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On Beauty

My friend, the professor, told a student he was beautiful – *you're really very beautiful* were the words – and two weeks later was summoned to the Joint Disciplinary Conduct Committee.

At first she saw neither correlation nor causation. She'd forgotten her comment to the student and assumed she was being brought in, as academics sometimes were, to act as an adjudicator or witness in a process convened to address someone else's behaviour, usually a man's. The process didn't interest her for reasons of jurisdiction. Because it was a university matter and not a police matter, it would be a transgression, not a crime. The possibilities were therefore predictable, the consequences banal.

It was not clear why the Disciplinary Conduct Committee was *Joint*. It was this she reflected on when she received her summons. The implication was that parts were being brought together that were usually separate. Moreover, it seemed to her that the formulation, *Disciplinary Conduct*, suggested not that the Committee doled out discipline, but that it enquired into the behaviour of discipline itself. She thought that the way one behaved could be disciplinary, whether of others (a narrowing of eyes, a sharpening of tone, a stiffness of manner) or of oneself (sit up straight, don't buy the chocolate bar, maintain eye contact). That it was *Joint* could suggest the way disciplinary behaviours tended to be meted out by groups, rather than individuals. In fact, she wondered, was it ever possible to discipline someone as an individual – discipline implying an understood set of rules or norms that, even when enforced by a lone actor, always retained the force of consensus?

She told me later that she was glad she didn't immediately realise the Committee was convened in her honour (or, she corrected, her *dishonour*) because it gave her a few extra days of serenity – of normality – which she'd never since been able to recover. She confided she couldn't sleep. She'd never realised, before, how clearly she could hear street noise from her house. Her home was an old villa from the 1910s that was set back into the Kelburn hill. Being recessed in this way gave the property a great deal of privacy, but she now realised that it also created a sort of cave effect whereby any noise from the road below would amplify and echo, so

that sometimes it seemed that a man laughing on the street was actually standing at her bedroom window and laughing at her.

Privacy, she said, was something that she was now thinking a lot about, because she'd assumed her communication to the student was private, that it was undertaken in a private capacity, but it had nonetheless taken on this public and therefore disciplinary life. Conversely, in the case of her villa, her own privacy remained intact in one sense (being higher up, she was not literally exposed), but admitted intrusions from the public, like a bubble blown inside a bubble by a street magician.

In reply I mentioned Habermas and observed that his idea of the public sphere had so permeated our collective imaginary that perhaps we saw all collectives as somehow circular, interestingly the most condensed shape, which might explain the way that, in groups, people tended to abandon neutral or ambiguous convictions for their most rigid formulations. She replied that in the German, Habermas's word was *Öffentlichkeit*, which had nothing at all to do with geometry, the sphere being an invention of the English translator – suggesting that the analogy must already have been embedded in the English imaginary, as in social and political *circles*, itself a translation of the French *coterie*, originally referring to the way peasants grouped together to rent land, and perhaps also related to *côte*, or coast, and the sweeping circle made by a bay.

The point is, she said, I cannot sleep. I hear voices from the street. Even though I *can* walk about naked I don't because the voices make it feel like a bad dream, one in which I am ridiculed and exposed. And the worst thing is these dreams that I'm not having because I'm not sleeping are so easy to interpret, so predictable. It feels likely, she said, that my idea of myself is only a pretence that conceals the most straightforward of natures.

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I met the professor while I was her student at Victoria University in the late 90s and 00s. She was my first experience of charisma. People took her courses because she was running them, regardless of their content. Even her gruelling paper on Thomas Aquinas was oversubscribed.

I read the whole of his *Summa Theologica* in an act of devotion. Its twisting questions and answers, its gnomic objections and qualifications, all I imagined in her voice, evoking the

way she spoke at cross-purposes with herself, raising points only to refute and reformulate them. I finished its nearly two million words with the conviction that Aquinas had written it in a state of love, in love with God, with the mind of God, with what he thought was his access to it, and in love with the proof of that access in the ever-growing pile of manuscript pages in his cloistered, tower study.

What God was to Aquinas, the professor was to me: towering, too, unreachable, too. In her courses, I felt myself being authored, what little was written in my character revised in new directions. I felt I was becoming more interesting, but less agential. I experienced the powerlessness of love and became as limp as a doll.

At the time she was a recent hire, and coup, for the literature department, though her actual field was intellectual history. She'd come directly from a fellowship at All Souls College, Oxford, a position few women received and one fewer women still held for the full seven-year term. She moved to Wellington to 'retire', though still in her thirties. She did not want to delude herself with her own importance, an illusion which Oxford almost required. She said she wanted to embrace obscurity. It was an issue of existential honesty. When she first told people where she was going, they asked if she had an incurable illness.

Other fellows at All Souls were in their twenties, fresh from the doctoral programmes they'd started immediately following their degrees, those degrees the inevitable finish-line of an exclusive boarding-school education. Like tropical fish, these were individuals accustomed to very specific conditions; their health deteriorated as soon as they were exposed to anything outside of that narrow range. Worse, these beautiful, delicate fish had come to believe they were apex predators. Meanwhile, the professor was already a mother, and she found this granted her two specific advantages. First, she had no urge to publish early, her teenage pregnancy having worn away the appeal of precocity; and second, she intimidated gay men. Her life chastened them. She had made their main preoccupation, their sex lives, feel unproductive: a substitute, onanistic. Or so she said.

She said: You cannot move for gay men; without them, Oxford would crumble. The Anglican Church would crumble and then Oxford would crumble, and then Rome.

She said: As a woman among gay men, you are either ignored or you are made into a sort of icon. You *have* to choose the latter.

The key was to assert yourself as a mother and as a woman while never showing them the reality of what that entailed. You had to assert the female knowledge that they coveted but could never grasp, but otherwise act like a man. It was only too obvious that this was regressive. It was a parody of womanhood: celebrated in the abstract and erased, in practice, from the real lives of these men obsessed with other men.

I grew a penis, she once told me, and then I had to fuck other men with it.

For all this, she loved Oxford, said that it was possibly the best place in the world. Gay men, she contended, were the only true friends women could have because they emancipated women from rape. They were eunuchs: beautiful arrases you could step behind and be concealed by. The best orgasm she'd ever had was from a gay man in his sixties who'd gone down on her in the Senior Common Room out of intellectual curiosity and port. It was totally platonic. He did exactly what she wanted, as if programmed, but even then it was not mechanical, because it was layered in taboo: the illicit location, the age difference, the tearing down of the walls of sexuality, their mutual admiration for each other's scholarship.

For all that she confided in me, I think I thought sex was something she had overcome, had sublimated in some final *coup de grâce* of the intellect. That it had been such a large part of her past only showed the scale of her victory. It was necessary for me to believe this to sustain the ideal I had cultivated for our friendship. It felt like a betrayal to acknowledge, even to myself, that my love for her was also erotic. I had dreams where we would shower together and I would face the wall, concealing an erection. In others, she would critique my work, staring only at my crotch.

My thesis, on Aquinas, was under her supervision. We went for peripatetic lectures on the Wellington hills, or we sat in her office late into the evening, drinking port. She invited me to her home for long, intense dinners, where music was never played. Her house was piled with books and adorned in a kind of tourist chintz: recreations of Egyptian hieroglyphs, faux African statuettes, even a few Hello Kittys waving on stacks of grammars and esoteric poetry. About these she said nothing. If asked about any of them, she would flick her hand: *Oh, they've always been there.*

The same gesture accompanied any mention of her daughter. She was a straightforward girl, and so probably very happy. She was studying something scientific, one of those newer -

ologies, in Sydney. In her absence, the professor had adopted a tabby called Whiskers, who was hit by a car, and then a replacement called Synecdoche.

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The paedagogical eros, she told me, is very powerful. What these administrators don't understand – what the *West* doesn't understand – is the concept of taboo. She suggested that the Anglosphere might better understand itself not as iconoclastic but as Puritan, for it was trying to expel shame by expelling the erotic – and in the end was only reconfiguring them both. The truth was, she observed, that we have never in history hidden our shame more thoroughly from ourselves. The secular piety was that it was possible to live without sin, that humans were perfectible. This was what liberalism was, at its core: a utopian project of the human soul. And utopias were necessarily naïve.

These children, she said, they discover sin in themselves, and they file a complaint to the university.

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After almost two decades in Australia and a bad divorce, I returned to Wellington.

I got in touch with the professor after seeing her name in the paper. She was giving a talk, the home stop in an international tour accompanying her new book, on an aspect of the Counter-Reformation.

I walked up to her house in Kelburn, listening to the click of my smartest shoes. She opened the door and pulled me inside like a fugitive.

She told me I had gained weight, that I had aged. We drank and she touched the corners of my forehead from which my hairline had receded. She told me I had been the most beautiful boy. She used the past tense. I had been Reni's *Saint Sebastian*. She told me she had thrilled, physically, to see me enter a room. She had dedicated her fourth book to me, didn't I realise? She picked it off a shelf in her library and showed it to me. I remembered reading it, voraciously, at night, while my fiancée was asleep. The dedication read *For Saint Sebastian, his beauty*.

She was very pleased to see me, nonetheless. The university was a corpse in advanced decay. I was lucky to have escaped the worst of its miasma. She felt like an embalmer, trying to stay the contagion or, worse, that she was putting makeup on top of what was already too far gone. Other times she felt more like a secondary parasite, not one that had killed its host, but that would die along with it, like a flea on a rabid dog.

She talked to me as if I was her equal. She asked my opinion on new arguments she was formulating, books she had read, thinkers she was thinking with. The spell fell over me again. I loved to hear her say words I didn't recognise, like *bolus*, *manumission*, and *kvetch*. But I was no longer a child. I no longer believed that there was a life of the mind devoid of the body. The professor had never pretended this was true; it was my invention. Like a child, I had chosen easy mistruths. I had constructed a sort of idol. For all his asceticism, I now imagined Thomas Aquinas wracked in his tower with holy touches.

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The greatest privilege of being a scholar, the professor said, was the time it afforded to appreciate beauty. Popular ideas of beauty and understandings of aesthetics had become so impoverished that taking it seriously was understood as vanity, at worst as capitalist capture. But it was not consumeristic to be an acolyte of beauty. The reverse: consumerism had debased beauty by its love of function and transaction. Beauty was understood in terms of design, ease of use and 'appeal'; it was understood as a means of differentiation for extracting a premium.

True beauty, she maintained, was surplus to function and unable to be used. It could not be deployed or grasped, nor even fully accounted for; it was a *gestalt*. It was beauty's nature to be underdetermined by its individual sources, like a body of water fuller than its topography could explain. Thomas Aquinas's work was one such body, proof that beauty found its corollary not in the erotic, but in the sublime. For Aquinas approached the maximum horizon dialectically, through minute oppositions: his writing resembled a cabinet with several large drawers, within which were hundreds of smaller drawers, and so on in a *mise en abyme*, except that it operated in reverse. The smallest drawer opened to the larger, and so on. Moreover, his dialectic was negative: God was not to be found within the drawers, but in the space the drawers left when pulled open, and even then, what was found was an outline, a shadow from which He was

absent. This futile attempt to account for beauty was, she explained, the primary calling of the scholar and consequently the office of the university itself – whether the administrators knew it or not.

And human beauty was no exception. It was a force in the world which could not be wholly explained by its apparent origins or causes. It was teleological, the trace in the world of the unmoved mover, the *primum movens*; in other words, it was proof of God. To be beautiful was not to receive a gift so much as to be elected a gift-giver, with all its attendant gratuities and resentments. Beauty made others acquisitive, even as it resisted acquisition. Nor could the beautiful person himself be said to truly possess beauty so much as wield it, like one might a sword or any object external to but augmenting the body.

What the Joint Disciplinary Conduct Committee was really accusing her of, she told them, was acquisitiveness. The suggestion that she had been ‘inappropriate’ made sense only if it was seen as symptom an acquisitive impulse – that is, a desire to physically possess. The Committee didn’t seem to recognise (and nor did the student) that acquiring beauty was futile *a priori*. She was an acolyte of beauty, a scholar of it. She was not a collector.

She did concede that she had a particular weakness for drawing attention to beauty. That, in a deep sense, was her job. It seemed to her a joke of a cosmic order for beauty not to know itself, akin to a prophet unaware he is speaking prophecy. It was a serious case of mistaken identity, best rectified.

Jason, her student in RELI108 (lectures on Monday and Wednesday afternoons), well, would the Committee not acknowledge he was beautiful? And yet he was afflicted by that common ailment in his generation, that sickliness of spirit, that ever-crescent moon. He should have been enjoying giving the gift of his beauty. For the thing about physical beauty was that it was best enjoyed with others; it was an auspice under which much could be catalysed between people, experiences heightened, spirits lifted. But Jason’s spirits were low. He was glued to his phone. He had ‘anxiety’.

He had come, nearly in tears, to her office hour, about his B+ assignment. The professor felt she had been generous, unable not to summon his face when marking his decidedly unbeautiful words. Nonetheless he reported that the B+ was the worst grade he had ever received. And this, to her, was the ultimate sign of his beauty, proof that it had been working on

the world all this time without his knowledge. His work was middling; it was superficial; it was a tower built on sand, tilting.

He accused her grade of stopping him from reaching his potential. He had ambitions to attend a prestigious university abroad, perhaps Oxford or Harvard.

She consoled him that those institutions were on the same path of decay that she mapped for all of the contemporary West. They were embalmed, it was true, in decidedly more money, but that would only stay the contagion for so long. The decline was terminal; indeed, it was already *post mortem*. His ambitions were, in other words, misdirected; they operated under two misapprehensions: first, that the university, as an idea, was still alive in the world (which, she suggested, the very existence of this committee implied it was not), and second, that if it existed, he would be a likely candidate to benefit from it. He was neither clever enough now, nor, she said, alive enough in spirit to sufficiently improve himself and benefit from conditions which in any case were hypothetical, counterfactual.

She acknowledged before the Committee that these were heavy tidings for any young person, but to these she had added the ultimate sweetener: the revelation to him of his beauty.

But, Jason, she had said to him in her office, this is all by-the-by because, did you know, *you're really very beautiful?* You are not a scholar but rather the spur to scholarship, the work on which work is to be written. You are already replete in what the university, were it not dead, would live to seek out. You see: you've bypassed the edifice, the whole sick system, and can walk down the street with your head held high. And even when old, even once beauty has left (because this was another mystery of beauty, its transience, the indiscernible point at which it could be said to depart) you will have the memory of the rapture of it, the way it possessed you and the way others wished to possess it in you; and that is an approach to something holy which few, vanishingly few, ever make. She had then concluded that their meeting was a turning point in his life. He could leave her office cured of his preoccupations, which were banal, and with a new sense of wielding akin to being bearer of some ceremonial object he alone was tasked to use and protect.

She told me later that she felt relieved, in recounting the incident, to have done justice both to what was said and to her intentions in saying it, and reported that once finished, she had turned to Jason, who was now seated opposite her and who was surrounded, on each side, by a

mediator from the Committee (bureaucratic flunkies, she said, fatty pouches of the palliative university).

Looking at him, she was reminded that she had been right about his beauty. To his pale lips, his green eyes, the thick crop of his eyebrows suggestive of the Levant, the prominence of his clavicle like a bow or the lip of a shield, and even the movement of his Adam's apple like a pebble clothed in silk, to all these *loca amoena* his beauty was a surplus.

She turned to him and said:

I'm sure you see, now, Jason, what I meant. I was merely telling you a truth about yourself. Or, perhaps better, a truth about creation that you are vehicle to. And if anyone should be complaining, it is me, or it is we others around this table, because your beauty makes us greedy for the ineffable; it is one drop of cold water reminding us how parched we are.

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A second session of the Joint Disciplinary Conduct Committee was scheduled for Monday week and again the professor's presence was requested, though she confided in me, as the longer shadows fell over her Kelburn home, that she thought the session superfluous, having said already all that there was to say.