

# **Adam Drozdek**

---

## **Solovyov on beauty**

---

**Studia Philosophiae Christianae 43/2, 43-54**

---

**2007**

Artykuł został zdigitalizowany i opracowany do udostępnienia w internecie przez Muzeum Historii Polski w ramach prac podejmowanych na rzecz zapewnienia otwartego, powszechnego i trwałego dostępu do polskiego dorobku naukowego i kulturalnego. Artykuł jest umieszczony w kolekcji cyfrowej **bazhum.muzhp.pl**, gromadzącej zawartość polskich czasopism humanistycznych i społecznych.

Tekst jest udostępniony do wykorzystania w ramach dozwolonego użytku.

ADAM DROZDEK  
*Duquesne University, Pittsburgh*

## SOLOVYOV ON BEAUTY

1. Ontology. 2. Beauty. 3. Art. 4. Tasks of Art. 5. Theurgy. 6. Beauty and all-unity.

Vladimir Solovyov, one of the greatest Russian philosophers, made an impressive effort to create a monistic system which would allow for rational explanation of Christian truths. In the ontological system he created, beauty occupies a prominent position as a mark of what he called the all-unity. Was he entirely successful in this effort? How does he understand beauty and what is its relation to the aesthetic meaning of the concept?

### 1. ONTOLOGY

According to Solovyov, the nature of man has three forms of existence: feeling (*chuvstvo*), thinking, and willing, each one with two sides: individual and social (F 257)<sup>1</sup>. Objective beauty is the object of feeling, objective truth – of thinking, objective good – of will (F 258). As in man, so in the existent (the absolute, God), there are also will, thinking, and feeling (F 364). The absolute can exist only through actualization in its other, the other cannot exist in separation from the absolute, since in this separation it is pure nothing (F 355). The

---

<sup>1</sup> The following abbreviations will be used:

ChB – Чтения о Богочеловечестве [1877-1881], in: В.С. Соловьев, *Собрание сочинений*, Санкт-Петербург 1911-1914, vol. 3, 3-180.

F – Философские начала цельного знания [1877], vol. 1, 250-406.

K – Критика отвлеченных начал [1877-1880], vol. 2, 3-397.

KP – Красота в природе [1889], vol. 6, 33-74.

OSI – Общий смысл искусства [1890], vol. 6, 75-90.

P – Значение поэзии в стихотворениях Пушкина [1899], vol. 9, 294-347.

other has no reality in separation from the existent, it is pure potentiality, matter, *hyle, me on*. This potentiality can be actualized only through the existent's will (F 363). Through Logos, the absolute determines itself as the existent, prime matter as essence, and their relation as being (F 359). Prime matter is called idea. „Idea is what the existent wants, what it represents, what it feels – its own object and content. As the content of the existent's will, the idea is the good, as the content of its representation, it is truth, as the content of its feeling, it is beauty” (F 363, ChB 107). The existent wills, represents, and feels the all (ChB 109-110), and goodness, truth, and beauty are only different forms of unity, forms in which the all – the absolute's content (idea) – is manifested for the absolute (ChB 110). The good is the goal, truth is an indispensable means of actualizing it, beauty is the real fulfillment (F 372). In other words, the existent, confirming an idea as the good, actualizes it through truth in beauty. Such an act is the subjectivization of the existent and objectivization of the prime matter, turning it from pure potentiality into an essence or idea (F 373). The unity lies in the fact that the same idea which is thought as truth is also willed as good and felt as beauty (F 379).

After the fall, the physical framework is created by God to enable the world to reach at least partial order and unity. The framework is extended gradually, beginning with time, space, and gravity, and then other laws are created during the world process to enable the world to ascend to a higher and higher level of order. This framework with physical phenomena is the domain of science. Science is disinterested in the underlying intelligible actuality of world soul and intelligible entities whose configurations manifest themselves as physical events. Science limits itself to the natural world which is the world of appearance, the real world, but this is the reality of a dream. Science has thus an appearance of control over the world by using natural laws to arrange and rearrange phenomena, to attain some effects using particular causes. However, the real action is beneath the surface of natural reality. Real forces are forces of entities, and if science and technology actualize certain goals, they do that with the second-hand tools, the natural world. The rearrangement of entities in the intelligible realm and exercise of their forces is invisible, even nonexistent to science. In a way, science deludes itself by thinking that it has a control over the world with the application of causal links between phenomena,

whereas the forces which are really responsible for changes in the natural world are inaccessible to it. They are inaccessible to science because such access can be made through the kind of experience which science rejects, namely through mystical experience. This is experience which enables philosophical investigations. Speaking about the absolute, its other, the existent and being, about God and the fall, the ultimate good, truth, and beauty cannot be done through observations and experiment. This experience is also used by artists, real artists who are inspired to perform their craft through promptings of the world beyond our world.

## 2. BEAUTY

Solovyov defined beauty as the embodiment in perceptible forms of the ideal content called good and truth (OSI 76). Beauty is transformation of matter through embodiment in it of a supramaterial principle (KP 41) or of an idea (KP 43); it is not an embodiment of just any idea, but only an idea which is worthy of existence and only an absolutely perfect and free entity is worthy of existence (KP 44), which means an entity being a part of perfectly harmonious all-unity<sup>2</sup>. A diamond is beautiful because it is an excellent embodiment of the idea of a shining stone, but a worm is not beautiful, because it is not a good embodiment of an animal organism (KP 46).

Such explanations are not entirely convincing. Glass is supposedly less beautiful than diamond; it does not belong to the beautiful phenomena and has no aesthetic significance (KP 40). However, glass can be considered an embodiment of an idea of glass, even a perfect embodiment, and as such, it should be considered beautiful. It would not have any aesthetic significance if there were no idea which is embodied in glass. Similarly, with a worm. It may poorly embody an idea of a living animal, but it may be an excellent embodiment of an idea of a worm<sup>3</sup>. Therefore, the definition of

---

<sup>2</sup> Any absolutely perfect and free entity is worthy of existence, not only the absolute, as suggested by M. Tenace, *La beauté. Unité spirituelle dans les écrits esthétiques de Vladimir Soloviev*, Troyes 1993, 70, and D. Strémooukhoff, *Vladimir Soloviev and his messianic work*, Belmont 1980 [1935], 299.

<sup>3</sup> There are authors in whose opinion worms are beautiful, e. g., L. Riley, W. Riley, *Nature's strongholds*, Princeton 2005, 586, or a worm is beautiful, e. g., E. J. van Bruyssel, *The population of an old pear-tree*, London 1870, 188; J. Micheline, *Beauty is everywhere*, in: *The outlaw Bible of American poetry*, ed. A. Kaufman, S.A. Griffin, New York 1999, 98.

beauty Solovyov proposed is at the very least incomplete. The definition could be defended by stating that there are natural objects and phenomena for which there is no corresponding idea. There is no worm idea and thus natural worms are not beautiful. Because everything in the natural world is a manifestation of configurations of entities in the intelligible world, worms would be considered manifestations of some entities which when manifested separately would be beautiful. Such a solution, however, seems to be highly artificial. Or, the worm idea is much different from its natural embodiments and what we see is consistently a poor rendering of the invisible worm idea. Only through an experience of a mystic or through an inspiration of an artist could the worm idea be accessed and actualized in our world, if only in art. With this solution, it is assumed that our perception of the world is always (or, usually) untarnished: if we see something as ugly, the immediate conclusion is that the underlying idea is not adequately embodied. But it just as well can be the fault of our vision: we see something as ugly because our perception is imperfect. After all, the perception takes place in a principally imperfect world, the world saturated with sin, the illusory world after the fall; why should perception in this world come out unharmed? Therefore, although Solovyov stressed the objective character of beauty, its subjective character cannot be ruled out when his metaphysical views are taken into account in full measure.

### 3. ART

The contact between the natural world and the world beyond is made through man who, being a natural being that also has mind and will, is created in the image of God and is eventually capable of deification. Also, as phrased by Solovyov, man can impact the world process because of his possession of consciousness (OSI 76). Not all a man does joins together the two worlds, natural and supranatural. Sensory perception binds man to the natural world alone, and so does the logic of scientific investigation. Mystical experience is needed and an artist, a true artist, is someone who can be touched by such experience through inspiration, through a visitation of the Muses (P 301-302), through special sensitivity of the soul to an influence of the domain of the subconscious (P 303), which can only be waited upon, but never forced (P 305-306). He is a vessel

sel that waits for being filled from above (P 322). „The mind is silent before inspiration” (P 301). An artist waits for the voice of God like prophets of old did (P 319). What should an artist do with this experience, and what is the task of art? The goal of the entire world process is the restoration of all-unity shattered by the two falls – the fall of the world soul and then the fall of man – making world a cosmos, a perfectly harmonious and ordered universe where unity does not exclude individuality, where individuality does not undermine the integrity of the whole, where an element senses in its particularity the integrity of the whole and its particularity in the whole, in which God is all in all (OSI 81), in which all is one in perfect interpenetration<sup>4</sup>. Such all-unity is the highest ideal, and perfect art should embody the absolute ideal in actual life (OSI 90). How? This is less clear.

Art is defined by Solovyov as any sensory representation of any object or event from the point of view of its final state or in the light of the future world (OSI 85). However, the definition seems to be too broad because it really encompasses domains not traditionally associated with art. People must survive to speak of any final state and future world, and computerization today seems to be a means of survival. Therefore, any printed computer program, a sensory representation of the actions undertaken by a computer, appears to be a work of art. But even in traditionally understood art, Solovyov's definition is of little help. Any representation from the point of view of the future world is art. How can that help in distinguishing between a good novel and a bad one, a splendid painting and a kitsch? Solovyov's definition focuses on what is represented, not how it is represented. But even if we focus on the „what?” what is this what? What should art represent?

Inevitably, a mystical experience is needed to access the reality itself, the world of intelligible entities, and see the truth. Solovyov very likely borrowed here from the Orthodox doctrine of icon painting. An icon is a true window to the spiritual world because it is painted by an iconographer who through a vision was able to see what the icon should represent. For Solovyov, each work of art seems to be on the same level as an icon: a work of an inspired artist whose mystical experience brings him in contact with all-one, with truth,

---

<sup>4</sup> General interpenetration is the essence of moral goodness (OSI 76).

goodness, and beauty. And, apparently, this is done in such a manner that even those devoid of mystical experience can appreciate such work of art. After all, most of the Orthodox believers are not mystics, and yet they venerate icons and esteem them very highly.

#### 4. TASKS OF ART

Solovyov specified art's tasks thus: „1. objectivization of attributes of living idea that cannot be expressed by nature, 2. spiritualization of natural beauty, and 3. immortalization of its individual manifestations” (OSI 84). Grand as it sounds, it is far from clear what the meaning of these phrases is. There exists beauty in nature, but natural processes by themselves cannot embody perfect beauty (OSI 83). The deficiencies of natural forces are rectified by man who, as a conscious being, can go further because he can see deeper than nature by itself. A living idea is apparently the idea of what should be, an idea that cannot be directly found in the natural world and can be accessed through mystical experience. By seeing the idea, man is able to embody it in nature, i. e., objectify it.

The second task is less clear. Spiritualization of natural beauty? Solovyov mentioned spiritualization of matter (OSI 77, 82, 83), where spiritualization of matter is synonymous with embodiment of spiritual life in nature (OSI 84) and, apparently, with embodying beauty in it (OSI 77). Actualization of all-unity should be done by integration of spiritual and material existence. This is done by spirit's incarnation in matter and also by matter accepting the ideal activity of soul, by being penetrated by spirit to become transformed, transsubstantiated into it (OSI 81-82). On the other hand, a material phenomenon that really becomes beautiful by incorporating the idea should become as lasting and immortal as the idea itself. This phenomenon should participate in immortality of the spiritual principle (OSI 82). It appears that the reference to immortality in the case of material phenomena is at best misleading. Perfect incarnation of beauty in matter means transformation of matter into spirit, means disappearance of matter. Matter is not eternal and cannot be eternal because matter does not allow for interpenetration of things and phenomena, at least because of the existence of space and time, and interpenetration is necessary for perfect all-unity. Matter is immortal in the transubstantiated, spiritualized form, but this is not matter any more.

Spiritualization of natural beauty seems to be bringing somehow natural beauty to the level of spiritual beauty, eventually making nature spiritual, dissolving nature in the spiritual world, making the spiritual world the only reality. Because the essence of this reality lies in the idea of truth-good-beauty, if spiritual beauty breaks through nature, it melts it to nothingness. Physical nature with its natural and imperfect beauty disappears, spiritual beauty and the all-unity remains as the only reality. However, the way artists should accomplish such a lofty cosmic goal is not altogether clear. Is simply painting or composing music sufficient to spiritualize natural beauty? Art is not repetition of nature, but a continuation of nature's work, which is striving for unity at the end of history (OSI 75), so, a painting continues on a higher plane the work of ordering the universe started by nature in, say, the beauty of a landscape. However, what does it really mean that the painting is spiritualization of such landscape? By the mere fact that it is transferred onto a canvas? Maybe it is by expressing better on the canvas the beauty which shines through the landscape? That would be what Solovyov called mediated anticipation of perfect beauty through reinforcement of given beauty (OSI 85). This would be rather an uncontroversial statement, but this would change the meaning of spiritualization, which is to be the embodying of spiritual life or embodying beauty: mediated anticipation is extracting beauty from nature, spiritualization is affecting nature through saturating it with beauty.

The third task of art, immortalization of natural beauty's individual manifestations, is equally well sounding but unclear. Nature is finite, mortal, riddled with death and dissipation. Nothing is immortal in nature. The spiritual world, the world of entities, is eternal. But this world is under control of the absolute, under the providence of God. Creating something immortal would mean creating something in the intelligible world which was never there, but man is not capable of accomplishing it. So, how can anything be immortalized? Composing a symphony may very well embody musical beauty, but this beauty is already immortal, not created by the composer. An artist does not really create anything: he discovers what exists in the intelligible world through mystical experience and expresses it with material means. An artist is a vehicle of bringing to the world immortal beauty, a vehicle of God's revelation

through beauty, the beauty which already exists<sup>5</sup>. Only in this sense can individual manifestations be immortalized, but the phrase is at best misleading, and – in the context of Solovyov's own metaphysics – it hardly expresses the task of art.

### 5. THEURGY

Beauty should improve reality, said Solovyov (KP 33), therefore, the more beauty in nature, the better nature is. Nature would be best if all of it were beauty. Natural processes cannot accomplish this; man has to have his share, in particular, the artist. By incorporating beauty in nature through his art, the artist saturates the natural and social world with truth and goodness. The more beautiful the world is, the truer it is, i. e., closer to all-unity, and morally better. An artist has thus an immensely important task, namely saving the world through beauty, and for this reason Solovyov uses an oft-quoted saying of Dostoevsky that beauty saves the world, as the epigraph to his „Beauty in nature”. This is a divine task, but God works through art, or rather, through artists, to improve and eventually save the world. The work of the artist is a divine work, divine creativity, it is theurgy. This creativity is limited to art. Through this creative, theurgic activity, man strives for the union of this world with the higher world (F 286). Through theurgy, man does not contemplate God, but aims at deification of man, at working together with God to transform humanity and the world from physical nature to spiritual, divine nature. This is transsubstantiation of matter into spirit, transformation of natural life into divine life<sup>6</sup>. The task of art is to transform existing reality and replace external relations between divine, human, and natural principles with internal, organic relations between them (K 352), is to spiritualize and transform our life (OSI 90). Truly, such a broadly defined task not only differs from the task commonly given to art, but sometimes even contradicts it (K 353). However, who establishes limits to art (OSI 90)? With such statements Solovyov seems to confuse the issues even more.

---

<sup>5</sup> In this sense, immortalization of beauty is merely „giving a foretaste of eternity,” as suggested by Tenace, op. cit., 97.

<sup>6</sup> В.С. Соловьев, *Духовные основы жизни*, in his *Собрание сочинений*, Санкт Петербург 1911-1914, vol. 3, 377.

If art is any spiritualization and transformation of natural and social life on the way to all-unity, then any activity is artistic. Solovyov concentrated in his discussions of art on poetry, but brought in also other traditional art such as painting, sculpture, literature, music, and also a borderline art, namely architecture (e. g. OSI 85-86, F 262). Arguably, most of painting is art, even if it is poor quality art, and most of architecture is not quite art, even in the case of solid, reliable end products<sup>7</sup>. It is hard to see how a painting hanging in a museum transforms matter into spirit more effectively than a dull building. It seems that what is not considered part of traditional art can be better suited for fulfilling the task of poetry, e. g., culinary art, martial art, the art of conducting business. However, Solovyov may have said that inspiration is necessary to accomplish the task of spiritualizing matter, a mystical experience which is a divine gift, and no one knows whether and when it will be granted. But why should such inspiration be limited to poetry and painting? Why not include here the invention of mechanical devices or the design of mathematical theories? The many accounts of scientific discoveries state that an idea came to discoverers or inventors in a flash of a moment. And although, say, a piston engine would hardly be classified as art, it is a product of inspiration and transforms our lives, hopefully, for the better, in the direction indicated by Solovyov. So, it appears to be theurgic work just as much as art.

With this, the outcome of Solovyov's discussion of art and beauty has little in common with traditional aesthetics. Beauty is introduced as an ontological entity and a theologically rooted being. There is really one spectator needed for such beauty, which is God. God then creates the world, which after the two falls should be brought back to Him, and this is done by thoroughly permeating the world with this divine beauty, thereby transforming the world from material to a spiritual and harmonious domain. This divine beauty, Solovyov claimed, manifests itself in the world through human work as traditionally understood beauty, and, as such, it is considered to have been brought down to earth by art. Because beauty is central in spiritualization and beauty is central in art, the task of individual and social li-

---

<sup>7</sup> In Solovyov's parlance, architecture is technical art because of prominent significance of material, not just form (F 262).

fe becomes equated with the task of art<sup>8</sup>, which sounds quite elitist. Most of people are not artists, not many people claim for themselves mystical experience leading to work that embodies divine beauty. The lofty position given to art becomes at the same time denigrating to most people, whose position in the scheme of universal salvation becomes at least unclear. How does the life of a peasant contribute to the spiritualization of matter if he spends his life in plowing fields, sowing, harvesting, tending cattle, etc.? Would it be good for the fate of the world if creative writing classes were set up for them so they could write some poetry and prose, thereby incorporating beauty, even if imperfectly, in the world surrounding them? Or is marvelous poetry of Pushkin worth all that minor poets could ever do, and so his contribution to the spiritualization task offsets theirs? True, Solovyov somewhat cryptically stated that labor is an interaction between men in the material world which should secure the means of existence and eventually spiritualize nature (*The justification of the good* 16.7), but it may mean that peasant's labor is necessary to secure the means of existence to a poet who spiritualizes nature directly, the peasant only indirectly, all the more that, as Solovyov emphasized, spiritualization of the material nature is the task of art (16.6). These are not fanciful problems since Solovyov was quite concerned with practical issues, to mention only his commendable efforts to actualize his program of unification of the Church, failed as they were.

#### 6. BEAUTY AND ALL-UNITY

In Solovyov's system, the most important thing is the return to all-unity. It is unclear, however, why beauty occupies such a prominent position in this scheme. Is beauty of things always proportional to their harmony? Does it have to be? To say that, there would have to be some means of estimating harmony and order independently of beauty? What would these means be for Solovyov? It rather seems that he identified the two and stated that beauty is a measure of orderliness<sup>9</sup>, which is a highly conjectural claim.

---

<sup>8</sup> „What until now only art could accomplish, should also become the fact of life”. B. Zelinsky, *Über die Ästhetik Vladimir Solov'evs*, Zeitschrift für Ästhetik und Allgemeine Kunswissenschaft 13(1968), 93.

<sup>9</sup> Beauty becomes for Solovyov an important sign of actualizing God's purpose, says В.В. Бычков, *Эстетика Владимира Соловьева как актуальная парадигма*, История философии 4(1999), 8.

A simple tune may be more enchanting than a symphony, and the latter is almost certainly more complicated and has a higher level of organization and orderliness than the former. So, Solovyov used beauty as a measure of the world harmony and thus as a measure of closeness to all-unity.

Also, if all-unity is the goal, why claim that beauty will save the world? God is said by Solovyov to have not only feeling but also mind and will. All-unity can be brought in a snap of a moment by God's will. We see it is not, but Solovyov does not address the problem. Also, why not through truth, that is, through the work of the mind? Maybe scientific endeavors would bring more harmony in the world by bringing us closer to truth? Art could be a useful addition to it, particularly where science fails. And because truth is another side of beauty, access to beauty allows access to truth. Starting from his first book, *The crisis of Western philosophy*, Solovyov criticized positivist intellectual atmosphere, but, in the cosmic scheme of things, this may be rectified so that science sees itself as leading the way to all-unity. Maybe beauty saves the world, but truth sets you free, and for Solovyov, perfect freedom is brought to individuals in all-unity. He does not address this problem either.

Solovyov's is metaphysics of beauty intertwined with theology and eschatology<sup>10</sup>. His analyses of beauty may be found rather unsatisfactory for an art historian or an art critique. Even his analyses of poetry of Pushkin, Tiutchev, Lermontov, Alexei Tolstoy, and Mickiewicz, interesting philosophically as they are, give little insight into the aesthetic value of their work. Their poetry becomes almost irrelevant in Solovyov's analyses of their theology and metaphysics, of their greatness as prophets, and of their insights into the hereafter. Their poetry fades in comparison with their grand and otherworldly views. And so it is with his speeches on Dostoevsky<sup>11</sup>. Solovyov dwelled on Dostoevsky's views but there is little to learn from him why he was such a great wri-

<sup>10</sup> This is 'ontology of beauty' – Zelinsky, op. cit., 83; 'philosophy of beauty', according to Strémooukhoff, op. cit., 298; „this is not theory of aesthetics, but theory of the absolute. The criterion of discerning beauty is not aesthetic form but the ideal and general content it contains". Tenace, op. cit., 71.

<sup>11</sup> He just stated his disinterest in literary criticism of Dostoevsky's work in the opening sentence of the preface to *Three speeches*.

ter<sup>12</sup>. In these analyses Solovyov is at his best, but he hardly gives the reader an idea why beauty matters and how exactly it affects the work of these great artists. To that end, the reader has to turn to analyses of the critics who are more sensitive to the aesthetic side of beauty.

## SOŁOWJOW O PIEKNIE

### Streszczenie

Włodzimierz Sołowjow był twórcą monistycznego systemu filozoficznego, w którym próbował racjonalnie wyjaśnić prawdy religii chrześcijańskiej. W jego ontologii piękno zajmuje znaczącą pozycję jako manifestacja wszechjedności rzeczywistości, gdzie piękno rozumiane jest jako transformacja materii poprzez wcieleние supramaterialnej zasady czy też idei godnej istnienia, czyli obiektu będącego częścią harmonijnej wszechjedności. Artykuł dyskutuje tę definicję, realizację piękna przez sztukę, transformacyjną rolę sztuki i stopień, w jakim piękno reprezentuje wszechjedność.

---

<sup>12</sup> It is even stated that Solovyov exposed his aesthetic blindness in his lack of appreciation of Dostoevsky and Lev Tolsay as artists, K. Мочульский, *Владимир Соловьев: жизнь и учение*, Париж 1951, 243.