

Anselm had a thing about painting

When I was first invited to present a paper at this conference, I knew immediately what I wanted to talk about. Anselm – my constant companion for the last three years or so – has a bit of a thing about painting. It is a favorite source of analogies for him, some of them illuminating but others noticeably strained. His most famous use of painting as an analogy, in the widely anthologized and over-studied passage that contains his so-called ontological argument, is so grossly misleading and inept for Anselm’s purposes that one can account for its presence only by assuming that Anselm just had to get something about painting in there somehow. Being a philosopher, and therefore ill-equipped to deal with anything concrete, I haven’t said anything in print about this strange preoccupation. But then this conference came along, and with it a mandate to talk about sacred *objects*. So here’s my chance to chew over Anselm’s painting fetish a bit and figure out why these objects – these in particular – are his favorite metaphors, put to service for a variety of theological and philosophical purposes.

It might help to start with a brief explanation of why painting is such an odd interest for Anselm – why, in other words, one ought to be puzzled by this fetish of his. Anselm is a Platonist. I don’t mean that so much in the full-blown metaphysical sense (in fact, in that sense Anselm isn’t much of a Platonist at all, despite what you read in all the standard books), but in the sense that he has a generally Platonic outlook: a tendency to think in terms of a dichotomy between an intelligible, perfect, unchangeable realm (which alone has genuine being) and a sensible, imperfect, changeable realm (which merely mimics, in a fragmentary and deficient way, the perfection of the intelligible realm). Plato famously argued that representations of sensible

objects are mere copies of copies of what most truly is; if sensible objects are dangerous, all the more so are representations of sensible objects. And any Platonist worthy of the name will recoil from the sensible world and the body, and will be distrustful of the allure of bodies.

Anselm certainly shares this fundamental outlook, and nowhere more vividly than in my favorite letter of his. Anselm is writing to Gunhilda, daughter of the late King Harold. As a member of the Anglo-Saxon royal family, she has been enjoying the protection of a monastic community since the Norman invasion. Though she has taken up the habit, she has not taken vows, and she would like to return to life outside the cloister. She had enjoyed married life before, with her late husband Count Alan Rufus; and now she would like to lay aside her habit and return to married life with her husband's brother, Count Alan Niger. (Yes, they were both named Alan; this seems to be original historical source for "This is my brother Darrell, and this is my other brother Darrell.") Anselm writes two letters to Gunhilda to persuade her not to abandon her better, monastic way of life. In the second, and much more vivid, of these, he tries to get her to see what the pleasures of the flesh really come to:

Turn away, sister and daughter, turn away your heart lest it be so concerned with vanity that it cannot reflect on truth. Consider: what is the glory of the world, what is it that you love? You were the daughter of the King and Queen. Where are they? They are worms and dust. Their exalted rank, their pleasures, their riches neither preserved them nor went with them. Your loved one who loved you, Count Alan Rufus. Where is he now? Where has that beloved lover of yours gone? Go now, sister, lie down with him on the bed in which he now lies; gather his worms to your bosom; embrace his corpse; press your lips to his naked teeth, for his lips have already been consumed by putrefaction. Certainly he does not now care for your love, in which he delighted while alive, and you shrink from his rotting flesh, which you longed to possess. This assuredly is what you loved in him; and this, and nothing else, is what you love in his brother.

Given Anselm's hostility to physical beauty, it comes as quite a surprise when we read the following in *Cur Deus Homo*:

I also shrink from your request because the subject matter is not merely precious but, just as it concerns one who is “beautiful in his appearance beyond the children of men,” so too is it beautiful in its reasoning beyond the understanding of men. Hence, just as I am accustomed to grow indignant at incompetent painters when I see that the Lord himself is portrayed as ugly in his appearance, so too I am afraid that the same thing will happen to me if I presume to discuss such a beautiful subject in unworthy and inelegant language.

There’s a lot of puzzling stuff in that short passage. Notice first that Anselm’s point is not merely that Jesus shouldn’t be *represented as* ugly, but that he was *in fact* exceedingly good-looking. But on what grounds does Anselm make this claim, and why does it matter?

As for the grounds on which he makes the claim, it would appear to be a straightforward case of quoting Scripture. Psalm 45, which he quotes here, was generally read with messianic implications. So if the warrior-king of Psalm 45 is really good-looking, we know that Jesus is really good-looking, right? Well, not so fast. Anselm is far from being a take-it-at-face-value kind of proof-texter, so this is a slender basis on which to erect a theory about Jesus’ physical appearance. And there is another, and more widely appealed to, messianic text that suggests quite the opposite reading. It’s Isaiah 53: “he had no form or comeliness that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him.”

So on Anselm’s usual way of adjudicating questions of Scriptural interpretation, we have to let some more general theoretical commitments determine which of these two passages is to be taken at face value and which is to be reinterpreted. The passage I’ve quoted from *Cur Deus Homo* suggests the more general theoretical commitment that takes hermeneutical priority. There is a close analogy for Anselm between physical beauty and what for lack of a better word we can call rational beauty. And painting is to physical beauty what discourse is to rational beauty. Both are vehicles for representation, and our judgments about both depend on how good

a job they do of representing the beauty they are supposed to represent. Given that Jesus was *speciosus forma*, a painter who represents him as ill-favored (*informis figura*) must be judged *pravus* – incompetent, but with strong moral overtones in Anselm’s usage. And given that the truth about Jesus is *speciosus ratione*, Anselm worries about essaying to represent that truth and succeeding only in producing an inelegant and contemptible discourse.

So painting is to physical beauty as discourse is to rational beauty. But that still doesn’t get me quite what I want. The argument so far says that *if* Jesus was good-looking, a painting that represents him as ugly must be condemned; but we still don’t have a reason for thinking that Jesus was good-looking – for preferring Psalm 45 to Isaiah 53. Here I can only speculate, but I think the speculation is well-grounded.

Physical beauty is a representation of rational beauty, but only in Jesus’ case, because he’s the only human being in which there’s no original sin to worry about. The dislocation of the physical from the spiritual that is a consequence of the fall of Adam is not operative in the case of Jesus. Moreover, according to Anselm’s Christology, the person to whom the physical appearance of Jesus belongs is not a human person, but a dual-natured person; the human nature is joined to the divine nature in unity of person. One can imagine Anselm thinking that it would be unbecoming for a person who has a divine nature to be anything other than good-looking, assuming that such a person has a physical appearance at all. Moreover, Anselm will suppose that we don’t have the same worries with him that we have with garden-variety human beings. The beauty of the God-man cannot be deceptive, since it belongs to a person who has a nature than which a greater cannot be thought. Nor is his beauty impermanent, fragile, and unworthy of enduring love, as was the beauty of the late Alan Rufus, whose state of physical debility Anselm

so memorably details. Here alone, where heaven and earth are joined, is the eternal beauty of the highest reason perfectly represented by the physical beauty of one who is *speciosus forma prae filiis hominum*.

And indeed Anselm regularly takes beauty as a metaphor for moral excellence. This is too large a topic for me to do justice to here, though no doubt all of you will want to run right out and buy my book on Anselm when it comes out so that you can explore the topic in more detail. But a brief tour through the main points might help. For Anselm, it is evident to reason that the work of a perfectly rational and perfectly good Creator will be beautiful, since beauty is a great good. And part of what beauty consists in is order: “If divine wisdom does not intervene wherever perversity tries to disturb correct order, a certain ugliness would arise from the violation of the beauty of order in the very universe that God ought to make orderly, and God would seem to fall short in his governance.” Thus we see that God’s good governance consists in part in his establishing and maintaining a beautiful order in the world he creates. We find similar themes in the practical advice Anselm gives in his letters. From his earliest letters through his latest, we find one constant refrain: we must maintain the beauty of divine order by submitting our wills to God’s. Moreover, nearly everyone is under the authority of earthly masters as well, and Anselm sees these human authorities as extensions of God’s regulating arm. So maintaining the beauty of order will require not only that we conform our will to God’s will but also that we obey our human superiors.

Now I want to drop the analogy between beauty and moral excellence – it will return shortly – and resume the discussion of rational beauty. Recall that what painting is to physical beauty, discourse is to rational beauty. So it makes sense to Anselm to use the analogy of

painting in talking about the representation of rational beauty. That analogy receives its fullest treatment in *Cur Deus Homo*. Anselm's interlocutor, the delightfully named Boso, asks Anselm to respond to the objections of unbelievers that the Christian story of redemption portrays God as acting in an unseemly and unreasonable way. Anselm initially replies by asserting the rational beauty of the Christian story of Atonement:

If [unbelievers] attentively considered how fitting a way this was to accomplish the restoration of humankind, they would not deride our simplicity but join with us in praising God's wise benevolence. For it was fitting that just as death entered the human race through the disobedience of a human being, so too life should be restored by the obedience of a human being. It was fitting that just as the sin that was the cause of our damnation had its origin from a woman, so too the author of our justice and salvation should be born of a woman. And it was fitting that the devil, who through the tasting of a tree defeated the human being whom he persuaded, should be defeated by a human being through the suffering on a tree that he inflicted. And there are many other things that, if carefully considered, demonstrate the indescribable beauty that belongs to our redemption, accomplished in this way.

But Boso immediately rejects the appeal to rational beauty:

All these things are beautiful, and they have to be treated like pictures. But if there is nothing sturdy underneath them, unbelievers do not think they provide a sufficient explanation for why we ought to believe that God willed to undergo the things we say he underwent. When someone wants to produce a picture, he chooses something sturdy on which to paint, so that his painting will last. No one paints on water or in the air, since no traces of the picture would remain there. So when we offer unbelievers these instances of what you say is fitting as pictures of an actual fact, they think it is as though we are painting on a cloud, since they hold that what we believe is not an actual fact at all, but a fiction. Therefore, one must first demonstrate the rational solidity of the truth: that is, the necessity that proves that God should or could have humbled himself to the things that we proclaim about him. Only then should one expound on considerations of fittingness as pictures of this truth, so that the body of truth, so to speak, might shine all the more brightly.

Now although Boso was a real person, and frequently played Robin to Anselm's Batman, the fact that Boso the character in the dialogues puts forward these strictures against the appeal to rational beauty, and Anselm the character accepts them, means that Anselm himself, the writer, accepts

them. But why? If indeed truth is rationally beautiful, why not display that beauty in order to persuade people of its truth?

The answer seems to be twofold. First, Anselm is worried about the possibility of misrepresentation. Beauty of discourse can, in the wrong hands, pull away from rational beauty. Anselm worries about this quite frequently in his letters: “I do not wish to be painted” – there’s that word – “I do not wish to be painted as something other than what I am.” The wrong sort of rhetorical artist can make an attractive painting even of what is unseemly in the eyes of reason.

Second, and following from the first point, Anselm appears to think that faith is necessary in order to be in the right sort of position to appreciate properly the rational beauty of the truth and to see past any deceptive rhetorical painting – whether a beautiful discourse that belies the ugliness of the subject matter, or (as is also possible) a halting discourse that, for someone lacking faith, might obscure the beauty of the truth. Faith, Anselm thinks, is not simply an epistemic attitude but a spiritual discipline marked by an obedient will:

First our heart must be cleansed by faith; Scripture describes God as “cleansing their hearts by faith.” And first our eyes must be enlightened by our keeping God’s commandments, since “the command of the Lord is bright, enlightening the eyes.” And first we ought to become little children through our humble obedience to the testimonies of God, in order that we might learn the wisdom that the testimony of the Lord gives, for “the testimony of the Lord is sure, giving wisdom to little children.”

Such spiritual formation enables believers to “develop[] spiritual wings through the firmness of their faith.” They have “set aside the things of the flesh” – including the contemptible baubles of deceptive discourse – and are living according to the spirit, and Scripture promises that “the spiritual man judges all things, and he himself is judged by no one.”

These, I take it, are the reasons that Anselm accepts the strictures on the appeal to rational

beauty that Boso insists on. Their dialogue then proceeds in a straightforward, rational way, with the unadorned prose that is characteristic of almost all of Anselm's works. (I note, in passing, a confirmation of my thesis about Anselm's attitude toward representing rational beauty by way of beautiful discourse. The only works in which Anselm writes poetically or strives for stylistic grace are those in which the speaker is professedly a person of faith: his prayers and meditations, and the first chapter of the *Proslogion*, which has exactly the same literary style as the prayers. When Anselm is presenting what he means to be purely rational arguments, meant to persuade people of the truth, he employs a straightforward, unadorned style.) Only once the truth is established by purely rational means

So, many thousands of unadorned words later, Anselm has provided the arguments that he thinks should convince the unbeliever, not by their beauty but by their evident rationality. He then turns to Boso and asks, "Is what we have said solid? Or is it something insubstantial, like clouds, as you said unbelievers claim in their objections against us?" Boso answers, "Nothing could be more solid." And *now* – now that we have a solid surface – the paintings come along.

Anselm says to Boso:

Then paint, not on an insubstantial fiction, but on the solid truth, and say that it is altogether fitting that just as human sin and the cause of our damnation had its beginning from a woman, so too the cure for sin and the cause of our salvation should be born from a woman. And so that women will not despair of membership in the company of the blessed because so great an evil proceeded from a woman, it is fitting that so great a good should proceed from a woman so that their hope might be restored. Paint this too: given that it was a virgin who was the cause of all evil for the human race, it is all the more fitting that it should be a virgin who will be the cause of all good. And paint this as well: given that the woman whom God made from a man without a woman was made from a virgin, it is altogether fitting that the man who will come to be from a woman without a man should likewise be made from a virgin. But let these be enough for now of the pictures that can be painted on the fact that the God-man ought to be born of a virgin woman.

Boso replies, “These pictures are exceedingly beautiful and reasonable.”

So now we can go back to the first passage I quoted from *Cur Deus Homo* and understand better what Anselm meant by saying that he did not want to present a contemptible discourse on such a beautiful subject-matter. A contemptible discourse would be one that did not do justice to its rationality, rather than one that did not do justice to its beauty. For Anselm generally eschews any attempt to do justice to its beauty, under the strictures enforced by Boso. Reason comes first, adornment second. So after the proofs come the paintings – until the painting are once again put away, and the art gallery is replaced yet again with the classroom.

All of this shows us very clearly the limits of the appeal to beauty as Anselm understands it in *Cur Deus Homo*. Beauty by itself is not persuasive – or at least, not reliably so – but to the person who is already persuaded an appreciation of the rational beauty of the truth strengthens and deepens understanding, giving the believer a kind of “experience,” in Anselm’s language: a sort of first-hand *feel* for the truth that is unmediated by argument. A colleague of mine who works in aesthetics has challenged this stricture. Shouldn’t Anselm acknowledge, he asks, that the theologian can do more to win over the unbeliever or doubter by displaying the great beauty and attractiveness of what he takes to be the truth? Does not beauty do more to attract belief than arguments do? It’s practically a tautology: beauty is, by definition, attractive, appealing. Arguments – well, as every philosophy professor knows from painful experience, the best arguments in the world often do surprising little to move their audience.

We’ve already seen why this won’t do. The fact that I get all tingly singing Christina Rossetti poems every Christmastide is hardly evidence for the truth of the Chalcedonian definition. For one thing, it’s an incommunicable experience. And for another, I get tingly

because I believe the definition; I don't believe the definition because I get the tingles. Just as Anselm says *Credo ut intelligam*, I believe in order that I might understand, so too he could say *Credo ut mirer*, I believe in order that I might be awe-struck.