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Of Beauty and Power  
Sir Roger Scruton interviewed by Mikołaj Sławkowski-Rode

**MSR:** Beauty and power (here I mean primarily political power) have a relationship with a long and turbulent history perhaps first explicitly acknowledged by Plato. Beauty is often employed in the service of power (national anthems, and emblems are perhaps the most obvious example), but sometimes also serves to undermine it (as the works of the romantic Polish poets in exile did). Likewise power has at times been the protector of beauty (during the reign of the Medici's for instance) and at others its persecutor (in Soviet Russia for example, where its appreciation was a hallmark of the bourgeois heresy, or currently in the areas controlled by ISIS where in many cases it's blasphemy). Can beauty be innocent serving any kind of power, or will it be corrupted if the power it serves is? Conversely can legitimate power use beauty without damaging it?

**RS:** Beauty has power, which is the power of our desire for it. Political power has no intrinsic beauty in itself, though it is a necessity, since without it no society can endure, as Hobbes recognized. Political power can be used in the service of beauty, as it was by the Medici's, or in order to destroy beauty, as it was by the communists. Beauty is offensive to people conscious of their own ugliness, which is why the monk burned down the temple at Kyoto, and why Iago hates Cassio in Shakespeare's play. Beauty cannot serve power, although it can add legitimacy to power, to the extent that power is used to propagate it, as the Church has used its power down the ages to propagate beauty, knowing that faith and liturgy are all beneficiaries of beauty, when it is in their service – but it is not the power of those things that beauty serves, but their authority in the heart of the believer.

**MSR:** For much of history (at least in Europe) both power and beauty were often seen as manifestations of the transcendent: one divinely ordained, the other divinely inspired. Since the transition of governance to elected authorities however, power has been seen less as representing something everlasting, and more as an order appointed temporarily, to deal with the economic and social issues at hand and to provide for the needs expressed by those whose votes legitimize it. Can beauty be democratized in a similar way, and appropriated to address concerns of the moment, or does it only express ideas and values of timeless validity (as Plato amongst others thought)?

**RS:** Beauty cannot be democratized, since its presence or absence does not depend upon whether anyone has chosen it or voted for it. Most people are wrong about most things, so there is no reason to think that their judgment about the beautiful will have any particular authority. On the other hand, there is a point to the judgment of beauty, and that is to coordinate the appearances that surround you with those that surround your neighbours. The judgment is a tacit recognition that things matter to others as they matter to you. So all decent people try to educate their taste, and are, as Kant puts it, ‘suitors for agreement’ with their fellows. It is just a pity that so few people understand this.

**MSR:** Last time we spoke you said that in his works Wagner could invoke a community of taste through which the new could become part of the old. Can we hope for a restoration of a community of taste, in Europe? You yourself point out the chasm, which has opened up between lovers of art and, on the one hand, the art establishment, and on the other, those who follow the stream of popular culture. Another chasm continues to grow between the ‘old’ and the ‘new’ in how both beauty and power are understood. Wagner is often accused of representing the old (and so the obsolete) in both respects. In your new book on The Ring Cycle you defend Wagner’s insights into the most crucial aspects of human existence (including the role of beauty and power in human life) as continuously relevant. Do you see a way for this relevance to become more widely recognized and understood?

**RS:** Yes, if we are prepared to educate people, and open the universities to genuine culture and discussion. That means getting rid of the left establishment. So it won’t happen.

**MSR:** In your film ‘Why Beauty Matters?’ you remark that in our democratic age some find it threatening to judge other people’s tastes, and so often question whether there is such a thing as the objectively beautiful. You suggest this sentiment is one of the things fuelling the modern ‘flight from beauty’. What consequences for political power today might the ‘flight from beauty’ have?

**RS:** The flight from beauty is an attempt to avoid judgment, to recognize no defect in one’s desires or appetites and to refuse to idealize the human condition. St Paul put the matter simply: ‘whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.’ Instead people dwell on what excites and degrades, and this makes them easy targets for political manipulation. Many of the recruits to ISIS go through an apprenticeship in pornography and the degradation of women before submitting to the call of absolute power. It is not the 99 beautiful names of Allah that appeal to them, but the fact that they can at last purge themselves of the ugliness on which they have feasted for far too long, by submitting to an absolute power that exonerates all faults, mass murder included.

**MSR:** It is often suggested by the contrast of the compassionate philistine and the refined murderer that the ability to appreciate beauty has no influence either way in the moral formation of human beings. You challenge this view in your book on beauty defending the idea that understanding and appreciating beauty does contribute to human moral growth. You also once described war as the ‘reckless pursuit of purpose by those in the grip of an idea’. Could the idea of beauty be the motivation to do ill?

**RS:** Sometimes beauty inspires people to do wicked things. This is surely true of human beauty as an object of desire and therefore a temptation. Dante’s story of Paolo and Francesca illustrates the problem, of

course. But in the aesthetic case beauty is an object of contemplation, not desire, and it is a way of representing the human condition as noble, complete and redeemed, despite all the suffering. This is the theme of my book on Wagner's Ring. Understanding that aspect of art does not necessarily improve a person morally; but it offers examples, shows what is possible, and deprives educated people of the excuses of which, as educated people, they could easily avail themselves.

**MSR:** Like 'the economy' for example, which as you sometimes suggest has been often used as an excuse for the aesthetic and cultural devastation of many parts of the world. Again it is the economic outlook which is considered forward-looking and objective, capable of bringing about the greatest possible happiness of the greatest possible number at the lowest possible cost, and contrasted with the narrow-minded and bigoted attitude of the NIMBY hailing from the dark ages. You advocate the development of the BIMBY (Beauty in My Back Yard) toolkit as an alternative, which accepts modern development as long as it looks right. Do you think this approach is likely to be taken more seriously by those who currently believe that the power of economy is a solution to everything?

**RS:** The only reason the economic outlook is regarded as progressive is that it provides a *measure* of progress. There was progress, in this matter, between Treblinka and Auschwitz. Until people begin to recognize that there are intrinsic values that cannot be measured in economic terms it will always be difficult to support beauty and culture as objects of public policy. But ordinary people don't think like the politicians, and if you give them a choice between beauty and ugliness in their neighbourhood they will choose beauty and be prepared to meet the cost. This has been abundantly proved by the British planning system.

**MSR:** You are a known Eurosceptic. Do you think Europe, a unified Europe, as many believe, is a beautiful idea, and if so why does it appear to have failed to inspire those who have power in European administration to live up to its promise?

**RS:** A unified Europe is a beautiful idea, certainly; but it is not what the EU produced. Who could think that unity between Greece and Germany, or Spain and Romania, or England and Poland was really advanced by what we have witnessed in the last two decades? And where is the beauty in this great machine that has destroyed the beautiful capital of Flanders with kitsch bottles of glass, or in the regime of regulations that has ironed out the local customs of Europe for the sake of the 'internal market'? If you mean by European unity that which the Holy Roman Empire of Charlemagne intended, then of course it is a beautiful idea; but the reality has never matched the idea, since human rivalry and narcissism always prevent it.

**MSR:** Is the move on the part of Britain to leave the EU a move in this direction? Some say that better the devil you know. Will the dissolution of the EU, if this is its beginning, benefit Europe?

**RS:** Yes, in the way that the removal of a cancer benefits the cancer patient. Unfortunately, the operation is also life-threatening.