

by FRED INGLIS

Beauty and Education

by Joe Winston

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The good society, as William Morris imagined it in *News from Nowhere*, would be one in which the useful would be beautiful and the dreadful drudgery of industrial labour would be transformed into happy and fulfilling craftsmanship. One way of reminding ourselves of the necessity of utopian thinking might be for us to imagine a corner of such a society as being one where vice-chancellors, instead of gibbering about 'outcomes', 'excellence' and the fatuity of 'impact', sat down quietly and read Joe Winston's splendid little book.

He opens with a wince-making anecdote about sitting round in a warm circle with his colleagues to share (as they say) plans for future research with which to guarantee gratifying outcomes. When it came to Winston's turn, and he said he intended that rather than reporting findings, he was going to think and read about beauty, he was greeted by incredulous sniggering.

The tale is a typical part of the man and his book. He moves easily and with a deep, modest sincerity between fragments of autobiography, recollecting without condescension and with amusement his efforts to mimic Bob Dylan, cap and all, almost forty years ago, turning to affecting little episodes in which schoolchildren by way of the arts of performance and their excellent teachers' guidance discover beauty, its truth and its goodness which they can still love spontaneously, and which the hideous strength of their mad computer games and revolting DVDs daily traduce in the name of profit.

But the autobiographical interpolations, always brief and nicely judged, are set in a foreground behind which tower the great ranges of the history of the idea of beauty, never foreshortened, justly surveyed and measured up.

He begins from the present and Roger Scruton's crazily partisan effort on television to persuade us that beauty is only to be found in its past forms, an ideological polemic which

traps its author in bad faith, unable to distinguish between life and death. Winston's larger purpose, however, is to sort among the ancestors and discover what of their conceptions is still a living deposit in his large and contradictory concept.

In essence, this becomes a duel between Plato and Kant, both still thriving in our sensibilities, having us now incline towards the sensuous coincidence of desire and beauty (Plato), now towards the sterner admonitions of Kantian disinterestedness and impersonality. Winston has read a lot and, like the good teacher he is, tells us on the way of those who most helped him sort out the argument.

The best of these are Alexander Nehamas, John Armstrong and Elaine Scarry, whose admirable essay *On Beauty and Being Just* gives the lie both to Roger Scruton and Winston's more egregious colleagues, as well as indicating to us that something important is stirring in the body academic which may yet quicken it to throw off some of the deathly corpulence and blood-stopping jargon of corporate pedagogy, never more ghastly than in an unbelievable-sounding book called *Building Learning Power*, here guillotined in one paragraph.

But Winston's heart is most caught and held by the small repeated beauties of children at their playful education, discovering and creating with easy or effortful negligence the fragile expressiveness which they will either carry forward in their souls for a lifetime or which will be blotted out by the saccharine emissions of kitsch and capitalism.

Winston acknowledges, as he must, the full-throated assault of high modernism – of Picasso, Stravinsky, Eliot and Otto Dix – upon the old sumptuaries of beauty and in the name of the terrible twentieth century. But he is restored, perhaps even a bit too easily, by the human resilience argued for by two grand old stalwarts, John Dewey and Michael Oakeshott, and their faith in the touchstone of experience.

Teachers have always made rather too much of this latter concept, and Winston is quick to insist on its active, constructive and world-making force, particularly in the use to which he puts Richard Sennett's instant classic, *The Craftsman* (he really is *very* well read; it shows in his beautifully (ha!) chosen epigraphs). Sennett however leads him unexpectedly to *The History Boys* and to the crafty affecting moment at which Alan Bennett turns the schoolteacher's craft into art, and leaves us with the tears and mortality of things: in Bennett's

delicate masterpiece, with Hardy's Drummer Hodge, in Winston's parallel anecdote, with a teacher reading Wilde's *The Selfish Giant* to her six-year-olds, and breaking down before its beauty. A little boy takes the book from her hands and finishes reading it aloud to the class. "I always have to do that when she reads that story", he tells the inspector who is watching.

Winston is certain – as who amongst us would not be? – that such experiences of beauty are good for all humankind. He makes no heavy weather out of the cross-cultural varieties of beauty, calmly and rightly convinced as he is that enough of its mighty meaning survives its transit across vast geographies. The children who provide the large chorus in his social drama bear him out. They are after all the society of the future and its students, a commonplace much overlooked by those university departments which treat their inferior colleagues in education with such unremitting condescension. The beauty they encounter in the classrooms of childhood has consequences, in Winston's book and in history, for the possibility of the good society.

He finds glimpses of that society in football, horribly damaged though it is by sheer money. He finds more in that new and wonderful space in society now provided for the disabled and so movingly occupied by dancers and sculptors making loveliness out of deformation. He gets a bit needlessly tangled up in the relations of creativity with beauty, siding rightly with Morris and Ruskin but getting a bit lost in some rather muffled pages on creativity and communication, and some worthy, not-obviously-relevant stuff on how to produce the first scene of *Hamlet*.

He tops this off with judicious, dogged afterthoughts on beauty in science, very properly helped out by Richard Holmes on the scientific Romantics before closing with, bless its creator and his creation, a day's earnest botanising at the infinitely beautiful Eden Project in Cornwall.

If this isn't exactly a beautiful book, its author has certainly a beautiful nature, a tribute which can only sound embarrassing if the academics have indeed and wholly abandoned their vocation and are in thrall to the corporate robots. This is a strong, awkward and courageous piece of work. Its author is dauntingly sincere, wide open but well-armed with intelligence and deep reading and his own unmistakable goodness of disposition. Crazy and piratical as

Routledge's price is, it will prove welcome ammunition for the intellectual commando in the hills, fighting on behalf of the nation's virtue.