

# Divine Beauty: “The Well-Baked Man” and the Aesthetics of Race

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“Beauty is truth, truth beauty”—that is all  
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.  
(Keats, “Ode on a Grecian Urn”)

“But think’st thou heaven is such a glorious thing?  
I tell thee *Faustus* it is not halfe so faire  
As thou, or any man that breathes on earth.”  
(Marlowe, *Doctor Faustus*)

Beauty can be dangerous. Whether it is the beauty of a face that “Launcht a thousand ships, / And Burnt the toplesse Towers of *Ilium*” (Christopher Marlowe’s characterization of Helen of Troy and the warfare ensuing from her abduction); the beauty of a dancing Salome, who had as her price for performance the head of John the Baptist on a platter; or the beguiling charms of Delilah, who sheared Samson of his locks and power, and brought about his downfall, the power of beauty can indeed be a deadly serious matter. Nor are women immune from becoming victims of their own beauty: the once-beautiful Medusa was turned into a gorgon by a vengeful Athena, and the once-beautiful Io was changed into a cow on account of Hera’s jealousy.<sup>1</sup> It may perhaps be no accident that “beauty” and “war” are close siblings in Latin: *bellus* and *bellum*. We needn’t go

back some 2,000 and more years, however, nor to the stuff of classic legends and Bible lore to find the darker, unbecoming side of beauty.

In November of 2002, the Miss World Beauty Pageant was moved from the Nigerian capital of Abuja to London in the wake of rioting that killed nearly 200 people and hospitalized over 1,000. This rioting was not incidental to the contest; it was indirectly caused by it. In response to earlier Muslim protests against the morality of such a contest, an ill-thought article on the front page of the newspaper *ThisDay* (sic) had observed that the prophet Mohammed would have chosen a wife from among the contestants. This was undeniably provocative and in poor judgment, and despite the resignation of the author and profuse apologies from the editors, religious riots ensued. "Islam teaches that no human being is infallible," the newspaper's "Apology to All Muslims" appealed.<sup>2</sup> While in the West protests against beauty contests tend to come more from the left as a result of women's liberation and the rise of a feminist consciousness, with parading feminine flesh seen as demeaning to women, protests from a more traditional Islamic point of view apparently see such pageants as blasphemous against Allah. To Muslims, "all of Allah's creation is beautiful, because Allah, the Khaaliq (Creator) does not create anything except with beauty and perfection;" thus "it is from the wisdom of Allah that He has chosen to create some of us short, others tall, some fat, some thin, some dark-colored, some light—all are beautiful and perfect in their own right."<sup>3</sup> This is a healthy tonic to body fascism and racism, and it indicates that we need look no further for explanations of why some people are dark, some light, of why we find in the human species a wide variety of shades and colors.

Some traditions and cultures do, however, seek further explanation for the diversity of racial types, and this essay addresses a few of them. In the beginning, it is vital to understand that with some of these explanations we are dealing with religion, and in matters religious the appropriate approach is on hands and knees. Others of these explanations are folklore, which may or may not have religious origins, but are presented by the tellers and taken

by their listeners not as “gospel truth” but as entertaining tales. In order to compare these traditions from a literary perspective, I will employ the term “myth,” and “story,” and other such common terms equally, with the caveat that some of these are part of a belief system and are not *mere* “myths” and “stories” to those people and cultures that believe in them. One person’s religion is another’s myth, and it is important to recognize and respect cultural differences in apprehension of the sacred. My focus is primarily upon what I will term the “well-baked man” motif, named after a Pima (Native American) tale, and this motif is here represented in the human genesis stories of three Native American tribes: the Seneca, the Seminole, and the Pima. Each of these stories is founded upon a basic observation: people come in different colors. Moving inevitably to the favorite question of childhood—“Why?”—these tales offer similar etiologies to explain the racial diversity of humans, the varied *chroma* of the human body. “Etiology” and “ideology” are similar not only to the ear, but also to the mind and heart, and these three tales are certainly freighted with political intent. They are nonetheless humorous and entertaining, and I offer that they can be read in the context of a beauty contest, in which God—the “Divine”—has to judge among the contestants to determine—to “divine”—that *chroma* which is most becoming to mankind. It is, in a sense, a truly global beauty contest, but one in which the contestants are not individuals but racial types, and with a supreme judge against whose verdicts there can be no appeal. Upon what criteria does the divine base its judgments? What else, but upon itself.

We shall begin with the Seneca story of the creation of man:

God at first created the sun and the moon. One day while walking about on the earth, becoming lonely, he said, “I will make a human being to keep me company.” He held his way until he came to an uprooted hemlock, which had raised a great pile of earth with its upturned roots. . . . God made a human being from the earth piled up among the roots of this tree . . . [but] the soil was so poor and light-colored that he had a pale, sickly complexion. God breathed on him and he stood up and walked. Then God looked at him from behind the

roots of the tree, but not being pleased with his creation, he resolved that he would try again.

God soon came to a walnut tree lying uprooted, which had pulled up with its roots a mound of black earth. From this earth God made another human being. As he looked at him, he saw that, being black, he had too much color. So God was not satisfied with this piece of work, either.

Going on farther, he came at last to an uprooted sugar maple. There the earth had a fine deep color; so out of this God made the third human being, whose body was smooth and firm and of a full rich tint. And God, pleased with his looks, said, "He will do; he looks like me." This last human being was an Indian; thus the Indian was the native human being.<sup>4</sup>

The Seminole myth of human creation offers a different methodology—the baking of clay, but with similar results:

Then the Master of Life said, we will make man. Man was made; but when he stood up before his maker he was *white!* The Great Spirit was sorry: he saw that the being he had made was pale and weak; he took pity on him, and therefore did not unmake him, but let him live. He tried again, for he was determined to make a perfect man; but in his endeavor not to make another white man, he went into the opposite extreme, and when the second being rose up, and stood before him, he was *black!* The Great Spirit liked the black man less than the white, and he shoved him aside to make room for another trial. Then it was that he made the *red man*; and the red man pleased him.<sup>5</sup>

The Pima have a tradition similar to this Seminole tale, but with God's efforts at man-making humorously frustrated and countered by the mischievous, godlike Coyote. Taking some clay, the "Magician" or "Man Maker" forms it "into a shape like himself" and puts it into an oven; when he turns away to gather firewood, Coyote changes its shape to resemble himself, and so dogs are created. In his second attempt, Magician/Man Maker decides to create a man and a woman "rather like himself," but through Coyote's deliberate ill

counsel he takes them too early from the oven: ““Oh my, what’s wrong?” he said. ‘They’re underdone; they’re not brown enough. They don’t belong here—they belong across the water someplace.’” In his third attempt, Magician/Man Maker is again duped by Coyote’s advice to ““leave them in a little longer,’” with the expected result: ““Oh my. What’s wrong? These are overdone. They’re burned too dark. . . . They don’t belong here.”” By his fourth attempt, Magician/Man Maker has learned his lesson:

This time the Magician did not listen to Coyote but took them out when he himself thought they were done. . . . They were neither underdone nor overdone.

“These are exactly right,” said Man Maker. “These really belong here; these I will use. They are beautiful.” So that’s why we have the Pueblo Indians.<sup>6</sup>

Within a Native American context, with teller and listener both part of the same race or even tribe, such stories can function as a kind of inside joke. They can increase social cohesion by establishing a group identity that is innate through the exclusion of those who do not possess the same innate quality. So long as there is no contrary testimony, the conclusions of the group can be held by the group as a universal paradigm. The problem, of course, is that once such judgments are opened up to public debate, there is indeed contrary testimony. In the early part of the twentieth century, Benedetto Croce, in his *Aesthetic as Science of Expression and General Linguistics*, showed the problem facing those who would attempt any meaningful analysis of human beauty:

Here we must before everything turn those who discuss this subject from the abstract toward the concrete, by asking: “What do you mean by the human body, that of the male, the female, or the hermaphrodite? . . . [And] of what race of men—the white, the yellow or the black, or any others that may exist, according to the division you prefer?” Let us assume that they limit

themselves to the white race, and drive home the argument: "To what sub-species of the white race?" And when we have restricted them gradually to one corner of the white world, going, let us say, from the Italian to the Tuscan, the Siennese, the Porta Camollia quarter, we will proceed: "Very good; but at what age of the human body, and in what condition and stage—that of the newborn babe, of the child, of the boy, of the adolescent, of the man of middle age, and so on?"<sup>7</sup>

Over a hundred years earlier, Immanuel Kant had suggested that "[t]he normal idea of the figure of an animal or a particular race must take its elements from experience;" he hypothesized that the imagination is able to tabulate all variations of a type and come up with a standard "average, which serves as the common measure of all." Thus, "the stature of a beautiful man" will be found to be "equally removed from the extreme bounds of the greatest and smallest stature." We might well hear the Seneca, Seminole, and Pima snickering in the background or over the shoulder of Herr Kant, for surely his formula would seem to prove them right. Kant is quick, however, to qualify this averaging process as limited to deriving "the normal idea in the country where the comparison is instituted": "Thus necessarily under these empirical conditions a Negro must have a different normal idea of the beauty of the human figure from a white man, a Chinaman a different normal idea from a European, etc." Kant was careful to give aesthetic relativism *vis-à-vis* different peoples its due, but he could not escape the primacy of human beauty itself. In his *Critique of Judgment*, Kant separates two kinds of beauty: free beauty (*pulchritudo vaga*) and dependent or adherent beauty (*pulchritudo adhaerens*): "The first presupposes no concept of what the object ought to be; the second does presuppose such a concept and the perfection of the object in accordance therewith." While wild and mysterious nature (Kant posits flowers, birds, and seashells as examples) may be considered as possessing free beauty, the beauty of humans, domesticated animals, and all things of human manufacture "presupposes a concept of the purpose which determines what the thing is to be." But

regardless of category, it is in humans alone that we can find the concept of ideal beauty:

The only being which has the purpose of its existence in itself is *man* . . . . This *man* is, then, alone of all objects in the world, susceptible of an ideal of *beauty*, as it is only *humanity* in his person, as an intelligence, that is susceptible of the ideal of *perfection*.<sup>8</sup>

That Kant privileges intelligence is crucial; the rigorous ancient Greeks may have classified man a “featherless biped” in body, but in mind he was perceived as more divine than beast. And while Kant may have pined that “[t]o seek for . . . a universal criterion of the beautiful is fruitless trouble, because what is sought is impossible and self-contradictory,” he nonetheless busied himself enough with a problem that may have found an answer in antiquity.

From the Platonic fount the rivers of Western philosophy flow,<sup>9</sup> and the neo-Platonic Plotinus assures us of the identity of divinity and beauty:

For all the gods are majestic and beautiful and their beauty is overwhelming: but what is it which makes them like this? It is Intellect . . . . [Gods] are gods because of their intellect. They are surely beautiful just because they are gods.

Plotinus, whose work is the fullest, earliest explication of Platonic aesthetic theory, proceeds along tautologically commonsensical ground:

All that is here below comes from there, and exists in greater beauty there . . . .

Who, then, will not call beautiful that which is beautiful primarily and as a whole, and everywhere . . .? . . . Or if that is not beautiful, what else is?<sup>10</sup>

To offer that transcendent beauty is innately bound with the primal transcendent may not be particularly satisfying to those looking for more than circular arguments, but the intellectual conception of that which is for

humans dependent upon physical perception—beauty, whatever organs we perceive or enjoy it with—liberates the aesthetic from the shackles of body and crowns it with the tiara of spirit.

So far as the well-baked man stories are concerned, the three "beauty contestants" might, metaphorically speaking, look smashing in swimsuits and ravishing in evening gowns, but it is in the realm of the intellect that they really have to strut their stuff. This part of the competition is not *shown* in the story, it *is* the story—the witty narrative that displays a deftness and intellectual sleight of hand. For it is important to recognize that the human genesis tales of the Seneca, Seminole, and Pima do not simply present an ethnocentric bias and leave it at that: they offer a seemingly rational explanation for this bias, and this is particularly important when they are to be transmitted across cultural lines. Indeed, it is primarily because of this all-too-clever explanation that the tales preserve their cross-cultural humor. As the philosopher David Hume noted, in order to offer any standard of taste relevant to others, one must put aside one's own "individual being, and . . . peculiar circumstances." Terry Eagleton calls this "aesthetic disinterestedness"—"a radical decentring of the subject, subduing its self-regard to a community of sensibility with others."<sup>11</sup> This is the objective ideal; in the "real" subjective world (despite pretensions to objectivity or humorous posturings of it), one can never escape oneself or one's own cultural frame (as the anthropologist Clifford Geertz demonstrates),<sup>12</sup> especially when we find our community not only in conflict with different communities but both subsumed by and subsuming different levels of community, nestled like boxes within boxes. It is through this sense, a set of communities within a larger community, that the tales present a paradox when read in an alien culture. On the one hand, the tales discriminate against and exclude those who are not "well-baked"; on the other hand, even those who are not "well-baked" can understand and appreciate the concept of being "well-baked," and so they are invited into a "community of sensibility" even as it discriminates against them. These tales, then, employ a principle that is ideologically-free and generally



acknowledged, but apply it to a context in which it is not at all logically appropriate and results in a clear ethnic bias. The applied principle is typically known in the West as the Aristotelian golden mean—a reasonable balance moderating extremes; it is even more popularly known via a children’s fairy tale, “Goldilocks and the Three Bears”—neither too hot nor too cold, neither too soft nor too hard, but “just right.” But whether we call it the “golden mean,” the “Goldilocks principle,” or any number of other terms, the idea is clearly a universal one, though what quality or degree makes something or someone “just right” is contestable. The under-baked or over-baked reader, then, recognizes and allows the principle, even as he/she disallows its application. The critic who fails to allow a Coleridgean suspension of disbelief might well observe that these tales offer neither a reaching towards the heavens nor an explication of earth, but demonstrate that principles applied out of context lead one *per aspera absurdum*. It is, nonetheless, an absurdity that all can delight in. Moreover, from a more precise and scholarly point of view, the tales have a Biblical resonance that testifies on behalf of the Native American claim that they are the true, original humans, the Adam that God intended.

In the Bible, after God creates the heavens and the earth, and all of its plants and animals on land, in sea and air, he ends his creative acts by creating his own look-alike out of the ground:

Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness;” . . . .

. . . . [T]hen the Lord God formed man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; . . . .<sup>13</sup>

The material used to fashion man plays upon the similarity in Hebrew between *'adham* (man) and *'adhamah* (ground); more strikingly, “Adam” can also connote color—“ruddy” or “reddish”—in addition to connoting “earth,” and often these two terms are conflated to render “Adam” as meaning “red clay.”<sup>14</sup> While this might seem a recondite etymological pun, it was one that any minister or missionary worth his salt would know, and it

is one that some Native Americans were clearly familiar with. In 1836, the Pequot William Apes argued that the only true "natives" were Native Americans, "inasmuch as we are the only people who retain the original complexion of our father Adam."<sup>15</sup> Christian missionaries had been active in America for hundreds of years by the time the polygenetic tales of the Seneca, Seminole, and Pima were recorded in the nineteenth century. Native Americans had plenty of time and opportunity to incorporate, refashion, and turn the rhetoric of colonization and its attendant myths against itself. (Stories do not remain the sole property of an "originating" culture; there is no copyright on scripture.) Mythologies reflect and explain reality; when reality or our perceptions of it change, so do the myths (or our perceptions of them). Mythologies, then, represent the experiences of a culture, and even in their aspirations to delineate the divine, they are bound by the human imagination.

We must here recognize a fundamental paradox: the mythographer of the divine functions in a circular process as both creator and created, much like M.C. Escher's famous print of one hand drawing another hand, from which it in turn is drawn. Thus, even as genesis stories are presumably ones of how humans are created by God, they give birth in the process of their telling to the very God who is purported to be the true creator:

Narrator (Mankind)      God      Mankind (Narrator)

The hand of God may work in mysterious ways, but in ethnocentrically biased accounts it is clearly the hand of Man (or *donna*) at work in fashioning gods whose goal is the creation of the narrator and his (or her) people. In this sense, the teller conceals responsibility for his/her text through the apparatus of a divine mask. Especially with oral cultures, over hundreds or thousands of years of adaptation and change, the question of authorship or origination is one that cannot be effectively pursued, and so the chicken and egg paradox becomes utterly impossible to unscramble. Tracing the trajectory of aesthetics in the Age of Enlightenment, Peter de

Bola has observed “the transformation of the discourse *on* the sublime to the discourse *of* the sublime,” with empirical investigation giving way to “a discourse which itself is, or produces, or inhabits, or exhibits the sublime.”<sup>16</sup> Just as discourse of the aesthetic is transformed into the aesthetic itself, we can say that language creates the reality it is attempting to describe. Language does not so much mirror reality as construct it: the very terms we use to describe the world create and make the world what it is. We do not see so much with our eyes as with our minds, and these are hardly a *tabula rasa*. The artist tends “to see what he paints rather than to paint what he sees,” observes the eminent art historian, E. H. Gombrich: “There is no neutral naturalism. The artist, no less than the writer, needs a vocabulary before he can embark on a ‘copy’ of reality.” This vocabulary is drawn from one’s cultural environment, and as “[t]he familiar will always remain the likely starting point for the rendering of the unfamiliar,”<sup>17</sup> it should not be surprising that renderings of God or gods are more often than not based on human figures and that these human figures are based upon one’s own *ethnos*, upon the needs, uses, and desires of one’s particular social context. In a tradition of the Miwok of Northern California, animal gods are just as keen to create man in their own images. In a council of animals held to discuss how they would create man, the lion, grizzly bear, buck, mountain sheep, owl, mole, and mouse all suggest a model based upon each one’s own physical self. Coyote criticizes them: “Every one of them wanted to make the man like himself. They might as well take one of their own cubs and call it a man.” Coyote proposes an amalgam of the various animals’ unique gifts, but the council breaks up without any consensus:

Every animal set to work to make a man according to his own ideas; and, taking a lump of earth, each one commenced molding it like himself; but the coyote began to make one like that he had described in the council.<sup>18</sup>

The "Pygmalion power" of the artist and the mythographer are the same. In tales of human genesis, it is not surprising that we find human beings assign themselves a special status, modeled after the divine, inasmuch as the divine models them after itself. "Who painted the lion?" observed Chaucer's Wife of Bath, questioning through analogy the misogynist texts her husband loved to read. "Who made the God that made mankind in *his* image?" a Nietzschean feminist might intone.

We can suppose that should any universal and timeless concept of beauty exist, it would exist within the concept of the divine. There can be no higher order, no higher law to which aesthetic theory appeals or aspires. While it is certainly true that classical goddesses of the Greek and Roman pantheon sometimes found good reason to be jealous of their earthly sisters' mortal beauty and took vengeance upon them by transforming them into beasts and monsters, it was not because the Olympic sorority was without its beauty queens. Indeed, a useful mirror to the genesis tales of the Seneca, Seminole, and Pima can be found in the most famous beauty contest in Western culture and one of the most popular stories depicted in all of European art, "The Judgment of Paris." This Greek and Roman myth offers a divine beauty contest in which the three goddesses Hera, Athena, and Aphrodite (Juno, Minerva, and Venus in Roman lore) compete for a golden apple. The prized apple had been tossed as an act of revenge with the note "To the Fairest" at Paris' wedding by Eris, the Goddess of Strife, who alone of the pantheon was not invited. The King of the Gods, Zeus (Jove) was smart enough to recuse himself from the responsibility of judging, and the lot fell to Paris. Warding off bribes of land and riches (by Hera) and victory in battle (by Athena), Paris was not able to pass up Aphrodite's enticement of the most beautiful woman imaginable—Helen—even though she was already married and the wedding bouquet of his own bride hadn't yet wilted.<sup>19</sup> Paris' judgment was as objective and selfless as that of a Wall Street telecom analyst, and the Trojan War that followed serves as a reminder that the most epic of consequences can obtain from quaint blunders of the phallus. Whether it is one god judging the beauty of three humans, or one

human judging the beauty of three goddesses, all is vanity and judgment is not disinterested. Though continents and millennia apart, these twin triptychs of beauty would seem to give evidence to the commutability between worlds human and divine. And as humans may aspire to present themselves as most godlike in their beauty, it is only fitting that we find the most beautiful of gods most human in their failings. “Divine” is a verb as well as an adjective, and we find both of these uses (“to determine” and “godlike”) together in “The Judgment of Paris.” Religion and beauty may seem at first blush to be strange bedfellows, but they are clearly intimate companions in cultural history. Terry Eagleton has observed the aesthetic to be “the very paradigm of the ideological” and “no more than a name for the political unconscious.”<sup>20</sup> Often, however, we can find an aesthetic of an overtly, politically conscious sort, especially when it involves religion.

When in 1998 Lejla Sehovic was crowned Miss Croatia, contest organizers uncrowned her six days later, citing *nepravilnosti*—“irregularities”—in the selection process. Apparently, the only “irregularity” was that she was a Muslim and could not, therefore, appropriately represent an overwhelmingly Catholic country in the Miss World competition to be held in the Seychelles. International protest found her reinstated, but while a disinterested observer would understandably perceive her dethronement as ethnocentric and discriminatory, an important question is begged in the endeavor for equality: what does it mean to be “Croatian”?<sup>21</sup> Within the former constituent republics of the former Yugoslavia, one’s ethnicity and nationality is largely (even exclusively) defined by one’s religion. This is a criterion utterly alien to those countries that have had the opportunity to cobble together a unified nation by putting aside religious and other differences, but it is an understandable (though not forgivable) one in a country that had just emerged from a civil war in which ethnic cleansing meant religious cleansing. To put the matter more immediately, the odds are fairly long against someone with the name of Kim Hyun-Sun being named Miss Japan any time soon, no matter how many generations ago her

ancestors came to Japan and became legal citizens, and the odds are equally against a Miss Ethiopia being represented by the blue-eyed, red-haired daughter of Norwegian immigrants. We all have concepts of what it means to be "Japanese," of what it means to be "Ethiopian;" these are cultural constructions, just as "Japan" or "Ethiopia"—or "Orient,"<sup>22</sup>—are. It was but two generations ago that Japanese Americans were interned for their ethnicity, and even were a Ms. Matsumoto truly the most beautiful "Miss America," she wouldn't have been allowed anywhere near the pageant runway. Men were walking on the moon before the Miss America Pageant in 1970 dropped the rules barring non-whites, and it was this narrow definition of "American" that gave birth to the first Miss Black America contest in 1968.<sup>23</sup> Pushing protest in another direction, it was not that many years ago that the contest for "Homecoming Queen" at a university in America became a *cause célèbre*: the winner (decided by student body election) was gay, a self-described "queen," and the administration found itself uncomfortably between the rock of tradition and the hard place of equality and moral relativism.<sup>24</sup> With the media camped with the "camp" camp, the campus became a site of cultural contestation in which concepts of identity based on gender and sexual orientation were exposed and exploded.

Employing Immanuel Kant, we can say that while all would recognize that beauty contests do proceed upon the basis of *pulchritudo adhaerens*, what is allowed to be adherent and understood to be essential (and thus indisputable) is, paradoxically, in dispute. (What does it mean to be a "queen," to be "Croatian," to be properly "human"?) There has to be some basis for judgment, and while we may agree to disagree, we do have principles that we apply to form our judgments. In the case of the well-baked man tales, which essentially and ethnocentrically beg the question "What does it mean to be 'human'?" the purported principle is the golden mean, and the arbiter divine in origin and hence seemingly irrefutable—"seemingly" because Native American gods are not characterized by the same absoluteness that is found in the Jewish, Christian, and Islamic traditions. While Yaweh/Jehovah/Allah is omniscient,

omnipotent, and benevolent, Native American gods are often foolish, clumsy, and driven by base sensual appetites. That the creation of mankind proceeds as a series of fits and starts, mistakes and corrections, should give us pause, but only pause, to question the creator's acumen and ability. The tales do reach satisfying, reasonable conclusions, and the internal logic of the tales force the reader to reach the same ones. Nonetheless, the same story can take on different meanings depending upon the speaker/writer and listener/reader. It would be difficult to imagine a white narrator sharing "The Well-Baked Man" with a white audience without the prefatory: "This is a Native American story." To do so would probably leave the listener confused and bewildered. With such a preface, however, the story would seem to make perfect sense as a protest of the oppressed waged in the realm of poetics, and it offers the listener/reader a *frisson* of delight in being privilege to inside knowledge, a kind of "rebel aesthetics" or *bosozoku* beauty. It is probably more likely, however, that myths from the margins are incorporated within or return to the hegemony in unthreatening forms, and this has occurred with the well-baked man motif.

The Seminole tradition of human creation that Washington Irving includes in *Wolfert's Roost* is significantly different from the one provided here earlier:

"I know you white men say we all come from the same father and mother, but you are mistaken. We have a tradition handed down from our forefathers, and we believe it, that the Great Spirit, when he undertook to make men, made the black man; it was his first attempt, and pretty well for a beginning; but he soon saw he had bungled; so he determined to try his hand again. He did so, and made the red man. He liked him much better than the black man, but still *he* was not exactly what he wanted. So he tried once more, and made the white man; and then he was satisfied. You see, therefore, that you were made last, and that is the reason I call you my youngest brother.

"When the Great Spirit had made the three men, he called them together and showed them three boxes. The first was filled with books, and maps, and

papers; the second with bows and arrows, knives and tomahawks; the third with spades, axes, hoes, and hammers. 'These, my sons,' said he, 'are the means by which you are to live; choose among them according to your fancy.'

"The white man, being the favorite, had the first choice."<sup>25</sup>

The Seminole chief who spoke these words to William P. Duval, governor of the newly conquered Florida territories in the early 1820's, was surely familiar with a more self-flattering version of this tale. But a new reality had emerged, a new "New World Order," and if only for a limited audience, for a limited time, the mythology had to accommodate it. Best not to remind the pale-faced representatives of this order that God did not find a face (*omo*) that was white (*shiro*) either very beautiful or *omoshiroi*.

Mythologies do not remain static, nor do cultures. When the white majority in America began to reconsider what it meant to be "American" and to recognize its own previously unquestioned biases, and when minority peoples began to shed the colonized aesthetics of the white hegemony, it changed both heaven and earth. More and more pictures of a black Jesus could be found in the homes of African-American Catholics, and if the holy family could be black, well, why not Miss America? (Enter Vanessa Williams. Enter *Penthouse*. Exit Ms. Williams, less tiara.<sup>26</sup>) The Catholic Church has itself been increasingly active in promulgating a more realistic, darker Jesus, a pan-"ethnic" figure neither white nor black, but happily in between. Perhaps the Seneca, Seminole, and Pima were right. Or perhaps they were at least closer than the hegemony would have them. Recently, for its millennium edition, the *National Catholic Reporter* chose for its front cover a painting called "Jesus of the People," modeled after an African-American woman. "This is a haunting image of a peasant Jesus—dark, thick-lipped," shares the BBC-famous nun and art critic, Sister Wendy Beckett, who chose the painting from a contest of over 1,500 entries.<sup>27</sup> An anecdote from the current writer's own entry into the academic world provides memorable



words on the question of divine identity: in my freshman year at college, my philosophy professor, a young African-American woman, one day mused upon the absurdity that many people had as their mental image of God a white man with a long, white beard, sitting on a throne in the clouds. “That’s so strange,” she observed, “’Cause everybody knows she’s black.”

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Marlowe, *Doctor Faustus, The Complete Works of Christopher Marlowe*, ed. Fredson Bowers, vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1973) V.i.1768-69; Matthew 14:1-12; Judges 16:4-31; Robert Graves, ed., *The Greek Myths* 2 vols. (New York: Penguin, 1983) § 159, 33b, 56.

<sup>2</sup> “An Apology to All Muslims,” *ThisDay News*, online, [thisdayonline.com](http://thisdayonline.com), 14 Jan. 2003.

<sup>3</sup> Ifrat Azad, “In Search of Body Beautiful,” *Tara’s World of Islam*, online, [angelfire.com/mo2/scarves/beaut](http://angelfire.com/mo2/scarves/beaut), 10 Jan. 2003, 1-2.

<sup>4</sup> J. Curtin and J.N.B. Hewitt, “Seneca Fiction, Legends, and Myths,” *Annual Report of the Bureau of American Ethnology*, 32 (1918): 168-69.

<sup>5</sup> Thomas L. McKenney, *History of the Indian Tribes of North America*, vol. 1 (Philadelphia, 1870) 82-83.

<sup>6</sup> Pima, “The Well-Baked Man,” *American Indian Myths and Legends*, ed. Richard Erdoes and Alfonso Ortiz (New York: Pantheon, 1984) 46-47.

<sup>7</sup> Croce, *Aesthetic*, trans. Douglas Ainslie (London: MacMillan, 1922) 105-06.

<sup>8</sup> Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. J.H. Bernard (New York: Hafner, 1951) § 16-17 (original emphasis).

<sup>9</sup> From Plato, the Western tradition derives the concept of the *noumenon* and the *phenomenon*, the universal and the particular. The noumenon is divine and original: perfect, ideal, good, true, eternal, unchanging, transcendent spirit; the phenomenon is a manifestation or copy of the divine original in nature. Art, then, is at best a copy of a copy: the painting of a tree is drawn from a tree in life, and this tree in life is itself a copy of the spiritual concept of “treeness.”

<sup>10</sup> Plotinus, "On the Intelligible Beauty," *The Enneads*, trans. A.H. Armstrong, vol. 5 (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1984) § 8.7-8.

<sup>11</sup> Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990) 39.

<sup>12</sup> Geertz calls this "Mannheim's Paradox"—the inability to define where "ideology leaves off and science begins": "what man is may be so entangled with where he is, who he is, and what he believes that it is inseparable from them." See *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973) 194, 33, *passim*.

<sup>13</sup> Genesis 1:26; 2:7.

<sup>14</sup> *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*, rev. stan. ed., ed. Herbert May and Bruce M. Metzger (New York: Oxford UP, 1977) 3, fnt.; Bruce M. Metzger and Michael D. Coogan, *The Oxford Companion to the Bible* (New York: Oxford UP, 1993) 10.

<sup>15</sup> Apes, *Son of the Forest* (1836) 20-21.

<sup>16</sup> Bola, *The Discourse of the Sublime: Readings in History, Aesthetics and the Subject* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989) 30 (emphasis added).

<sup>17</sup> E.H. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1972) 82, 87, *passim*.

<sup>18</sup> Stephen Powers, *Tribes of California, Contributions to North American Ethnology*, vol. 3 (Washington: GPO, 1877) 358-60.

<sup>19</sup> Graves, § 159; James Hall, *Dictionary of Subjects and Symbols in Art*, rev. ed. (New York: Harper and Row, 1979) 180-81. Graves locates the apple at the wedding of Peleus and Thetis, Hall at the wedding of Paris and Oenone. With many classical sources for this legend extant, variations are to be expected.

<sup>20</sup> Eagleton 93-94, 37.

<sup>21</sup> The controversy surrounding Lejla Sehovic was widely reported internationally. Born in Croatia, but of immigrant Bosnian Muslims, she was legally Croatian but was popularly considered not to be. That she was allowed to compete, deprived of her title, then reinstated reveals the tensions between ideals and *Realpolitik*—tensions hardly unique to the Balkans and beauty contests.

<sup>22</sup> Edward W. Said offers the most celebrated demonstration of Giambattista Vico's idea "that men make their own history, that what they can know is what they have made" by extending it to geography. See *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient* (New York: Penguin, 1978) 4-5, *passim*.

<sup>23</sup> “Miss America: Timeline,” online, pbs.org/wgbh/amex, 14 Jan. 2003, 3.

<sup>24</sup> In America colleges and high schools, “Homecoming” is a particular football game in which alumni are encouraged to come back and meet up with classmates. The hoopla and buildup for Homecoming King and Queen (presumably man and woman) is more of a popularity contest than a beauty one (though beauty is often a cause for popularity).

<sup>25</sup> *The Complete Works of Washington Irving*, ed. Richard Dilworth, et al., vol. 27 (Boston: Twayne, 1979) 184-86. This politically expedient version quite might well be the result of white mediation, but given Washington Irving’s demonstrated ability to adopt a pro-Indian stance, he is unlikely to be responsible for it. The presumably less-mediated version (recorded by McKenney) is told by the openly hostile chief Neamathla, Irving’s by an unidentified chief, who might be a calculatingly penitent Neamathla. On Neamathla’s mercurial, Trickster-Transformer-like mood swings, see Irving 186-91.

<sup>26</sup> Vanessa Williams became the first African-American Miss America in 1984. She was forced to resign two months before her reign was to end when *Penthouse* published nude photos taken of her when she was 17. Within eight years there would be five African-American Miss America’s, demonstrating America’s penchant for pendular extremes; in 2000, Hawaii’s Angela Perez Baraquio became the first Asian-American Miss America. “Miss America” 4-5.

<sup>27</sup> Qtd. in Pamela Schaeffer and John L. Allen, Jr., “Jesus 2000,” *National Catholic Reporter*, online, natcath.com, 24 Dec. 1999.