former status, the conclusion of the book of Job registers as anticlimactic. It unfolds in third person, much as the book began. Stripped of dramatic dialogues, the conclusion points back to Job's final haunting words:

> I have heard of you by the hearing of the ear,
> but now my eye sees you.

What does Job see? Addressing this question demands attending to a prior question: what does he no longer see?

What Job Doesn't See

From the cross of his suffering, Job has been thrust into a state of affliction, a term French philosopher Simone Weil adopts to describe a trifecta of suffering: physical

pain, social isolation, and spiritual abandonment.[6] Initially, Job can only register what he can't see, what is no longer in front of him. Those losses align with Weil's definition of affliction. Physically, Job has sores all over his body and finds himself in constant pain. Socially, he has lost all standing both with his home and within his community. Even the relationship with his God is threatened. As he gives voice to his abandonment, Job laments that he can no longer "see" God. At the outset, Job can only see what he no longer has. Each of these dimensions of affliction—physical, social, and spiritual—warrant further attention.

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Physically, Job's body is covered with "loathsome sores . . . from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head" (2:7). In the ancient world, skin disease banished one from human community. Conditions like leprosy, boils, and "loathsome sores" or unknown etiology were considered so contagious that those who had them were cast outside the gates of the city. They were too dangerous to be in the company of others.[7]

Job registers this change in status visually, remembering the time "when I went out to the gate of the city, when I took my seat in the square" (29:7), and nobles, kings, and elders came to him for counsel. While he dispensed advice to the rulers, he gave alms to the poor: "I delivered the poor who cried, and the orphan who had no helper. The blessing of the wretched came upon me, and I caused the widow's heart to sing for joy" (29:12–13). Now he no longer sees the people he used to see at the city gates. He sees only lepers and other bearers of contagion. They are his companions. Physical disease has exiled him outside the city gates.

Socially, Job counts losses in both private and public spheres. Early on, Job's sons and daughters perish in a windstorm, and Chaldean marauders kill his servants and carry off his livestock. Job's remaining family members now shun him, friends and acquaintances shut him out, relatives and close friends no longer remember him, and servants ignore his summons.

> He has put my family far from me,
>   and my acquaintances are wholly estranged from me.
> My relatives and my close friends have failed me;
>   the guests in my house have forgotten me;
> my serving-girls count me as a stranger;

[6] Simone Weil, "The Love of God and Affliction," in *The Simone Weil Reader* ed. George A. Panichas (Mt. Kisco, NY: Moyer Bell, 1977), 440–41.

[7] According to Lev 13:20, Job's skin disease would have rendered him unclean. See Diane Jacobson, "Job as a Theologian of the Cross," *Word & World* 31, no. 4 (Fall 2011), 375n1.

> I have become an alien in their eyes.
> I call to my servant, but he gives me no answer;
> I must myself plead with him.
> (19:13–16)

In his own household, Job has become invisible. Accordingly, he no longer sees the friends and family he used to see.

Not only does Job experience anonymity in the private sphere of family and friends, he is invisible in the public square, where he had enjoyed the status conferred on someone with his resources in wealth and piety. He used to hold court at the gates of the city, and

> the young men saw me and withdrew,
> and the aged rose up and stood;
> the nobles refrained from talking,
> and laid their hands on their mouths;
> the voices of princes were hushed,
> and their tongues stuck to the roof of their mouths. . . .
> I chose their way, and sat as chief,
> and I lived like a king among his troops,
> like one who comforts mourners.
> (29:8–9, 25)

All energy moves toward a center of gravity, and Job is that center, pulling everything toward him like a magnet. People make space for him; people move toward him.

As Job's lament continues, the energy turns around. Like a magnet reversed, Job repels the very people he used to attract.

> But now they make sport of me. . . .
> And now they mock me in song,
> I am a byword to them.
> They abhor me, they keep aloof from me;
> They do not hesitate to spit at the sight of me.
> (30:1, 9–10)

Spiritually, Job feels abandoned by his God. As one who "called upon God and he answered me" (12:4), Job is used to "seeing" God. Now he cannot look on that familiar presence. His wife urges Job to "curse God and die" (2:9). But Job will not abandon God, even though he feels God has abandoned him. Job never lets go of God.[8] He boldly assumes there is even someone there to receive his anger.

[8] As Diane Jacobson ("Job as a Theologian," 377) puts it so powerfully, "Even in his anger, or better, particularly in his honest and direct anger, Job never lets go of his intimate relationship to God."

Job insists on arguing his case before God; he begs for an audience, and in words that hearten similarly afflicted believers, he reveals his soul's deepest conviction:

> For I know that my Redeemer lives,
> and that at the last he will stand upon the earth;
> and after my skin has been thus destroyed,
> then in my flesh I shall see God.
> (19:25–26)

Job never surrenders his agency. He never asks "why me?" an utterance that would make him a victim, the object of someone else's action. He avoids the temptation of the accusative "me"; he retains his subjectivity and inhabits the nominative "I." As news of the first tragedies come in, Job says, "Naked *I* came from my mother's womb, and naked *I* shall return there" (1:21). Throughout the long conversations with his friends, Job never assumes the role of victim. He is always present to his suffering as "I." "*I* wish *I* had never been born." "*I* cry to you." "*I* stand." As his final words roll down, Job still responds as the subject of his own situation. "*I* know that you can do all things. . . . Therefore, *I* have uttered what *I* did not understand"(42:2–3). The areas over which Job has control have drastically shrunk, but he never relinquishes the "I."

Moreover, as a subject, Job speaks directly *to* God. While his friends merely speak about God, speculating about divine motive in third person, Job uses direct address. He calls out a Redeemer he knows is alive.[9]

What Job Sees

Job claims his subjectivity; he claims his vision. He dares to address God directly. Maybe it's this fierce self-possession in the midst of affliction, that crucible of physical pain, social isolation, and spiritual abandonment, that opens Job to what the voice from the whirlwind reveals.

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Job gets the audience he requested. The voice from the whirlwind responds with a fierce agency of its own and addresses Job as another subject. There is plenty of direct speech in the ensuing conversation, and it proceeds like a courtroom

[9] Kathryn Schifferdecker, *Out of the Whirlwind: Creation Theology in the Book of Job* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 55.

interrogation. Backgrounded against the destruction of all that Job had made for himself, the voice from the whirlwind paints another story of creation:

> Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?
>   Tell me, if you have understanding.
> Who determined its measurements—surely you know!
> (38:4–5)

The first of the divine speeches evokes Genesis in chronicling the creation. The cosmos unfolds. First come the building blocks of the world: the earth, sea, light, and darkness (38:4–21); then, the meteorological phenomena: snow, hail, winds, rain, dew, ice, frost, stars, clouds, and lightning (38:22–38); and finally, the animal world (38:39–39:30). The creation rolls out in dazzling and somewhat terrifying beauty. Unlike the Genesis stories of creation, though, there is no dominant human presence walking in this landscape, naming its parts, or taking dominion. The world the divine speeches describe exists outside the walls of the city, outside the borders of the civilized world, outside the control of human jurisdiction. Because he has been exiled from city and civilized company, Job can catch a glimpse.

Nor is the creation laid out in the divine speeches without order. There are "measurements" for the foundation of the earth; a "line" has been stretched upon it (38:5); there are "bounds" prescribed for the sea, "bars and doors" enclose it (38:9); the dawn "knows its place" (38:12). Indeed, God directly addresses the sea: "Thus far shall you come, and no farther, and here shall your proud waves be stopped" (38:11). For the ancient Near Eastern peoples, the sea evoked both awe and terror. There is no absence of "place, limit, and non-encroachment" in the divine speeches.[10] This creation is under control, it's just under a divine watch that neither Job nor his colleagues have ever encountered.

Now God calls Job out in a battery of questions: "Who is this?" "Where were you?" "Were you there when . . . ?" The address decenters Job, situating him in a horizon that dwarfs the once-familiar surroundings of home, family, and city. Yet Job's very exile from these places positions him to see more.

The divine interrogation goes on, gaining strength, and it seems like Job is going to get mowed down by the Creation Machine, the last insult for someone who's done no wrong. But indeed, where *is* Job without his children, his servants, his property, and his health? Where *is* Job without his honor, his standing in the community? Job the righteous man, who used to be able to do so much for so many people, is rendered useless. He who was once at the center has now been pushed out to a wild, untamed, ungoverned, and ungovernable place: the edge of the city, the edges of civilization.

[10] See Carol A. Newsom, "The Moral Sense of Nature: Ethics in the Light of God's Speech to Job," *Princeton Seminary Bulletin* 15, no.1 (1994), 20.

There is, it seems, a lot of company out there. The creatures so vividly described in the book's final chapters inhabit the fringes of what might be considered an "ordered life," particularly a life ordered by humans.

There are wild animals, in particular, the wild ass, to whom God has given "the steppe for its home, the salt land for its dwelling place. It scorns the tumult of the city; it does not hear the shouts of the driver" (39:5–7). The description is affectionate. God loves this wild thing.

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Then there's the ostrich, which has wings—plumes, even!—but does not fly. It doesn't even know how to take care of its young, "because God has made it forget wisdom, and given it no share in understanding" (39:17). As a parent, the bird is useless. Yet, "when it spreads its plumes aloft, it laughs at the horse and its rider" (39:18). The ostrich's feathers serve no purpose but beauty, but an ostrich on the ground, flapping its plumes to get aloft, makes even the tamest horse rear. God delights in that.

The last two creatures mentioned in this alternative story of creation are the Behemoth and the Leviathan. And the Behemoth, probably a hippopotamus, violates all kinds of boundaries, living both on land and in water. The first stories of creation carefully segregated animals that live on land from animals that live in air from animals that live in water. The Behemoth, it seems, breaks all the rules. And the Behemoth eats whatever it wants, wherever it finds it, again against the rules of the first stories of creation. Humans beware, but to God this creature is utterly magnificent.

The Leviathan is the Behemoth of the oceans: "There is terror all around its teeth . . . , its sneezes flash forth light, and its eyes are like the eyelids of the dawn" (41:13–14, 18). The Leviathan is the most monstrous of the sea monsters, but who wouldn't want to see those eyes? Like the Behemoth, the Leviathan is wild, utterly ungovernable, and completely useless to the human project.

All of these creatures live outside the cities, romping on the edges of the mountains, the seas, the borders of civilization. All of these creatures are emphatically part of the divine project. In all their wildness and their sheer uselessness to the human project, God delights in them. Indeed, God loves them because they are wild; God loves them because they are useless. They serve no purpose but beauty.

Job in his isolation, his uselessness, his suffering, is not abandoned. Job has just joined the Wild Things. Suffering initiated Job into this wild tribe of trespassers, tricksters, and border-crossers. And *because*—not *in spite of*—but *because* Job is part of this crowd, God delights in him, too. More importantly, God is there beside Job, accompanying him.

How Job's Vision Might Inform Our Own

The dialogue between Job and the voice from the whirlwind is the dramatic climax of the story; it is not the conclusion. Narrated in the third person, the conclusion reports that Job regains twice as much as he had before. His brothers and sisters return to feast with him again. He has seven sons and three daughters, and the daughters are named Jemimah, Keziah, and Keren-happuch. They are women of extraordinary beauty, and they receive an inheritance along with their brothers. Job dies "old and full of days" (42:17).

But has Job changed?[11] He has seen affliction as physical pain, social isolation, and spiritual abandonment. He has seen a view from the margins. Finally, he has seen the world from a theocentric perspective. This angle of vision transforms Job as a beholder.

First, Job has seen affliction. It was etched into his body. He lost the company of his friends and family. His relationship with God was called into question. The divine speeches reveal a beauty that is utterly outside human control but wholly obedient to God. Job can only see this beauty when he has lost control of everything. Only then, when he has given up the illusion of control, is the beauty of the world revealed in its fullness.[12]

Job's vision informs our own by reminding us that beauty pulses underneath the white noise of self-important busyness.

Job's vision informs our own by reminding us that beauty pulses underneath the white noise of self-important busyness. Affliction sweeps away all distraction, breaks open the soul, and allows the light of divine beauty to seep in. Artist and composer Leonard Cohen puts this truth to music: "There is a crack in everything; that's how the light gets in."[13] Suffering presents a crash course in the perception of beauty. Nature offers everyday access. In an illustration of the "unselfing" power of beauty, Iris Murdoch reaches for nature: "I am looking out of my window in an anxious and resentful state of mind, oblivious of my surroundings, brooking perhaps on some damage done to my prestige. Then suddenly I observe a hovering kestrel. In a moment everything is altered. There is nothing now but kestrel. . . . And when I return to thinking of the other matter it seems less important."[14] Beauty surrounds us, if we would only notice.

[11] The question of Job's transformation animates the work of biblical scholars Jacobson, "Job as a Theologian," and Newsom, "Moral Sense of Nature," 20.

[12] "So it was that to Job, when once the veil of flesh had been rent by affliction, the world's stark beauty was revealed. The beauty of the world appears when we recognize that the substance of the universe is necessity and that the substance of necessity is obedience to a perfectly wise Love." Weil, "Love of God and Affliction," 456.

[13] Leonard Cohen, "Anthem," *The Future* (Columbia Records, 1992).

[14] Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good* (New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970), 84.

Second, Job has seen a view from the margins. He now knows what things look like from the edges of the city and the borders of civilization. As Job returns to these once-familiar centers, that view from the margins burns on his retinas like the afterimage of a bright object one has stared at for too long. The afterimage of that view impacts the way he looks at everything and informs his every action.

Perhaps that afterimage prompts Job to give his daughters an inheritance, an unusual move but one that gives them some freedom. Perhaps that view from the margins prompts the author of the story to name the daughters, conferring on them a subjectivity that the narrative does not accord Job's sons. Job has the advantage of seeing the world both from the centers of power and from the margins.

Job's vision informs our own, asking each of us to name the views we have from the center and the periphery. Job's bifocal vision demands that we are not only aware of the difference in these vantage points but see and speak for the perspective of the marginalized when we are at positions closer to the center. Bifocal vision carries responsibilities.

Finally, the voice from the whirlwind moves Job from an anthropocentric to a theocentric view of the world. The worlds of the city and civilization were oriented around human ties to family, community, and a civic good. The world according to God runs by a different logic. There are still times and seasons, pathways and storehouses, but these times and places are not organized around a human project, a fact that makes everything they govern both terrifying and beautiful. God's creation serves no purpose but beauty. Job beholds the scope of *that* creation and collapses in wonder.

Job's vision informs our own. As we behold the world from his various angles of vision—center, margin, and center again—we cannot miss the fact that throughout Job is himself beheld by God. God has not let him go. ⊕

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