

The Triumph of the Eye

BY RALPH C. WOOD

In a society ever more determined by visual appeal, men begin to desire women who conform to a certain shape and look perpetually young. Women, in turn, strive to conform to eye-driven male desire. How can we reshape imagination to prefer spiritual vision to mere sight?

In Letter XX of *The Screwtape Letters*, C. S. Lewis takes his readers by surprise when the demon named Screwtape urges his sub-demon named Wormwood to cease making direct attacks on the chastity of the recently converted Christian whose faith they are seeking to subvert. Overt and obvious urges to sexual self-indulgence – perhaps masturbation or even fornication – can be resisted, says Screwtape. (Frederick Buechner likens such raw lust to a craving for salt in a man who is dying of thirst.¹) For when the Christian learns to discipline himself against such gross desires, Screwtape complains, his chastity will become increasingly immune to demonic allurements. He may indeed become a faithful husband and perhaps a father.

Something subtler is needed, Screwtape declares, a shrewder tactic, one more likely to destroy chastity, the master demon argues. Hence his odd proposal to make “the rôle of the eye in sexuality more and more important [while] at the same time making its demands more and more impossible.”² When I ask my students to interpret this passage, they are often nonplussed. They do not really understand the devil’s craftiness. The reason, I believe, is that they are products of our overwhelmingly ocular culture and thus are often opaque to Lewis’s meaning.



There is little doubt that our lives as Americans are ever more visually determined. We receive the world almost entirely through the projection of

images onto screens – whether they are located on our computers, our televisions, or at the cinema. A colleague who teaches Film Studies reports that most American college students have seen one hundred movies for every book they have read. What this radically ocular re-orientation has done to our reading habits is obvious. What it has done to our sexuality is not so plain. Yet already in 1942 C. S. Lewis discerned the problem, even

when most other eyes were turned on the horrors of the Second World War.

The giant success of the American cosmetic surgery business and the pervasiveness of eating disorders are markers of what C. S. Lewis calls the demonic triumph of the eye.

When the eye triumphs, especially in the way men view women, then something demonic happens, Lewis suggests. Men begin to desire women who conform to a certain shape, women who look perpetual-

ly young, women who are “less willing and less able to bear children,” as Lewis says. Writing more than sixty years ago, he nonetheless foresaw the familiar pattern of our time. “We now teach men,” Screwtape gleefully confirms, “to like women whose bodies are scarcely distinguishable from those of boys.” The devils thus prompt women to wear clothes that “make them appear firmer and more slender and more boyish than nature allows a full-grown woman to be.”³

Martha Croker, a character in Tom Wolfe’s novel of 1998, *A Man in Full*, is such a woman. She is the fifty-three-year-old ex-wife of Charlie Croker, an aging real estate developer whose trophy wife Serena is half Charlie’s age. Recognizing that, alas, she will never again have the filly-like appearance of Serena, Martha reflects on the younger women at the health club where she works fiercely at her own aerobic exercises: “They had nice wide shoulders and nice narrow hips and nice lean legs and fine definition in the muscles of their arms and backs. They were built like boys, boys with breasts and hurricane manes.” Wolfe continues, “Only vigorous exercise could help you even remotely approach the feminine ideal of today – *a Boy with Breasts!* ... The exercise salons were proliferating like cellular telephones and CD-ROMs. *Boys with breasts!*”⁴ Wolfe the deft satirist uses this phrase in witty mockery, knowing all too well that it is the eye-dominated dream-model that haunts many American women.

A friend of mine found his thirteen-year-old daughter’s diary lying open in such a fashion as to invite her father’s inspection. There he found these words scrawled in large letters: “I despise my body.” Unable to make her teenage figure approximate the proverbial Coke-bottle shape, this woman-child has had her self-worth shattered. She has been virtually crushed by

the desire for a false bodily conformity that has been imposed on her and that she has embraced without knowing it. A former student, seeking to treat lightly what is in fact an immensely sad matter, confesses that, if his mother keeps having her face lifted, her cheeks will eventually meet at the back of her neck. A similarly troubling disclosure brought to light by the O. J. Simpson trial is that, while neither Nicole Brown Simpson nor any of her three sisters had ever earned a college degree, all four had undergone breast enhancement surgery.

The moral and religious implications here are huge, not only for women, but also for us men who, because we are dominated by the eye, demand that women meet the expectations of the notorious “male gaze.” The giant success of the American cosmetic surgery business is a marker of what Lewis calls the demonic triumph of the eye. It has been reported that, in this country alone, there were nearly eleven million cosmetic surgeries performed in 2006, but then twelve million in 2007. Following close behind the American market is Europe, where elective cosmetic surgeries generate \$2.2 billion in annual business. The five most common of these so-called “aesthetic” procedures for women are mammoplasty (breast augmentation), lipoplasty (body contouring), blepharoplasty (eyelid lifting), abdominoplasty (“tummy tuck”), and breast reduction.⁵

While cosmetic surgery is an entirely elected response to eye-driven male desire, bulimia and anorexia often are not. Instead, the bulimic and the anorexic seek to become literal no-bodies, stripped of hips *and* breasts, returning to a prepubescent state, shriveling into a skeletal shape that exposes the absurdity of our culture’s androgynous ideal by way of exaggeration, distortion, and negation. These dreadful eating disorders have complex causes, but the result is almost always the same: an obsessive fear of gaining weight. Anorexics seek to drastically lower their body weight by willful starvation, excessive exercise, or so-called diet pills. Bulimics, by contrast, massively overeat and then force themselves to vomit, or else they resort to enemas, laxatives, and diuretics. Again a personal example: A friend reports spending more than \$100,000 for his daughter’s four collegiate years of psychiatric treatment for bulimia – all because her boyfriend complained that she was fat. The poor girl would have done better to dump her lover. Such candor is hard to find in an eye-ridden time such as ours. Humor is even further away. We need more women akin to the jovial old lady who declared that she would rather shake than rattle.



If the demons have distorted our view of women by a victorious ocular deceit, where might a Christian remedy lie? Lewis’s profoundest work, *Till We Have Faces*, offers implicit answers.⁶ It concerns a woman named Orual, who is obsessed with her own physical ugliness. Among other nasty names

that her father once used to belittle her, perhaps the worst is “curd face.” Because Orual is physically unattractive, there is no hope of her ever marrying a wealthy prince and thus no likelihood of her bringing both money and might to the Kingdom of Glome, where her father brutally rules.

Without rehearsing the complicated plot of Lewis’s fine novel, suffice it to say that Orual seeks her own power and influence in order to achieve the

Regarding the face as our most distinguishing characteristic, C. S. Lewis insists that we cannot have true faces apart from true faith in God. There are huge implications here for overcoming the devilish deceits of the eye in our time.

glory that she could not win by physical beauty. To increase her sense of mystery as well as to hide her shame at the awful evils she eventually commits, Orual wears a veil to cover her guilty face. Knowing that it would be an evil deed of my own to spoil the plot by reporting its outcome, I will concentrate instead on the truth that Orual gradually learns and that eventually

redeems her – namely, how to differentiate sight from vision.

Vision is central to the biblical tradition. It is distinguished from mere sight. If we see *with* our eyes, using them as mere optical instruments, then we have only *sight*: the perception only of the outward and visible and often ephemeral things that Orual came so passionately to desire: wealth and power and position. If, by contrast, we see *through* our eyes, with lenses formed by true convictions about God and man and the world, then we have *vision*. We can discern what is not apparent, what is not obvious, but what is indeed ultimately valuable. Especially can we recognize the true beauty of women.

Scripture itself makes this distinction. “No one shall see God and live,” is a familiar refrain. God’s utter holiness would obliterate any sinful creature who beheld it directly. In a memorable scene, God hides Moses in the cleft of the rock, covering him with a hand as God passes by Moses (Exodus 33:20-23). Nor does Moses encounter God directly on Mount Sinai when he is given the Ten Commandments; instead, he hears God speak in the midst of dense smoke. Yet while the Bible downplays raw naked sight, it elevates revelatory vision. Job, for example, hears the voice of God speak to him “out of the whirlwind,” answering Job’s justifiable lament against the injustices he has suffered (Job 38-41).

So do Israel’s prophets repeatedly receive visions that become the basis for their utterances and commands. Perhaps the most notable of these visionary encounters with God is recorded in Isaiah 6, where the prophet

discerns the presence of the enthroned Lord surrounded by terrifying angels. Only then—having been given this remarkable vision—is Isaiah able to repent of his sin and thus to hear and heed God’s voice. We are not to take lightly, it follows, the warning of Proverbs: “Where there is no vision, the people perish” (29:18).

It is noteworthy that in *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien has his demonic figure named Sauron embody himself as a gigantic all-seeing Eye. In constituting himself as a single ocular master, he believes he can control all that his eye surveys. Yet Sauron makes a double mistake, and thus he is ironically undone by the triumph of the ocular. In having only a single eye, he can descry only breadth and not depth; everything looks flat and undifferentiated. It also gives him only sight and not vision. He can scan the surface of everything, but he can penetrate the profundity of nothing. He assumes, to his ultimate cost, that small creatures called hobbits must be as weak as they are diminutive. He lacks the vision possessed by Gandalf to discern that these halflings have the inward courage and strength to resist the most powerful of evils.

The New Testament makes a similar distinction between sight and vision. The first three Gospels record Jesus as having spoken in parables so that, as Mark strangely puts it, “they may indeed see but not perceive” (4:12, RSV).⁷ The deep things of the kingdom, Jesus declares, cannot be easily understood because they are matters of vision rather than sight. His command for those who have ears to hear, to listen, and eyes to see, to see, is a clear reference to moral and spiritual vision rather than bare sight (Mark 4:9; cf. Mark 8:18). The author of First Timothy declares, therefore, that God dwells in “unapproachable light” and thus cannot be seen with the human eye (6:16). Paul also declares that, even in knowing the love of Christ, we still behold God as if in a dim mirror, and that only in the life to come shall we behold him “face to face” (1 Corinthians 13:12).

Passages such as these have led the church’s theologians to speak of the Beatific Vision as the ultimate privilege of Paradise. This doctrine is based on the promise of our Lord that “the pure of heart...will see God” (Matthew 5:8). Thomas Aquinas declared that such direct and unmediated sight of the Lord in all his goodness and glory is the happy purpose for which humanity was created and thus the blessed end toward which we are all meant to “live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28). In C. S. Lewis’s terms, this is what it means to “have faces”—namely, for God to behold us as creatures who have been redeemed by his grace, so that we, in turn, might be able “to know God and to enjoy him forever.”



Lewis is right to regard the face as our most distinguishing characteristic, and for insisting that we cannot have true faces apart from true faith in

God. There are huge implications here for overcoming the devilish deceits of the eye in our time. Many women have truly blessed faces without recourse to the cosmetics industry, much less to the expense and pain of cosmetic surgeries. Almost all icons of the Theotokos – the Mother of God, as the Virgin Mary is called in the Orthodox tradition – depict her with dark half-circles under her eyes. Far from marring her beauty, these signs of her

Almost all icons of the Virgin Mary depict her with dark half-circles under her eyes. Far from marring her beauty, these signs of her suffering actually enhance her beauty.

suffering actually enhance her beauty. They reveal that she is no shallow and superficial maiden, but rather a woman of immense character and quality – precisely because she has declared her ultimate “Yes” to God himself, even at the cost of immense grief and distress.

Icons of the Apostle Paul also depict him with deep creases across his forehead – evidence not only of his suffering for the sake of Christ, but also of his mind-wrenching efforts to probe the depths of the Gospel.

Forty-five years after first encountering him in the classroom, I can still recall the remarkable countenance of my major professor in college. He confessed one day in class – to the surprise of us youths largely unacquainted with grief – that the folds of his face were his “battle scars.” I was not alone in drawing the right inference: he was our best teacher because he had fought the inward and spiritual battles that outwardly marked his face.

The novelist Peter De Vries told a similar story about himself, except in reverse. He was serving as an editor of a sophisticated Chicago literary journal during the 1930s, fashioning himself as something of a dandy and aesthete whose hero was Oscar Wilde. But one day an older writer bluntly declared to De Vries that he had “a face unmarked by sorrow.” Utterly shaken by this searing indictment, De Vries took the rest of the day off, the better to ponder his own superficiality.⁸

Surely the most notable face in American history is Abraham Lincoln’s. Those who saw it only through the lens of the untrained eye found it almost hideously ugly. In fact, Lincoln made jokes about his unattractiveness, saying that if he were a self-made man, then he had done “a damn bad job.” Others, possessing real vision, saw the remarkable beauty of Lincoln’s visage, especially in its sadness, as he spiritually absorbed the woes of his nation. The novelist Nathaniel Hawthorne, visiting the president in 1862, beheld the same beauty: “The whole physiognomy is as coarse a one as you would meet anywhere in the length and breadth of the States; but, withal, it is redeemed, illuminated, softened, and brightened by a kindly though

serious look out of his eyes, and an expression of homely sagacity, that seems weighted with rich results of village experience.”⁹



John Donne possessed the spiritual vision to perceive the true beauty of the womanly face – without the deceits of the eye – in Lady Magdalen Herbert. The mother of George Herbert, the Anglican devotional poet of the seventeenth century, she bore ten children altogether, but their father Charles died shortly after the birth of the tenth child in 1596. She was thus left to rear a large family. After remaining a widow for a dozen years, Lady Herbert married Sir John Danvers, a man many years her junior. It is not difficult to understand why she remained so very attractive to anyone who had eyes to see – who had *vision*. She was a woman of almost unparalleled gifts and accomplishments: she was keenly intelligent, she was cultivated in both arts and letters, she was at once vivacious and pious, and she was possessed of immense charm and attractiveness.

Still able to discern Lady Magdalen’s womanly beauty in 1625, when she was in her mid-sixties, John Donne addressed his poem entitled “The Autumnal” to her. The first six (of twelve) stanzas in Donne’s *Elegy IX* record the poet’s remarkable vision of this woman who, in her latter years, remained utterly feminine without at all seeking to be “sexy.”

No spring, nor summer beauty hath such grace
 As I have seen in one autumnal face;
 Young beauties force our love, and that’s a rape;
 This doth but counsel, yet you cannot scape.

If ‘twere a shame to love, here ‘twere no shame;
 Affections here take reverence’s name.
 Were her first years the Golden Age? That’s true,
 But now she’s gold oft tried, and ever new.

That was her torrid and inflaming time;
 This is her tolerable tropic clime.
 Fair eyes, who asks more heat than comes from hence,
 He in a fever wishes pestilence.

Call not these wrinkles, graves; if graves they were,
 They were Love’s graves, for else he is nowhere.
 Yet lies not Love dead here, but here doth sit,
 Vowed to this trench, like an anchorit,

And here, till hers, which must be his death, come,
 He doth not dig a grave, but build a tomb.

Here dwells he; though he sojourn everywhere,
In progress, yet his standing house is here;

Here, where still evening is, not noon, nor night;
Where no voluptuousness, yet all delight.

In all her words, unto all hearers fit,
You may at revels, you at counsel, sit.

In spring, Donne declares, youthful beauty is literally eye-catching, so much so that it virtually forces the male gaze to admire it, almost molesting the beholder by the force of its gorgeousness. Summer, by contrast, is a metaphor for fruition and thus of childbearing. Alas, it is also the time that many men assume to mark the end of beauty in women, as their figures are no longer firm and boyish. Autumn, therefore, would seem the least likely place to discern beauty, for it means the end of both youth and middle-age, even as the leaves are falling from the trees, with only the bare trunks and branches remaining. Indeed, autumn marks the beginning of old age and the decline that winter signifies.

Yet Donne pronounces autumnal love and beauty to be the finest of them all. This harvest-time femininity embodies deep wisdom, a truthfulness that is no less escapable than the glare of the gorgeous. Youthful love is often shamefully lustful, Donne knows all too well, but autumnal love is full of reverence and affection rather than naked desire. If one wants to count the early years of eye-appealing comeliness as akin to the Golden Age, Donne does not object—so long as we do not accept the myth that this is the only age of peace and prosperity, with all that follows resulting in calamity and loss. On the contrary, this lady's splendor is all the more golden for having been sifted and tested by age and experience.

In a similar fashion, the eye alone would crave for youthful beauty because it excites the heat of sexual passion (the scorching southern Tropic of Capricorn), while ignoring the temperate zone (the mild northern Tropic of Cancer) that Lady Magdalen now metaphorically occupies. In fact, Donne directly addresses those who behold such womanly beauty with "fair eyes alone" and who thus wish that she were more "steamy" and sensual: he calls them insane, driven mad by lascivious desire that would make not for fruitfulness but the plague. (Donne is not afraid to link the word "pestilence" with the deadly "pox" of sexually transmitted disease.)

He also puns on the word "graves," which is also French for "engravings." This lady's facial furrows must not be construed as disfigurements, for they have been etched there by Love itself, as have the dark moons under the Virgin's eyes in the icons of the Eastern church. As Dean of St. Paul's Cathedral in London, Donne also uses the word "love" as signifying both *agape* and *eros*, both self-emptying surrender *and* self-fulfilling desire. Such double-sided Love is gloriously ensconced in the love-lines of her face,

just as an anchorite is gladly limited to the confines of his cell. Her sociable chastity is a form of avowed holiness no less than the solitary monk's consecration to celibacy.

Love does not scoop out graves in this lovely woman's face. Instead, he shapes the marble effigy that will lie atop her tomb when she dies. Love will indeed go on his perennial journey (his royal "progress") to honor other women possessing such beauty, but he will always return to this lady's monument as his true home. For here, Donne declares, the light of womanly beauty is neither blinding like the overhead sun nor extinguished in sheer darkness. Rather does its splendor dwell in an autumnal femininity. Neither sultry nor seductive, Lady Magdalen's beauty is suffused with a gentle delight, a serene tranquility like the hushed calm of the setting sun. What matters now is not her looks so much as her *speech*, for she both embodies and articulates the wisdom that provides apt advice to all who come to listen, whether it be youth who need restraint from their riotous revels, or adults who need her counsel in discerning the beauty that comes with age.

Thus does Donne propose "a more excellent way" for overcoming what Lewis calls the demonic triumph of the eye. Such a victory will not be easily or quickly won. Yet we might at least make a start by pondering Donne's magnificent tribute to Lady Magdalen Herbert and by inspecting icons of the Virgin Mary. They will enable the reshaping of our imagination no less than our minds, as we learn to distinguish between ocular sight accomplished *with* the eye, on the one hand, and spiritual vision achieved *through* the eye, on the other. Only then shall we behold true feminine beauty. It is a beauty found in the voice of wisdom and companionship rather than the shape of the hourglass. It is an autumnal beauty often located in young women imbued with moral seriousness. Creased with the care of both love and sorrow, it is a beauty that can finally behold even God face to face.

NOTES

1 Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking* (original edition, 1973; revised and expanded edition, San Francisco, CA: HarperOne, 1993), 54.

2 C. S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (original edition, 1942; San Francisco, CA: HarperCollins, 2001), 107.

3 *Ibid.*

4 Tom Wolfe, *A Man in Full* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1998), 192.

5 Statistics for the American market are from "11.7 Cosmetic Procedures in 2007," The American Society for Aesthetic Plastic Surgery (February 25, 2008), www.surgery.org/press/news-release.php?iid=491 (accessed August 9, 2009). ASAPC reports that "Women had 91 percent of cosmetic procedures" and "procedures increased 9 percent" in 2007. For the comparison with Europe, see Sreyashi Dutta, "Cosmetic Surgery Market: Current Trends," *Frost & Sullivan Market Insight* (December 30, 2008), www.frost.com/prod/sero/let/market-insight-top.pag?Src=RSS&docid=153913646 (accessed August 9, 2009).

6 C. S. Lewis, *Till We Have Faces: A Myth Retold* (original edition, 1956; New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1980).

7 Quotation marked "RSV" is from Revised Standard Version of the Bible, copyright

1952 [second edition, 1971] by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

8 "Adrift in a Laundromat" (a review of Peter De Vries, *The Tents of Wickedness*), *Time* (July 20, 2009), 100.

9 Nathaniel Hawthorne, "Chiefly about War Matters. By a Peaceable Man," *Atlantic Monthly* 10:57 (July 1862), 43-61. This description of President Lincoln was suppressed by the journal editors, with the author's permission, and only printed in an 1883 edition of Hawthorne's essays.



RALPH C. WOOD

is University Professor of Theology and Literature at Baylor University in Waco, Texas.