

It is said in Egypt that nothing of beauty is ever perfect. In the reality I know, there is One Who is both beautiful and perfect: the Father of Lights, with Whom there is no variation, nor shadow of turning. With that exception, the proverb rings true. In this world, beautiful things are not perfect - but neither do their imperfections prevent them from being beautiful. The beauty of all imperfect things is their similarity to perfect beauty; the beauty of many imperfect things lies in their very imperfection.

Beauty in this fallen sphere is imperfect because it is just that: fallen. If it were perfect, it would satisfy us completely – but it does not. A gorgeous sunset or a sky full of stars or a wonderful friendship may seem to us very nearly perfect, but it never quite satisfies us. It thrills us, but it also leaves us with an inexpressible longing that is part joy and part loss. The cause of this imperfection is the Fall.

I suggest that there is not only a cause but also a reason for this imperfection. The reason is this: that we are not supposed to be satisfied with this world. It is beautiful to us because it reminds us of, or gives us a glimpse of, perfect beauty - but the world itself is only a shadow. Its beauty pleases us, but it also awakens in us a desire for something other, something more. I do not mean discontent or ingratitude. We ought to appreciate the beauty of this world, but we also ought to recognize its imperfection. God made this world beautiful – allowed imperfect beauty even in this fallen world – not so we would be completely satisfied, but rather so we would desire Him.

Imperfectly beautiful things, then, are beautiful because they remind us of, or evoke in us a desire for, perfect beauty. Imperfection does not prevent them from being beautiful. I think we can go even further. Many things would not even be beautiful without their imperfections. An opal is a thing whose imperfection is its beauty. Ellice Hopkins wrote of it: “[The opal] owes its beauty and its preciousness to a defect. It is a stone with a broken heart. It is full of minute fissures which admit air, and the air refracts the light. Hence its lovely hues . . . ”

Like the beauty of an opal is that of a beautiful character. In order for a person's character to be

beautiful, a person's life must have been riddled with imperfections. I have often found that loving hearts are hearts that have been broken, patient hearts are hearts that have been sorely tried, hopeful hearts are hearts that have suffered tragedy. These are the things that produce beauty in a person's character.

The beauty of the love that exists between a man and a woman is also based on imperfection. A man and a woman are beautiful to each other precisely because both of them are imperfect, incomplete, lacking something; that is how they were made. If they were perfect in themselves, complete by themselves, they would not desire each other. There would then be no such love. That love is a very beautiful thing, and its source is imperfection.

At a first reading, the Egyptian proverb may sound like a regret, as though it were a sad thing that nothing of beauty is ever perfect. But it is not a sad thing. Some beauty would not exist were it not for certain imperfections, and all imperfect beauty is meant to draw us to the One Who is both beautiful and perfect, "Whom having not seen, [we] love."