

## Beauty

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WHAT does it mean to be interested in beauty? The last decade or two have seen renewed attention to beauty both within our field, where economic and liberal discourses as well as discourses of science and the body have been brought to bear on established aesthetic traditions, and in the humanities at large, where the aesthetic has to some extent been recuperated from charges of cultural elitism and social irrelevance. I shall not attempt to count the ways beauty has been defined in nineteenth-century literature and culture nor to chart its manifold forms and values across the century, nor even to connect it, strategically or otherwise, to the present. Rather, I shall attempt to outline a political interpretation of beauty by reflecting not just on what it meant but also for whom. In so doing, I place the stress on interest, that is, on the complexities of being interested in beauty amidst the social transformations of nineteenth-century Britain.

Let me turn to Raymond Williams by way of registering the complexities of interest and, at the same time, registering appreciation for his work. Williams is, characteristically, alert to the shifting historical senses of interest: it is, he notes, “a significant example of a word with specialized legal and economic senses which, within a particular social and economic history, has been extended to a very general meaning,” and, he continues, “the now predominant sense of general curiosity or attention, or having the power to attract curiosity and attention, is not clear before C19.”<sup>1</sup> Here are the grounds of possibility for being interested in beauty. Put differently, beauty might be understood in a limited sense as a marker of taste and privilege (as, for instance, in the essays of Walter Pater) and in an expansive sense as a means of imagining the lives of individual subjects and their roles and responsibilities in society (as, for example, in the writings of John Ruskin).

I do not want to overdraw the opposition between Ruskin and Pater but instead gesture to the terms of debate. To this end, I want to make three claims about the debate over beauty in nineteenth-century Britain. First, that it arose from and spoke to a particular set of conditions including (but not limited to) state intervention into matters of art, the ascendancy of the middle classes and the alienation of the working classes, and the extension of the franchise. Second, that it pivoted on the distinction between self-regarding and other-regarding actions as

critics, artists, and arts administrators directed individuals and groups to identify a position amongst conflicting understandings of interest in order to participate in the collective life of society and also recognize their own aesthetic advantage or detriment. Third, that it revealed conflicts between established political notions of nobility and class hierarchy and emerging democratic ideals of liberty, individuality, and equality.<sup>2</sup> One way of thinking about the content and consequences of these claims is to borrow a statement from Dean Mathiowetz, a political theorist who contends that “arguments from interest . . . are claims about ‘who’ somebody is, and provocations to act in such a way that this ‘who’ is realized,” and, further, that “identity is not a backdrop to interest; rather, an appeal to the interest of an agent is an ascription to that agent of *an* identity against a field of possibilities.”<sup>3</sup>

To parse this statement, let me now offer an example of how beauty might serve as the ground for democracy as well as an instrument of social justice. It is well known that William Morris championed “the Democracy of Art” in his lectures and socialist writings, decrying the destruction of society by the forces of industrial capitalism and advocating for its reconstruction by reinvesting value in the production of beautiful objects.<sup>4</sup> The terms by which Morris explains this cause bear more than a passing resemblance to Alexis de Tocqueville’s opinions about the cultivation of the arts in *Democracy in America*.<sup>5</sup> Morris was not impressed by received standards of art on the evidence of his admittedly rare visits to the Royal Academy, however. More appealing to his political and aesthetic sensibilities were the possibilities presented by free exhibitions in working-class districts of, say, Manchester and London. Take the Whitechapel Fine Art Loan Exhibition: its purpose, Morris explained at the Easter opening in 1884, was to show “beauty, imagination, [and] fancy” to “a set of people much in need of such instruction,” and to prove “a serious man” can dedicate his life to “expressing these qualities for the benefit of his fellows.”<sup>6</sup> Or take the art exhibition at New Islington Hall in Ancoats, Manchester where, in the same year, Morris called on workingmen to claim their right to beauty: “the qualities of beauty and interest which have made these works the wonder of the world should be present in some way or another in your own daily work and have their influence on your home life, making it orderly, beautiful, in a word human.”<sup>7</sup>

Morris was not alone in wanting a less impoverished and more tolerant and inclusive understanding of beauty; at the same time, his provocations to action were not devoid of exclusions since his appeal was made

expressly and consistently to workingmen. In fact, the Whitechapel Fine Art Loan Exhibition (sometimes called the St. Jude's Picture Exhibition) appealed to a broader constituency of women, children, and men than Morris admitted. Set up on the initiative of Samuel and Henrietta Barnett and inspired by their commitment to Ruskin's teachings on art and society, the Exhibitions, which ran from 1881 to 1897, represent a practical endeavor to democratize beauty.<sup>8</sup> "What do the people want with fine art? . . . Show them an oleograph of 'Little Red Riding Hood,' or a colored illustration of 'Daniel in the Lion's Den,' and they will like it just as much as Mr. Millais's 'Chill October' or Mr. Watts's 'Love and Death.'" Such were some of the opinions Henrietta Barnett recorded about the very idea of "having an art exhibition in Whitechapel."<sup>9</sup> And yet, the Barnetts persisted in their belief that objects of beauty could offer a moral and cultural counterweight to the problem of poverty. The intersection of contemporary art with social impoverishment at St. Jude's reveals tensions between tradition and progress, between class hierarchy and property, between sacred and secular, and between aesthetic and economic conditions. These tensions are, I propose, fundamental to understanding beauty in nineteenth-century Britain.

#### NOTES

1. Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 171, 172. For a related account of interest, see Albert O. Hirschman, "The Concept of Interest: From Euphemism to Tautology," in *Rival Views of Market Society* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1986), 35–55.
2. For detailed explanation of these claims, see my book: *Democratising Beauty in Nineteenth-Century Britain: Art and the Politics of Public Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 1–17.
3. Dean Mathiowetz, *Appeals to Interest: Language, Contestation, and the Shaping of Political Agency* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2011), 9–10.
4. See, in particular, William Morris, "Art under Plutocracy," in *The Collected Works of William Morris, with Introductions by His Daughter May Morris. Volume XXIII: Signs of Change. Lectures on Socialism* (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1915), 164–91.
5. Alexis de Tocqueville, "Of the Spirit in which the Americans Cultivate the Arts," in *Democracy in America*, trans. Henry Reeve, new ed., 2 vols. (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1889), 2: 42–49.

6. May Morris, *William Morris. Artist Writer Socialist. Volume the Second* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1936), 165.
7. Morris, *William Morris*, 413.
8. On the Exhibitions, see Seth Koven, "The Whitechapel Picture Exhibitions and the Politics of Seeing," in *Museum Culture: Histories, Discourses, Spectacles*, ed. Daniel J. Sherman and Irit Rogoff (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 22–48; and Diana Maltz, "In ample halls adorned with mysterious things aesthetic: Toynbee Hall as Aesthetic Haven," in *British Aestheticism and the Urban Working Classes, 1870–1900. Beauty for the People* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 67–97.
9. Henrietta Barnett, "Pictures for the People," in *Practicable Socialism: Essays on Social Reform*, 2nd ed. (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1894), 175.



## Boy

MATTHEW KAISER

Though she called me 'boy' so often, and with a carelessness that was far from complimentary, she was of about my own age.

—Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations*<sup>1</sup>

**B**EYE; boye; boie; boi. It is unclear why the voiced bilabial stop known as the “b” sound, when harnessed to the business end of the diphthong “oi,” should appeal to the medieval ear as a means of communicating diminutive or low status in male persons. What *is* clear, however, is that, by the early thirteenth century, the slang term “boye,” introduced to England by Dutch sailors and Frisian merchants, and watered liberally by tavern badinage, had taken root in English. By the time Edward I expelled the Jews in 1290 and conquered Wales, the monosyllable had experienced a lexical growth spurt, acquiring three related but distinct meanings: male child; knave; and male servant or slave. “Boy” as “knave” (the dubious, illegitimate or base man) barely survived the fourteenth century, petering out in the fifteenth, but “boy” as “male child” (the proto-man, the not-yet man, the unformed or half-grown man)