

*A Promise of Happiness:*  
*The Place of Beauty in a World of Art*

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## I

What happens to us when something—something we see for the first time or have perhaps known for long—reveals its beauty to us, and, suddenly transfigured, takes our breath away and makes time stand still? This is Plato's answer:

When someone sees a godlike face or a bodily form that has captured Beauty well, he shudders and a fear comes over him...; then he gazes at him with the reverence due a god.... Once he has looked at him, his chill gives way to a sweat and a high fever, because the stream of beauty that pours into him through his eyes fires him up and waters the growth of his soul's wings.... Nothing is more important to that soul than the beautiful boy. Mother, brothers or friends mean nothing to it; it willingly neglects everything else and couldn't care less if it lost it all for his sake.<sup>1</sup>

And this is Arthur Schopenhauer's:

Then all at once the peace, always sought but always escaping us on the former path of the desires, comes to us of its own accord, and it is well with us. It is the painless state Epicurus prized as the highest good and as the state of the gods; we are for the moment set free from the miserable striving of the will; we keep the Sabbath of the penal servitude of willing; the wheel of Ixion stands still.<sup>2</sup>

Plato and Schopenhauer agree on one thing: the beautiful object is not an end in itself. Plato believes its beauty leads those who can follow it further to more worthy beauties, to wisdom and virtue, to the true happiness only philosophy (he thought) could secure. Schopenhauer finds in beautiful things the real nature, the "persistent form," of their species, removed from the details and freed from the travails of ordinary life, pulling along its beholders, who also shed their individuality

I am very grateful to Richard Rorty and Elaine Scarry for their comments on these lectures when I first presented them at Yale University in April 2001 as well as to Yale's Whitney Humanities Center and its director, Peter Brooks, for their invitation and hospitality.

<sup>1</sup> Plato, *Phaedrus*, trans. Alexander Nehamas and Paul Woodruff (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1995), 251a–52a, modified.

<sup>2</sup> Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, trans. R. B. Haldane and J. Kemp (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner, 1883), Book III, sec. 38.

and become “that *one* eye of the world which looks out from all knowing creatures.” Beyond that common ground, there is a world of difference.

When Plato thinks of beauty, he first thinks of beautiful people—most often, beautiful boys. Paederastic desire is the initial step toward the higher beauties he values; but these—the beauty of souls, of laws and ways of life, of learning—however abstract, persist in provoking passion and longing. Even the philosopher who finally grasps, through reason alone, the intelligible Form of Beauty itself wants of it just what ordinary men want of the boys whose sensual beauty strikes and distracts them: intercourse.<sup>3</sup> Modeled on the human form and its power, beauty is for Plato inseparable from yearning and desire.

The beauty of the human form, to the extent that it is an object of passion, is irrelevant to Schopenhauer.<sup>4</sup> He turns his back to it with an almost desperate determination. Beauty is for him to be found only in works of art, in pretty landscapes, and, sometimes, in the recollection of the distant past. Desire, yearning, and passion are just what Schopenhauer wants to escape from; beauty, as he conceives it, is the surest means of liberating us from the shackles of the will, which, since it “springs from lack, from deficiency, and thus from suffering,” can never be content and is the source of constant misery. All satisfaction is ephemeral, “like the alms thrown to a beggar, which reprieves him today so that his misery may be prolonged until tomorrow.” The will is “the wheel of Ixion”; beauty stops it temporarily by removing us for a moment from its demands.

It is hard to imagine a starker opposition. Schopenhauer denounces just what Plato celebrated when he personified the desire for beauty as the son of two minor gods, Resource and Poverty: “Now he springs to life when he gets his way; now he dies—all in the same day. Because he is his father’s son, he keeps coming back to life, but then anything he finds his way to always slips away, and for this reason [he] is never completely without resources, nor is he ever rich.”<sup>5</sup> And although Plato never really thought of works of art as beautiful, Plotinus, who did, be-

<sup>3</sup> Plato, *Symposium*, trans. Alexander Nehamas and Paul Woodruff (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1989), 211d6 (*sunontas*), d8 (*suneinai*).

<sup>4</sup> Except as a fit subject for painters and sculptors; Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*.

<sup>5</sup> Plato, *Symposium*, 203e.

lieved that “whatever is beautiful produces awe and a shock of delight, passionate longing, love and a shudder of rapture.”<sup>6</sup>

Plato and the long tradition that followed him take beauty to be the object of love (*erōs*)—that is the name of the desire for beauty I coyly omitted from my quotation from the *Symposium* just above. They can use the risky language of passion because a vast philosophical (and, later, religious) picture allows them to think that love of beauty, dangerous as it is, can lead, when practiced correctly, to love of truth, wisdom, and goodness—to moral perfection or, more modestly, moral improvement. Once that picture began to fade, however, only the dangers of beauty remained visible in the traces it left behind. And so human beauty was reduced to good looks: superficial, morally irrelevant, even suspect—no longer a subject worthy of philosophy. To the extent that beauty mattered, it came to be confined to art and the wonders of nature—museums and national parks.

Not that works of art cannot provoke the most extraordinary reactions. Think, for example, of the young man who left on the Cnidian Aphrodite the physical evidence of the consummation of his passion for the statue; think of Mark Twain on Titian’s *Venus of Urbino*, “the foulest, the vilest, the obscenest picture the world possesses”: “I saw,” Twain writes, “a young girl stealing furtive glances at her; I saw young men gazing long and absorbedly at her; I saw aged infirm men hang upon her charms with a pathetic interest.”<sup>7</sup> The erotic has always been essential to our love of the arts, but, for complicated reasons, it has come to seem deeply inappropriate. The proper, “aesthetic,” reaction to the beauty of nature and art has gradually been divorced from passion and longing completely. Schopenhauer in fact follows Immanuel Kant, who claimed that beauty produces a “disinterested pleasure,” a pleasure bereft of desire, and is in turn followed by almost everyone else. In 1914, Clive Bell became famous for defending early Modernist art on the grounds that “to appreciate a work of art we need bring with us nothing from life, no

<sup>6</sup> Plotinus, *Enneads*, I 6.4.15–18.

<sup>7</sup> Mark Twain, *A Tramp Abroad*, cited by David Freedberg, *The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), p. 345. The Cnidian Aphrodite story appears in Pliny, *Natural History*, 36.21. It is discussed, along with several other similar cases, by Leonard Barkan in “Praxiteles’ Stained Aphrodite, and Other Tales of Sex and Art” (unpublished manuscript, 2001). Barkan, very cautiously, suggests that perhaps all aesthetic pleasure may be a form of erotic delight. I would prefer to see them on a continuum: the attraction of beauty always includes an erotic aspect, but not every form of eroticism need manifest itself sexually.

knowledge of its ideas and affairs, no familiarity with its emotions... we need bring with us nothing but a sense of form and colour and a knowledge of three-dimensional space.”<sup>8</sup> He should also be famous for following that thought to its conclusion and excluding beauty from art altogether, since for most people “‘beautiful’ is more often than not synonymous with ‘desirable.’”<sup>9</sup> And in 1938, R. G. Collingwood, precisely because he knew that Plato saw that love is what beauty deserves, insisted that “the words ‘beauty,’ ‘beautiful,’ as actually used, have no aesthetic implication.... The word ‘beauty,’ wherever and however it is used, connotes that in things in virtue of which we love them, admire them, or desire them.... To sum up: aesthetic theory is not the theory of beauty but of art.”<sup>10</sup>

The idea that art and beauty have little to do with each other is reinforced by the commonplace that evaluating a work of art marks the end of our interaction with it, the goal toward which all criticism aims. In 1949, Arnold Isenberg wrote that “it is a function of criticism to bring about communication at the level of the senses, that is, to induce a sameness of vision, of experienced content. If this is accomplished, it may or may not be followed by agreement, or what is called ‘communion’—a community of feeling which expresses itself in identical value judgments.”<sup>11</sup> In 1995, Alan Goldman restated essentially the same view: “The purpose of interpretation itself [is] to guide perception toward maximal appreciation and therefore fair evaluation of a work.”<sup>12</sup> Mary Mothersill, who wants to bring beauty back into the philosophy of art, believes that the critic’s “aim is to remove obstacles to appreciation and to present a particular text, performance, or object perspicuously, that is to say, in such a way as to enable its audience to arrive at a fair estimation of its merits.”<sup>13</sup> But, like most philosophers of art, she takes “beautiful” as a “generic aesthetic predicate,” a general term of appraisal.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Clive Bell, *Art* (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1958; originally published in 1914), pp. 27–28.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 21.

<sup>10</sup> R. G. Collingwood, *The Principles of Art* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1938), pp. 38–41.

<sup>11</sup> Arnold Isenberg, “Critical Communication,” in his *Aesthetics and the Theory of Criticism*, ed. William Callaghan et al. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973), p. 164. Perhaps these are not, in the end, distinct possibilities. It could be that “immediate experience” refers not to the first experience of a work of art but to the perceptual experience that is induced in a work’s audience once the critic has communicated the features to which attention needs to be paid.

<sup>12</sup> Alan H. Goldman, *Aesthetic Value* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1995), p. 102.

<sup>13</sup> Mary Mothersill, *Beauty Restored* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), p. 31.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

Such a generic kind of aesthetic value, if it exists at all, becomes apparent much later, and after much longer investigation, than the feature Joseph Addison had in mind when he wrote that “we immediately assent to the Beauty of an Object without enquiring into the particular Causes and Occasions of it.”<sup>15</sup> Although that was not Addison’s intention, the beauty he spoke of became associated with desire and good looks, and as it did, the arts joined the rest of our world and became suspicious of it themselves. By contrast, aesthetic value, difficult to discern and appreciate, seemed tailor-made for the art of Modernism. Think of the difference between Botticelli’s *Birth of Venus* and Picasso’s *Seated Bather*; of the disparity between Keats’s “La Belle Dame Sans Mercy” and Wallace Stevens’s *The Hand as a Being*; of the dissonance between Mozart’s *Marriage of Figaro* and Schoenberg’s *Moses und Aron*. Modernist works, and the rhetoric that accompanied them, made being difficult and inaccessible a virtue: how can I know whether I do or should like a Modernist work that is so difficult to understand in the first place? If to be beautiful is to look or sound good, to be in general immediately attractive, most Modernist works are not beautiful. And if Modernism, as many of its defenders argued, shows what is essential to all art, then beauty may be as irrelevant to *The Birth of Venus*, “La Belle Dame Sans Mercy,” *Dove sono*, even perhaps to the *Apollo Belvedere*, as it seems to be to Damien Hirst’s sectioned, eviscerated, and preserved cows in his *Some Comfort Gained from the Acceptance of the Inherent Lies in Everything*.

If beauty is irrelevant to *art*, surely it is irrelevant to the serious aspects of the rest of our lives, while aesthetic value, if it is relevant to art, has been defined so as to have no connection to anything else that matters to us—sex, morality, politics, religion.<sup>16</sup> We can always say that we should value poems and paintings “just as” poems and paintings and nothing else, but such slogans usually mean simply that we shouldn’t allow the sexual, moral, political, or religious aspects of poems or paintings to determine their value: what remains, remains a mystery. Unless, then, we are willing to identify aesthetic value, in part or completely, with one or more of these values, we can’t connect what matters to us in the arts with anything else that matters to us in life. Worse, we can’t even say why the arts matter to us in the first place. And to take aesthetic values seriously, to take them as *human* values, as I believe we

<sup>15</sup> Joseph Addison, *The Spectator* (1712), 411.

<sup>16</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, trans. and ed. Paul D. Guyer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), §§1–5.

should, risks seeming not serious, calling to mind a purple suit, a green carnation, a penchant for paradox, and a general air of irresponsible insouciance. There's nothing wrong with purple suits, green carnations, or the penchant for paradox, but they are only accidental features of taking aesthetic values seriously; and although irresponsible insouciance may be occasionally wrong, it is not a necessary feature of admiring the aesthetic. Aesthetic considerations form a distinct kind. Although they are most evident in the arts, they are not confined to them (and pretty sunsets). But we will not be able to recognize their role as long as beauty is denied entrance both in the arts and in the rest of what matters to us. Dave Hickey has called beauty "the invisible dragon." What denies it entrance, the visible dragon that must be slain before beauty can shine forth once again, is the view that criticism is a kind of intellectual layer cake, "descriptions supporting interpretations, ... lower-level statements supporting higher-level ones, and ... critics arguing for evaluations by means of interpretations,"<sup>17</sup> the idea that to evaluate a work of art is to finish with it, the goal and end of our involvement with it.<sup>18</sup>

It is true that we cannot arrive at a final evaluation of anything without first understanding it fully, and it is plausible to think that the aim of criticism is the evaluation of works of art. We tend to consider what Kant called the judgment of taste, the statement "This is beautiful," now taking "beautiful" as shorthand for a general evaluation, to be the culmination of our aesthetic interaction with things. That is why many philosophers agree that the purpose of criticism is to reach a "verdict" regarding the works of art it addresses, even though they dispute whether this verdict can be supported by the same sort of reasons as a legal or moral verdict or, indeed, whether it can be supported by reasons at all. But although this is plausible, it is not true.

What is true is that one part of aesthetic discourse aims at verdicts: that part, interestingly, that is most likely to contain the vocabulary we commonly characterize as "aesthetic"—words like "powerful," "swift," "fluid," "deep," "solid," "sharp," "eloquent," and "delicate," the terms, we are told, on which evaluation depends. My list is not haphazard. It

<sup>17</sup> Ann Sheppard, *Aesthetics: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974), p. 84.

<sup>18</sup> Richard Rorty has pointed out that it is not necessary to deny that some beautiful things may provoke the kind of reaction Schopenhauer values in order to argue that Plato's view is also correct. That is a very valuable idea, and I intend to develop it more fully in a future version of these lectures.



comes from Arthur Danto's book on the philosophy of art, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*,<sup>19</sup> and he, in turn, has taken it from a review of an exhibition of André Racz's drawings of flowers. That, I believe, is not an accident. And I suspect that the idea that all criticism aims at verdicts, as well as the extraordinary interest of philosophers in the nature and logical features of "aesthetic" terms, derives from the fact that most of us, when we think of criticism and aesthetic discourse in general, actually think of reviewing, which both aims at verdicts and depends heavily on "aesthetic" descriptions. These are some of the terms, for example, that Michael Fried used in less than two pages while reviewing a Hans Hofmann show: "a surprisingly warm grayish brown," "warm, autonomous colors," "forceful streak of blue," "vibrant with energy," "flare into resonant life," "passionate note," "integrated," "coloristic strength," "impatience with contrivance that is itself perhaps a bit contrived," "power, delicacy, and subtle intelligence," "exploratory and liberating." It may not come as a surprise that Fried concluded that Hofmann's was one of the two "finest" shows that month in New York and not to be missed (although, of course, a review can equally often reach a negative verdict).<sup>20</sup>

Reviews aim to let us know whether or not we should visit an exhibition, read a book, or attend a performance. What is fascinating is that the vocabulary itself is almost never enough to convince us one way or the other. Our attitude toward the reviewer is also—perhaps even more—crucial: If you are familiar with Fried's views, tastes, and preferences and find them abhorrent (as I don't), you may well decide, precisely on the strength of his praise, to give Hofmann a miss. Critics are in that respect like artists: We cannot understand an individual work in isolation, without a knowledge of its maker's style; just so, we need to be familiar with the critics we read if we are to rely on their recommendations.

Let me stay with that idea a moment. Kant famously claimed that the judgment of taste is "not based on concepts." What he meant was well expressed by Arnold Isenberg when he wrote that "there is not in all the world's criticism a single purely descriptive statement concerning which one is prepared to say beforehand, 'If it is true, I shall like that

<sup>19</sup> Arthur C. Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace: A Philosophy of Art* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1981), p. 155.

<sup>20</sup> Michael Fried, "New York Letter: Hofmann" (originally published in 1963), in *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), pp. 294–96.

work so much the better.”<sup>21</sup> Isenberg, like Kant, would say that if we smuggled in terms that are not purely descriptive—terms like “forceful” or “integrated” in contrast to “large” or “written in 1917”—then the conclusion would be more likely to follow. If, though, we rely on critics whose style we already generally know, it is not only “purely descriptive statements” about a work that fail to show that it is beautiful: no account of the work, however many aesthetic terms it contains, will by itself imply that you will like that work better, even though aesthetic terms always evaluate whatever they describe.<sup>22</sup> What Fried describes as “a forceful streak of blue,” given your view of his taste, may be more likely to repel rather than attract you. It’s not that Fried is *wrong* to call the blue streak forceful: you can see just what he means, but, also, you just don’t like it. You might even say, “That’s exactly *why* I don’t like it.” His commendation is your condemnation.

The notion that we can understand the complex practices of criticism by generalizing from reviews seems to me as hopeless as the dream that we can capture the many ways the arts matter to us by isolating and studying a group of special words. Aesthetic terms are by themselves both insignificant and double-edged. Arthur Danto, for one, would disagree with both these pessimistic claims. He writes that the aesthetic terms he mentions

echo terms of praise in common life; it is difficult to imagine a context in which it is discommendatory to speak of something as “powerful.” Power, speed, sureness, fluidity, are qualities we praise in things, or at least things we rely upon, and it is useful here to consider them, not least of all because, as examples, they are markedly less shopworn than the commonplace vocabulary of aesthetic discourse, at least as this is represented in philosophy.<sup>23</sup>

To me, these terms—“powerful,” “swift,” “fluid,” “deep,” “solid,” “sharp,” “eloquent,” “delicate”—seem quite as shopworn as any others that have appeared in philosophical discussion: you will know little—and that, very vague—about Racz’s drawings if that is what you know of them. And they are, as I said, double-edged. With the possible exception of “powerful,” it is easy to imagine, and possible to find, instances

<sup>21</sup> Isenberg, “Critical Communication,” p. 164.

<sup>22</sup> Danto, *Transfiguration*, p. 156.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 155.

where they are used to condemn rather than praise: delicacy, to take the most obvious case, could be a serious defect in a depiction of a brutal execution;<sup>24</sup> sharpness of tone is not a quality prized by opera singers; Jake and Dinos Chapman's *The Un-nameable* is repellent partly because their demented figures of little girls flow so fluidly into one another; while it is because it is hollow (the contrary of solid) that Robert Morris's *Untitled: Ring with Light* exerts its magnetic attraction.

The ability to cut both ways applies even more to the much more complex, almost technical terms that critics sometimes use to summarize a complicated general approach to art, terms that have little to do with the limited aesthetic vocabulary we have looked at so far. Fried, again, rejected the minimalism (or "literalism") of Donald Judd, Sol LeWitt, Robert Morris, and Tony Smith for being, in contrast to the work of Frank Stella or Kenneth Noland, "theatrical" in a very intricate and specific sense—a notion he has used in order to develop a general approach to the art of Modernism. The virtues of Modernism, as he sees it, are absorption, autonomy, and self-sufficiency, an effort—perhaps impossible—to act as if they have no audience, while Minimalism is essentially audience-oriented and flattering. Minimalism, for Fried, aims to produce works that are just objects in literal space, explicitly attracting their spectators' attention to them: "For Judd, as for literalist sensibility generally, all that matters is whether or not a given work is able to elicit and sustain (his) interest. Whereas within the modernist arts nothing short of *conviction*—specifically, the conviction that a particular painting or sculpture or piece of music can or cannot support comparison with past work within that art whose quality is not in doubt [without, that is, any concern for what its audience think of it]—matters at all."<sup>25</sup> Thirty-seven years later, however, Peter Schjeldahl praises Minimalism precisely for the features for which Fried had condemned it, for producing "a visceral conviction of utter reality—actual space, heartbeating time; it was the dawn of a new world... a true revolution had occurred—

<sup>24</sup> Danto himself makes a related and very interesting point when he argues, taking his cue from Robert Motherwell's *Elegies to the Spanish Republic*, that sometimes it might even be inappropriate for a work to be *beautiful*—if, for example, it depicts a savage and horrible subject: "A painting—a work of art in general—can have an internal beauty and be a failure if, in fact, the beauty is inappropriate or unfitting. But that means that there are works that are better off for not being beautiful, since they might be artistic failures if they were, so to speak, aesthetic successes." See his "Beauty and Morality," reprinted in *Uncontrollable Beauty: Toward a New Aesthetics*, ed. Bill Beckley with David Shapiro (New York: Allworth Press, 1998), p. 31.

<sup>25</sup> Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood," in *Art and Objecthood*, p. 165.

one that shifted the focus of art experience from the created work to the self-conscious viewer.”<sup>26</sup> Dave Hickey, for his part, is more explicit and more irreverent: “Our twentieth-century characterizations of the work of art as this ravishing, autonomous entity that we spend our lives trying to understand, that makes demands on us while pretending that we are not there, is simply a recasting of the work of art in the role of the remote and dysfunctional male parent in the tradition of the Biblical patriarch. Even art critics deserve some respite from this sort of abusive neglect.”<sup>27</sup> Of course, one could always dismiss criticism as an expression of differences in taste masquerading as argument, but that in turn would express an impoverished understanding of the role of both taste and argument in our lives.

For over forty years, philosophers have tried to distinguish descriptive terms (“blue”), which apply to things on the basis of public criteria, and aesthetic terms (“elegant”), which lack criteria and require the exercise of taste, with which only some people are blessed.<sup>28</sup> That the evaluation, and so the value and significance, of art depends on a particular set of aesthetic features has now become an institutional self-evident commonplace. The *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics*, which was published in 1998, has this to say in its entry “Qualities, Aesthetic”: “To say that a particular painting has a blue spot in the upper right corner is not to say or suggest anything about the value of the painting; such a statement is clearly not relevant as grounds for aesthetic praise or blame of that painting”—in contrast, for example, to its being garish or unified.<sup>29</sup> But the actual practice of art criticism reveals that this thin, anemic picture is only a poor caricature. In the Mannheim version of Edouard Manet’s *Execution of Maximilian*, there is a streak of red paint between the legs of a soldier in the firing squad. In the painting’s earlier versions, the streak represents the stripe on the trousers of the squad’s commander, who is standing behind them. In the Mannheim version, the officer has disappeared,

<sup>26</sup> Peter Schjeldahl, “Less Is Beautiful,” *New Yorker*, March 13, 2000. And see Fried, *Art and Objecthood*, pp. 43–44.

<sup>27</sup> Dave Hickey, “Prom Night in Flatland: On the Gender of Works of Art,” in *The Invisible Dragon: Four Essays on Beauty* (Los Angeles: Art issues. Press, 1993), pp. 46–47.

<sup>28</sup> The project originated with Frank Sibley’s “Aesthetic Concepts,” in *Art and Philosophy: Readings in Aesthetics*, ed. W. E. Kennick (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1964), pp. 351–73. Sibley’s influential essay has been discussed extensively since its original publication in 1959; a good response is in Ted Cohen’s “Aesthetics/Non-Aesthetics and the Concept of Taste,” *Theoria* 39 (1973): 113–52.

<sup>29</sup> Göran Hermerén, “Qualities, Aesthetic,” in *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics*, ed. Michael Kelly, 4 vols. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), vol. 4, p. 98.

and critics have been arguing for years about the significance of the streak. Michael Fried, after considering all the possibilities, decides that this is just what it is: a streak of red paint, which is, as such, crucial to his interpretation and evaluation of the work:

On close inspection the streak of paint is merely that and nothing more: it absolutely resists being assimilated to the work of representation, by which I also mean that it escapes the categories of finish and nonfinish that indefatigably structured contemporary responses to Manet's work.... Perhaps it too is best thought of as a *remainder*..., something left over after the task of representation was done and which stands for everything in Manet's art which adamantly resisted closure, which was irremediably disparate, which pursued a strikingness that could not be kept within the bounds even of the excessive, which repeatedly interpellated the beholder in ways the latter could only find offensive and incomprehensible, and which in fact continues to defeat our best efforts to make reassuring sense of his paintings by inserting them in a historical context, no matter how that context is defined.<sup>30</sup>

If a streak of red paint can make such a difference, it is ludicrous to believe that criticism is exhausted by a specific "aesthetic" vocabulary. We will learn little about the arts if we concentrate on their elegance, garishness, fluidity, unity, or forcefulness. The fact is that there is no special class of aesthetic terms or qualities that only some people can discern while the rest of us remain trapped within the prosaic world of description. The best we can say about terms like "elegant" or "garish" is that if they apply to an object at all, they are (unlike other terms) always relevant to its aesthetic value—but not particularly useful in letting us see what that is. The fact is that everyone uses aesthetic terms all the time: they are part of the texture of our life. There is, actually, no word that cannot on some occasion or other be used aesthetically: even "blue"—for example, in Mary's mantle in *The Virgin Visited by Angels at the Temple* in the *Visconti Hours*, in almost any work by Yves Klein, in William Gass, who wrote a whole book on the word and turned it into object and tool of aesthetic attention at once:

*Blue*, the word and the condition, the color and the act, contrive to contain one another, as if the bottle of the genie were its belly, the lamp's breath the smoke of the wraith. There is that lead-like look.

<sup>30</sup> Michael Fried, *Manet's Modernism, or the Face of Painting in the 1860s* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), pp. 359–60.

There is the lead itself, and all those bluey hunters, thieves, those pigeon flyers who relieve roofs of the metal, and steal the pipes too. There's the blue pill that is the bullet's end, the nose, the plum, the blue whistler, and there are all the bluish hues of death,<sup>31</sup>

and in what seems like a cosmic joke on philosophy, the blue spot at the upper right-hand corner of Damien Hirst's *Alantolactone* (1992)!<sup>32</sup> Aesthetic terms are everywhere: every word can be one. They are, for that reason, less of a problem than aestheticians have thought. It is not, as many have believed, that some people just fail to detect delicacy or balance and therefore lack "taste, perceptiveness, or sensitivity."<sup>33</sup> It is that they don't find them where we do; their taste differs from ours. No one lacks taste, if taste is simply the ability to see *some* of the aesthetic features of things: the only question is whether that taste is good or bad.

Reviews, we have seen, end in verdicts, but in verdicts that are peculiarly thin, and the reviews themselves tell us little about the works they concern. Talk of power, swiftness, fluidity, or delicacy is an invitation to look at, to read, or to listen to the works for ourselves, often to get acquainted with them for the first time. It is a promise that time spent with them will (or will not) be worth our while, and how reliable the promise is depends partly on the reviewer's record and reputation. Reviewers are like people, ideally friends whose judgment I trust, eager to introduce me to someone they think I will enjoy meeting.

Now suppose I accept the invitation: I read the book, I visit the gallery, go to the opera, watch the TV show. Am *I* also trying to reach a verdict, to decide whether the work is or is not valuable? That *I will* reach a verdict of some sort is likely, but it is neither my goal nor, if it is positive, the end of my interaction with the work.

The human parallel has something to teach us here. When I meet someone on your recommendation, I do so in the *hope* that I will enjoy the meeting but not *in order to* enjoy it, and certainly not in order to *de-*

<sup>31</sup> William Gass, *On Being Blue: A Philosophical Inquiry* (Boston: David R. Godine, 1976), p. 11.

<sup>32</sup> In *The Prose of the World* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), p. 62, Maurice Merleau-Ponty writes that André Malraux once told a story about an innkeeper at Cassis, who saw Pierre Renoir working by the sea and went over to observe him: "There were some nude women bathing in some other place. Goodness knows what he was looking at, and he changed only a little corner. . . . The blue of the sea had become that of the brook in *The Bathers*. . . . This vision was less a way of looking at the sea than the secret elaboration of a world to which that depth of blue whose immensity he was recapturing pertained." I am grateful to Sean Kelly for this reference.

<sup>33</sup> Sibley, "Aesthetic Concepts," p. 351.

*cide* whether it is worth enjoying. My *goal* is not to enjoy the meeting, but to get to know someone new. If the meeting turns out as all of us had hoped, if, that is, I decide it was enjoyable (although, I repeat, making that decision was never my goal), I shall want to know that person better. My “verdict” is not, as long as it is positive, the end of the matter; on the contrary, it is a desire to make that person a larger part of my life, a sense that your friend has more to offer than I was able to see on that occasion. The positive verdict doesn’t signal the end of our interaction, but expresses my realization that it should go on. In other words, it is not a verdict.

If enjoyment seems too trivial or banal a reaction, imagine that, either on your suggestion or by chance, I find myself with someone who strikes me as utterly beautiful. I don’t mean someone whom, so to speak, I merely judge to be beautiful or good-looking, but someone whose beauty actually attracts me. At first, of course, I will just want to keep on looking. But that, if the beauty continues to strike me, will soon give way to the desire to approach, to spend some time with that person then and there, to get to know them better. I won’t always act on my desire (I may be shy, afraid of rejection, considerate of the feelings of someone else, afraid of my action’s consequences for myself), but sometimes I will. And now suppose I do.

We are now on delicate and dangerous ground. I am arguing that when I find someone beautiful I am attracted to them; and that is to have a sense that my life would in some way be better (by no means primarily, or even marginally, moral), more worthwhile, if that person were part of it. Sometimes, half-knowingly, I allow myself to believe that people whose looks I admire are more intelligent, engaging, serious, or sensitive than I know they are. That could be because I am unwilling to acknowledge the sexual aspects of my attraction or, more generously, because I hope that in time I will find such features in them. Often, in fact, to say that an attraction is merely sexual (more probably that it *was* merely sexual, since such an acknowledgment usually comes after the fact) is to say that I found nothing further to attract me to a particular person; it is an evaluation of a relationship that didn’t, sometimes against my own desires and expectations, go anywhere. Sometimes, knowingly, I disregard the fact that they are not intelligent or engaging because I am willing to admit that my attraction is mostly sexual: that is when beauty becomes identical with good looks. Sometimes, someone I find beautiful also strikes me as intelligent, engaging, serious, or sensitive. Sometimes,

attraction turns into love. In all these cases, to find someone beautiful (or even just good-looking) is nothing like issuing a verdict and very like a desire to continue interacting with them, to know them better, to make them—to whatever extent and in whatever way—my own.

The expression “to make someone my own” should not sound a sour note, suggesting possession, mastery, control, or any of the many other relations we have come officially to disapprove of in recent years. I am not thinking of Swann’s desire to possess Odette so completely that merely hearing that she owns a dress he has not seen nearly shatters him because it shows him that her life has aspects of which he is not aware.<sup>34</sup> Such things occur often enough, but in the love and friendship to which I want to liken that aspect of our relation to the arts that matters most in life, the desire to make someone my own is inseparable from the desire to make myself their own as well. Even in cases where I simply enjoy your company without being your intimate friend or lover, I can exhibit a willingness to change as a result of interacting with you: the extent of such a willingness is a matter of degree. I am not inclined to spend my time with you because I already know what I want to get out of you, having a settled sense of myself and of what you can give me. Rather, I suspect that you can give me something I don’t yet have a conception of, I hope that you will make me want something I have not wanted before.<sup>35</sup> In doing so, I make myself emotionally and intellectually vulnerable to you.<sup>36</sup> I put my identity at risk, and the risk is great because I don’t yet know how you will eventually affect me—and if you feel as I do, your problems are exactly like mine. But then, as the ancient proverb said, friends have everything in common.

Aristotle, who made much of that proverb, believed that the best kind of friends love each other for their own sake, “as another self.” He thought that this is possible only for the virtuous, who love one another not on account of the profit or pleasure they can derive from their friendship, but on account of their virtues, which are essential to who one is,

<sup>34</sup> Marcel Proust, *Remembrance of Things Past*, trans. C. K. Scott Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin, 3 vols. (New York: Random House, 1981), vol. 1, pp. 262–63.

<sup>35</sup> See Richard Rorty, “The Pragmatist’s Progress: Umberto Eco on Interpretation,” in *Philosophy and Social Hope* (London: Penguin, 1999), pp. 144–45.

<sup>36</sup> See J. David Velleman, “Love as a Moral Emotion,” *Ethics* 109 (1999): 338–74. Velleman’s views, especially his criticisms of various common conceptions of love, are very valuable, and his own phenomenology of love is extremely attractive. His Kantian conclusion that love is directed at the rational nature of our lovers, however, is not easy to accept.



and, therefore, for themselves.<sup>37</sup> Unless your conception of virtue is very broad, that makes friendship much too rare a phenomenon, and, besides, it flies in the face of experience—not every captured criminal, after all, turns state’s evidence. But we can turn Aristotle’s picture around: friendship is not limited to the virtuous, but friends find in each other features they consider to be virtues, rather than merely pleasant or profitable. With profit and pleasure, you generally know what to expect. Virtues, in this context, manifest themselves in the most unexpected ways and (as we shall see more clearly when we return to the arts) belong to your friend and to your friend only—which is the reason we say we love our friends for themselves and part of the reason it is impossible to say why we love them at all. Your friends, then, are the people from whom you don’t already know what you want to get, but whom you trust enough to give yourself to in the hope that they too will give themselves to you, both of you becoming something you can’t at this stage even imagine. To love your friends for themselves does not prevent you from loving them for your own sake as well. It is, though, to put yourself in their hands and give them a part in determining what your sake actually is, what your self will turn out to be as a result of your friendship.

Still, you can be wrong, and put your trust in the wrong person. That is one of the great dangers of beauty. Now, you may ask, how did beauty come into this discussion of friendship? Surely it is not necessary to find our friends beautiful. That is true, but it is also impossible to be a friend of someone you actually find physically repulsive, even ugly.<sup>38</sup> David Lynch gives a brilliant demonstration of it in *The Elephant Man*. Lynch manipulates the physical point of view of the camera and the fictional point of view of Frederick Treves, the physician who saved John Merrick from a freak show on purely humanitarian grounds, and shows Treves ceasing to mind Merrick’s appearance as he gradually realizes that Merrick’s horrible physical disfigurement does not reflect a psychological wasteland and comes to be actually fond of him. At the very same time, and through the same mechanism, Lynch makes his character appear

<sup>37</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, VIII–IX.

<sup>38</sup> To find someone ugly is not simply to judge that they are ugly—which is to say that you can understand why someone might think of them as ugly, how someone *else* might find them ugly—but to be directly struck by them as ugly, to be, to that extent, repelled by them. The case is parallel to finding someone beautiful, which implies being actually attracted to them, not just realizing that others might find themselves in that position.

more human to the audience, whose fondness for Merrick reflects Treves's transformation. In Nicholas Ray's *Rebel Without a Cause*, Natalie Wood's character, desperate about her father's moral disapproval, cries out, "He looks at me as if I was the ugliest thing in the world!" In her memoir, *Paula*, Isabel Allende recalls her feelings for the man who raised her:

The first time I saw my Tío Ramón, I thought my mother was playing a joke. *That* was the prince she had been sighing over? I had never seen such an ugly man.... [T]en years later...I was at last able to accept him. He took charge of us children, just as he had promised.... He raised us with a firm hand and unfailing good humor; he set limits and sent clear messages, without sentimental demonstrations, without compromise. I recognize now that he put up with my contrariness without trying to buy my esteem or ceding an inch of his authority, until he won me over totally. He is the only father I have known, and now I think he is really handsome!<sup>39</sup>

Intimacy reveals beauty; perhaps it goes with it hand-in-hand.

Allende's mother, who loved Ramón, did not even have to wait to find him handsome. For love, as Plato saw, is beauty's attendant and constant companion. To love someone just is to find them beautiful. One of the first signs that love has withdrawn is a sense (I would not call it a "realization") that our lover no longer seems beautiful, that a particular feature, which may once have been attractive, gradually turns into a cause of aversion. Love for someone whom I actually find ugly, though perhaps possible, is pathological.<sup>40</sup> That is the love of Shakespeare's Dark Lady sonnets: "My love is as a fever, longing still / For that which longer nurseth the disease" (147). And so strange a love it is that even Shakespeare's best readers seem to shy away from it. When Helen Vendler, whose reading of the sequence is a brilliant dissection of its paradoxical voice, comes to its final sonnet—"In loving thee thou know'st I am forsworn...For I have sworn thee fair: more perjured eye / To swear against the truth so foul a lie" (152)—she feels forced to put "love" in quotation marks in her discussion: The speaker's "own complicity is what shocks

<sup>39</sup> Isabel Allende, *Paula*, trans. from the Spanish by Margaret Sayers Peden (New York: HarperCollins, 1994), pp. 48–49.

<sup>40</sup> I am not thinking of that version of Christian love that is addressed to everyone indiscriminately, simply as a child of God. But even there, the practice, for example, of kissing lepers' wounds during parts of the Middle Ages suggests that nothing about those we love can provoke repulsion.

him, as he discovers that it is precisely her *unworthiness* that raises ‘love’ in him.” Such “love” is merely sexual passion: the poem is “a bitterly shaming acknowledgment of one’s own least acceptable sexual proclivities,” and “the reader admires the clarity of mind that can so anatomize sexual obsession while still in its grip.”<sup>41</sup> I doubt the paradox disappears if we exchange sexuality for love: sexual passion must still find *something* attractive in its object. But love, which can survive contempt, dislike, disgust, and even hate, can’t ever live with ugliness. Eros, Plato wrote, “was born to follow and serve Aphrodite, because he was conceived on the day of her birth. And he is by nature a lover of beauty because Aphrodite herself is especially beautiful” (*Sym.* 203c).

As long as I find someone beautiful—which is, in different degrees, a matter of love—I commit myself to its being worthwhile for that person to be—to whatever extent—part of my life and for me to be, in turn, part of their own life as well. Without that forward-looking element, and all its risks, attraction and love wither and disappear: love, as Plato knew and Proust wrote (though Proust is tormented by a thought I find exhilarating), “in the pain of anxiety as in the bliss of desire, is a demand for a whole. We love only what we do not wholly possess.”<sup>42</sup> And as with love, so with beauty: beauty fades and dies out when it can promise nothing it has not given already.

And so, also, with art. A work we admire, a work we love, a work we find, in a word, beautiful sparks within us the same need to rush to converse with it, the same sense that it has more to offer, the same willingness to submit to it, the same desire to make it part of our life. I don’t want to understate the differences, but I also don’t want to lose sight of the similarities. We can’t hurt works of art, nor can they hurt us, in all the ways we hurt one another, but overlaps persist. When Dave Hickey personifies the Modernist work as a dysfunctional father capable of indifference, abuse, rejection, or humiliation, what he says—although not true of Modernism generally—is still true, if only as a metaphor, of many works, both Modernist and not. Still, even the least possessive among us don’t usually rush to share our lovers with others, not even our

<sup>41</sup> Helen Vendler, *The Art of Shakespeare’s Sonnets* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997), pp. 643, 645. The same scare-quotes around “love” occur in G. Blakemore Evans’s commentary on Sonnet 152 in his edition of the sonnets for *The New Cambridge Shakespeare* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 152.

<sup>42</sup> Marcel Proust, *The Captive*, trans. C. K. Scott Montcrieff and Terence Kilmartin and Andreas Mayor (New York: Random House, 1981), p. 102. That, of course, is also the starting-point of Socrates’ speech on Eros in the *Symposium*.

friends. While we want our lovers to be admired, it can be disturbing to find them loved by someone else, and devastating to discover that their love has found another object. And yet we eagerly allow, encourage, expect, and sometimes even require others to love the works we find beautiful. We want to converse, to interact further with beautiful people directly; we want them primarily for ourselves (in another sense of that term). But when I am moved by a novel, my desire to get to know it better is one and the same as my wish for others to read it and discuss it with me. When I think that a work is beautiful, I believe others should think so too. And if that, as I have claimed, is to think that my life would be more worthwhile if that work were to be part of it, I also believe that the lives of others would also be more worthwhile if they felt about the work as I do. Our feelings for art are essentially promiscuous. Here is Dave Hickey again, after being bowled over by Gustave Flaubert's *A Simple Heart* at age fifteen on a sunny afternoon in a small Texas town:

I started calling my friends. I wanted them to read the story immediately, so we could talk about it; and this rush to converse, it seems to me, is the one undeniable consequence of art that speaks to our desire. The language we produce before the emblem of what we *are*, what we know and understand, is always more considered. This language aims to teach, to celebrate our knowledge rather than our wonder. . . . The language that we share before the emblem of what we lack, however, as fractious and inconsequent as it often seems, creates a new society.<sup>43</sup>

I am trying to say that the judgment of taste—the statement “This is beautiful”—is neither a conclusion I reach by interacting with a work nor, since it is not a conclusion and thus not supported by reasons, purely subjective—though, as Kant rightly saw, it is based on, and expresses, a feeling toward that work. Far from freeing us from the demands of desire, as Schopenhauer thought, beauty provokes them. He thought that to perceive a beautiful object is to grasp its “Platonic Idea,” its real nature, to come to understand it fully and in itself, apart from its relations to anything else. I think of beauty in exactly the opposite way. Beauty is, in every case, the object of love. Both last as long as the sense that I am standing before something I do not yet fully understand to which I am willing to submit in order to come to know it bet-

<sup>43</sup> Dave Hickey, “Simple Hearts,” in *Air Guitar: Essays on Art and Democracy* (Los Angeles: Art issues. Press, 1997), p. 30.

ter—not through the mediation of others, since that, we shall see, is impossible in aesthetics, but directly, on my own. But far from being solipsistic, my desire to possess the beautiful thing on my own is essentially social. Part of it is the desire that others have that desire as well; as Peter Schjeldahl has written, “An experience of beauty entirely specific to one person probably indicates that the person is insane.”<sup>44</sup> Part of it is the desire to know how these others react to the work, to depend on them as I continue to shape my own understanding and to return the favor to them. For these reasons, I am willing to spend part of my life in their company, literally with those with whom I discuss it, less strictly with those whose views of the work I may read or discuss with my friends. The social nature of the judgment of beauty is, as I shall argue in the next lecture, one of art’s great pleasures and one of its greatest dangers.

All I have accomplished in this lecture is to claim that the judgment of beauty is not a verdict on the features of persons or things but a sense that our life will be more worthwhile if they are part of it. It is a sense that can be wrong—as long as love and beauty last, the jury, so to speak, is always still out—and, we shall see, capable of great harm even when it is right. The values of art have nothing to do with a specific set of “aesthetic” features: any feature can be aesthetic that is relevant to interpreting, and thus evaluating, a work and there is no way of knowing in advance which features are relevant and which are not. Our attitude toward works we find beautiful is similar to our attitude toward beautiful persons. It also differs from it in some ways, and these reveal that the judgment of taste has an essentially social aspect. The social nature of the judgment of taste—the fact that it is not purely private, that it involves, somehow, the agreement of others—raises the possibility that to say that something is beautiful is to make a genuine judgment, one that, in Mary Mothersill’s words, is “contingent, hence either true or false, . . . such as to admit testing by anyone who cares to take the trouble and [for which] there are determinate confirmation procedures that can be sketched in advance . . . consistent (or inconsistent) with other judgments . . . eligible to play a role in inference, support entailments and so forth”—a judgment as genuine or objective as saying that something is blue.<sup>45</sup> But then, as Mothersill knows, “someone who found nothing remarkable in [what I take to be beautiful] would strike me as slightly

<sup>44</sup> Peter Schjeldahl, “Notes on Beauty,” in *Uncontrollable Beauty*, ed. Beckley and Shapiro, p. 58.

<sup>45</sup> Mothersill, *Beauty Restored*, p. 164.

defective—as if something blocked his perception or impaired his sensibility.”<sup>46</sup> Let me leave you with that thought. We all have it, all the time. It implies that, since tastes differ everywhere, everyone in the world finds everyone else defective. That is disturbing, but the thought also envisages an ideal world, free of contempt, in which everyone’s taste would then be exactly the same. That is more than disturbing: it is truly frightening. Why? That is the question with which I begin my next lecture.

## II

Almost everyone knows that when he heard a witty remark of James Whistler’s, Oscar Wilde cried, “I wish I’d said that!” and Whistler replied, “You will, Oscar, you will.” What not everyone may know is what “that” was that Whistler had said. It was this: “My dear fellow,” the painter told Humphry Ward, the art critic for the *Times*, who had been judging Whistler’s work during an opening, “you must never say this painting is good or that bad. Good and bad are not terms to be used by you. But you may say ‘I like this’ or ‘I don’t like that,’ and you will be within your rights. Now come and have a whisky: you’re sure to like that.”<sup>1</sup>

I am interested in what happens to me when I say to myself that something is beautiful and not merely that I like it. In my first lecture, I said it is not the conclusion of interpretation—that is why the judgment of taste, as Kant claimed, does not follow from any description of its object: we can give no reasons for it. It is more like hearing something call me, a guess or a hope that if that thing were part of my life it would somehow make it more worthwhile. But when I find something beautiful, even when I speak only to myself, I expect others to join me and make that beautiful thing part of their own lives as well. Whistler did not just put Ward down; he also asked a real question: Does anyone have the right to such an expectation?

The question is raised by the fact that if the judgment of taste expresses something more than a purely private preference, it seems to de-

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 165.

<sup>1</sup> Richard Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde* (New York: Knopf, 1988), p. 133.

mand nothing less than universal agreement. Yet how can we expect *anyone* to accept a judgment for which we can give no reasons? And what of the brute fact that such a demand has never been met? Kant thought that everyone who judges something to be beautiful speaks with “a universal voice,”<sup>2</sup> but all that clamor sounds to me no stronger than the voice of one crying in the wilderness. Universality, at any rate, comes at a very high price, only vaguely hinted at in the third *Critique*, but clear and definite in the works of contemporary Kantians. For if the judgment of taste is a genuine judgment, then, as Mary Mothersill argues, it is either true or false; if it is true, everyone should accept it; there is therefore something wrong with those who don’t. Worse, since we all believe our judgments are true (whether or not they really are), we must feel that everyone whose taste differs from ours is “slightly defective—as if something blocked his perception or impaired his sensibility.”<sup>3</sup>

Can this be right? I would probably consider defective everyone who refused to acknowledge that I am now standing before you (unless, of course, we were having a philosophical conversation!). I might possibly, in certain circumstances, consider defective someone who, unable to understand some more complex idea, was also unwilling to learn what it took to see that it was true—defective intellectually or defective in character, defects of which I am aware in myself. I would find fault, under very specific conditions, with someone who disputed some particular aesthetic judgment of mine—perhaps a friend from whom I expected better, or someone whose disagreement was based purely on what I considered ignorance or prejudice. But I can’t even begin to

<sup>2</sup> Strictly speaking, Kant writes that “if one . . . calls the object beautiful, one *believes* oneself to have a universal voice, and lays claim to the consent of everyone” (*Critique of the Power of Judgment*, ed. Paul Guyer and trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000], §8, p. 101). He thinks, of course, that this belief is correct. Guyer points out (p. 368n18) that in *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, §67, Kant offers “a striking variation on this theme”: “Kant describes the judgment of beauty as an invitation (*Einladung*) to others to experience the pleasure one has oneself felt in an object.” But that invitation, which is much closer to how I would describe the judgment of beauty, is still an invitation issued to one and all.

<sup>3</sup> Mary Mothersill, *Beauty Restored* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), p. 165. David Hume, unlike Kant and Mothersill, believed that “there are certain general principles of approbation and blame” (that the judgment of taste, in Kant’s terms, is in fact governed by concepts): “Some particular forms or qualities, from the original structure of the internal fabric, are calculated to please, and others to displease.” Faced, then, with the fact of widespread disagreement, he accounted for it by claiming that “if they fail of their effect in any particular instance, it is from some apparent defect or imperfection in the organ.” See “Of the Standard of Taste,” in David Hume, *Essays, Moral, Political, and Literary* (Indianapolis: LibertyClassics, 1987), p. 233.

imagine what it would be like to consider defective *everyone* who disputed my particular taste in painting, literature, or television. I can't even imagine I would have that reaction toward everyone who found my taste, say, for television in general an error (the same might be true for lyric poetry).

Here, now, is another version of the Kantian way of looking at things:

When you do not laugh at the jokes I love, or when you do not care for baseball, that may sadden or surprise me, but it is a worldly fact that I can tolerate, that I can live with. But when I take a thing [the reference is to movies and photography—the whole institutions] to be art, I take my relation to it to put me in touch with everyone else, at least potentially, for I am taking it that the thing ought to be able to be the focus of a catholic community.<sup>4</sup>

For me, judgments regarding beauty or art, although not purely subjective, do not have that kind of generality: neither a beautiful object nor an artistic field creates a catholic community; it creates many different communities, and not any less serious because they are partial—each is, from the point of view of those who belong to it, orthodox. When the same author writes that to consider “that something is art is to understand that this thing is an object for a community of auditors, and that you belong to this community,”<sup>5</sup> I want to say the same about beauty. Also, that neither for art nor for beauty is that primarily a matter of *understanding*: it is a matter of hoping, of trying to make the beautiful thing an object for such a community, of *creating* the community that centers around it—a community whose boundaries are constantly shifting, whose edges are never stable or impermeable. But that doesn't matter.

It doesn't matter because the community I hope to create around what strikes me as beautiful is never a universal community. If it were, if I expected my judgments of beauty to be binding on everyone, then in the ideal case—apart from those whose sense and sensibility were incorrigibly corrupted—everyone in the world would agree with everyone else on what is beautiful and what not. C. S. Peirce held that a true belief is a belief fated to be accepted by everyone who engages in scientific

<sup>4</sup> Ted Cohen, “The Very Idea of Art,” *NCECA Journal* 9 (1988): 12.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.



investigation<sup>6</sup> and had a vision of an ideal world—a world he thought to be supremely beautiful—in which scientific inquiry would come to an end. Kantianism, from which Peirce drew much of his inspiration, has a similar dream about aesthetics—it dreams of a world where aesthetic judgment provokes no disagreement and, since the judgment of taste is a conclusion regarding the aesthetic features of things, everyone’s reasons for making the same judgments as everyone else would also be the same as everyone else’s. Is that a dream or a nightmare? Is it any less repulsive than Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World*, where, apart from the incorrigibly corrupt Savage who insists on having his own taste, “everyone is happy nowadays”? A world where everyone liked, or loved, the same things would be a desolate, desperate world—as devoid of pleasure and interest as the most frightful dystopia of those who believe (quite wrongly) that the popular media are inevitably producing a depressingly, disconsolately uniform world culture. Although I say this with serious discomfort, a world in which everyone liked Shakespeare, or Titian, or Bach for the same reasons—if such a world were possible—appears to me no better than a world where everyone tuned in to *Baywatch* or listened to the worst pop music at the same time. What to me is truly frightful is not the quality of what everyone agrees on, but the very fact of universal agreement. Even the idea of *two* individuals whose aesthetic judgments are absolutely identical sends shivers down my spine. In a minute I will try to suggest why.

If the Kantian view is right, then in the less than ideal situation in which we are bound to live, where no one agrees completely on aesthetic issues with anyone else, whoever attaches importance to such issues will certainly end up finding everyone else defective. No doubt everyone feels that way about some people, but I wonder if that is the right way to feel about everyone else in the world. If the idea that the judgment of taste is a genuine judgment implies that our species should be held together by bonds of mutual contempt, then something is wrong with that idea. We must reject it without falling back on the silly relativism for which aesthetic judgments express purely private preferences that we cannot ever discuss or evaluate.

Our aesthetic judgments need a middle ground on which to rest, for they are most consequential. It is not as if I go through life picking one

<sup>6</sup> See John P. Murphy, *Pragmatism from Peirce to Davidson* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1990), p. 31.

person here, one novel there, one landscape further down and adding them to my stock of what I have judged to be beautiful. Prospective as they are, my judgments determine, literally, my life's course—they direct me to other people, other objects, other habits and ways of being. They are, as I have said, essentially social. Yet their range does not extend to humanity as a whole; if it did, the idea of a world where everyone found the same things beautiful would not be revolting. The reason it is revolting is that what we find beautiful constitutes our taste, and, as Susan Sontag once wrote, although taste “has no system and no proofs... there is something like a logic of taste: the consistent sensibility which underlies and gives rise to a certain taste.”<sup>7</sup> Such a consistent sensibility is essential to character: It is our style. And it is central to character and style that they are part of what distinguishes us from the rest of the world, even from those who are the closest to us. “*One thing is needful,*” Friedrich Nietzsche wrote in *The Gay Science*:

To “give style” to one’s character—a great and rare art! It is practiced by those who survey all the strengths and weaknesses of their nature and then fit them into an artistic plan until every one of them appears as art and reason and even weaknesses delight the eye.... In the end, when the work is finished, it becomes evident how the constraint of a single taste governed and formed everything large and small. Whether this taste was good or bad is less important than one might suppose, if only it was a single taste!<sup>8</sup>

The subtleties of Nietzsche’s view are not important here. What matters is that I can admire you for exhibiting “a single taste,” a consistent sensibility, without for that reason admiring the taste you exhibit—at least not in every respect. Who strikes me as having bad taste? Not everyone whose judgment I reject. Not everyone who shares my judgment for reasons I find unacceptable. Those, rather, whose views I cannot connect in an interesting way with the rest of their aesthetical choices. Bad taste, most often, is literally the lack of taste, haphazardness, the absence of style.

Developing a style, as Nietzsche saw, is an accomplishment. As Charles Baudelaire said of Manet, “He will never completely fill the

<sup>7</sup> Susan Sontag, “Notes on ‘Camp,’” in *Against Interpretation* (New York: Dell, 1966), p. 276.

<sup>8</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 1974), sec. 290.

gaps in his temperament. But he has a *temperament*—that’s what’s important.”<sup>9</sup> For that reason, when I detect a style, even a style I don’t admire, I want to come to know how its elements hang together, the character its possessor’s choices manifest. Conversely, I may become reconciled to the fact that those whose style I admire differ from me on specific questions without thinking of that as a lapse, precisely because it fits with the rest of their taste. And so I understand and respect Dave Hickey’s admiration for Norman Rockwell, whom I continue to find trite and banal, because Hickey discerns in his work formal complexities put in the service of a widely accessible art (like Raphael’s, he would say) that celebrates Hickey’s populist democratic values,<sup>10</sup> as I accept Michael Fried’s rejection of Minimalism, which I enjoy, because it lacks the seriousness, impersonality, and “conviction” that are the hallmarks of the Modernist works to which Fried is devoted.<sup>11</sup> It is no mean feat to exhibit a consistent sensibility.

But it is also not enough. Consistency that is too obvious and predictable often amounts to the unity that Sontag, in the essay from which I have quoted, called “Camp, . . . the glorification of ‘character.’ . . . What the Camp eye appreciates is the unity, the force of the person. . . . What Camp taste responds to is ‘instant’ character. . . and, conversely, what it is not stirred by is the sense of the development of character. Character is understood as a state of continual incandescence—a person being one, very intense thing.”<sup>12</sup> The camp character is so determined that every new action, every new choice, is already anticipated and always exhibits more of the same. This, though somehow suspect, need not be a fault. It is, for example, the defining feature of many movie stars. In film after film, Garbo is just Garbo, and we love her because we know exactly what to expect, because we can recognize everything we *already* knew her to be whatever new situation we find her in. She gives pleasure precisely because she is capable of remaining uncannily the same whatever drama is unfolding around her: the same faraway look combined with

<sup>9</sup> Charles Baudelaire, *Correspondance* (Paris: Editions de la Pléiade, 1966), vol. 2, p. 501.

<sup>10</sup> Dave Hickey, “The Kids Are All Right: After the Prom,” in *Norman Rockwell: Pictures for the American People*, ed. Maureen Hart Hennessey and Anne Knutson (New York: Harry N. Abrams: 1999), pp. 115–30.

<sup>11</sup> Michael Fried, “Art and Objecthood,” in *Art and Objecthood* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), pp. 148–72.

<sup>12</sup> Sontag, “Notes on ‘Camp,’” pp. 285–86.

the same passionate intensity, the same yielding lassitude combined with the same cold hard flame, the same (always the same) monosyllabic pelvis. Yet character, as I am thinking of it, in all its unity and consistency, can also surprise: unanticipated actions and novel dispositions can *fit in* with the old, throwing new light on them and, in that very process, changing their significance and coming to compose with them an original but still intelligible whole.

Consistency is therefore one element of an admirable style or character. Its price is uniformity—internal and self-imposed, like camp, or social and derived from others, as happens with all those who let another, either an individual or a group, dictate in one way or another what they are to appreciate and like. If camp is always on the brink of collapsing into doubtful taste, social uniformity (although it has its own uses: think of the punk style or all those men in their grey flannel suits) reveals its radical absence—whether you let Bernard Berenson, Clement Greenberg, Leo Castelli, or Martha Stewart determine your preferences for you, however happy your choices, your taste is no longer yours, but theirs. Style requires originality, and originality demands distinctiveness. It is with us as it is with the arts, and that is one reason we should be careful not to draw too stark a distinction between “art” and “the world.” T. S. Eliot once wrote that one function of criticism was “to exhibit the relations of literature—not to ‘life,’ as something contrasted to literature, but to all the other activities, which, together with literature, are the components of life.”<sup>13</sup> I would go a little further: Features we tend to associate only with the arts, because under the sway of Modernism (not Eliot’s, this case) we have tried to draw a contrast between the arts and life, are crucial to all these other activities, which, together with the arts, are the components of life. Part of the value of the style, taste, or character for which we admire some individuals derives from their difference from other styles, tastes, and characters, just as the value of works of art depends on their ability to stand out from their surrounding context. Not that difference, which is a catch-all idea, incapable of specifying anything and unable to be a goal in its own right, produces value on its own. Value depends on specific features, which themselves differ from others in specific ways. They are the kind of features that set Jean-Baptiste Chardin apart from his contemporaries,

<sup>13</sup> T. S. Eliot, quoted by Wendy Lesser, *Pictures at an Execution: An Inquiry into the Subject of Murder* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993), p. 10.

which Nicolas de Largillierre missed when he told him, “You have some very fine paintings there. They must be by a good Flemish painter.”<sup>14</sup> These are the features to which Michael Baxandall has given such careful attention in *Patterns of Intention* and *Shadows and Enlightenment*,<sup>15</sup> the features that allow him to see that Chardin started from “an old heroic formula for lighting composition found in such as Guido Reni” and “transferred [it] to domestic things and to food on tables. But he worked on it and effectively transformed it, not least by distinguishing more sharply between illumination and distinctness, distinctness and force of hue, force of hue and lustre. In effect he asked what the old formula could be seen as *representing*, and by making it represent perception he made it something else. . . . [His pictures] offer the product of sustained perception in the guise of a glance or two’s sensation.”<sup>16</sup> That is why Chardin’s painting forces you, as Jed Perl has noticed, to *see slowly*.<sup>17</sup> Beauty, both in art and in the rest of life, may take a long time to see. What you then see will be something that stands out, although its beauty and its value are not identical with its standing out. Even though the value that derives from standing out does not necessarily conflict with moral virtue, it does not depend on it: it is a different kind of reason for admiration and praise, blame and contempt.

I have said that to find something beautiful is to want to make it part of your life and of the life of those whose taste you already admire; also to want to find others who have made it part of their own lives, in the hope that something about it that you have not yet seen will make your life worthwhile. I have said nothing about what makes a life worthwhile in the sense I intend, and I must try to do so now. In the ideal case, what you find in or through the beautiful thing and the many relationships into which the beautiful thing leads you will be something no one has seen before; as a result, you will turn into someone interestingly, perhaps admirably, different from everyone else. The judgment of beauty, which is a judgment of value, implicates you in a web of relationships with

<sup>14</sup> The anecdote, reported by Cochin, is repeated by Pierre Rosenberg, “Chardin: The Unknowing Subversive?” in Pierre Rosenberg et al., *Chardin* (Paris: Editions de la Réunion des Musées Nationaux, 2000), p. 29.

<sup>15</sup> Michael Baxandall, *Patterns of Intention: On the Historical Explanation of Pictures* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), ch. 3; *Shadows and Enlightenment* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995).

<sup>16</sup> Baxandall, *Patterns of Intention*, pp. 98–99.

<sup>17</sup> Jed Perl, *Eyewitness: Reports from an Art World in Crisis* (New York: Basic Books, 2000), pp. 311–30.

people and things, and leads toward individuality. It is neither completely objective nor entirely social nor purely private. It is personal.

It is also aesthetic. The aesthetic features of things are those features they share only with those objects from which they are indistinguishable.<sup>18</sup> This idea underlies our sense that the little patch of yellow wall in Jan Vermeer's *View of Delft* that brought the dying Bergotte, like the dying Proust himself, out of his bed to pay homage to it was not, as Proust's fictional critic had written, beautiful just by itself, "like a priceless specimen of Chinese art," but only within the context of Vermeer's work.<sup>19</sup> It allows me to understand why I admire Piero's *Baptism of Christ* for its geometric balance, while Rockwell's equally balanced *After the Prom* leaves me cold; why the violence of Steven Seagal films makes them distasteful while the violence—the "particular" violence—of *Oz* is one of its glories; why the endless philosophical discussions of *The Magic Mountain*, which may sound quite silly in themselves, are essential to the novel's greatness, while the discourses of *Siddhartha* make the book unreadable. It permits any feature to be aesthetic in a particular context, and every object to have aesthetic properties.

Beauty does not depend only on elegance, grace, harmony, unity, and the other isolated features that appear in the pathetic lists of our textbooks. Beauty is the object of love: Anything can provoke it, and even a streak of red paint or a blue spot on the upper right-hand corner of a painting that any "person of normal intelligence and eyesight" can perceive can turn out to be aesthetic in a particular context. You don't need taste or sophistication to become aware of the aesthetic features of things—you need taste to focus on the right ones, in the right way.

<sup>18</sup> In this, I follow Mothersill, who follows Sue Larson; see *Beauty Restored*, pp. 343–45. The issue is very complicated and needs to be discussed in detail. For example, it may be that two vases may be identical in shape but different in color: can't they share some aesthetic features in respect of their shape? There is also an issue whether being indistinguishable is a transitive relation, whether "*a* is indistinguishable (by *A*) from *b*" and "*b* is indistinguishable (by *A*) from *c*" imply that "*a* is indistinguishable (by *A*) from *c*." If it does not, as Nelson Goodman, for example, argued in *The Structure of Appearance* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1951), p. 230, and also in *Languages of Art* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1968), pp. 99–112, then none of the properties of *a* can be aesthetic. If, for instance, *a* is *F* and we suppose that *F* is aesthetic, then *b* also is *F*, since *a* and *b* are indistinguishable. But then *c* is also *F*, since *b* and *c* are indistinguishable. In that case, *F* is not an aesthetic property of *a*, since it shares it with at least one object from which it is distinguishable. Delia Graff, however, has recently argued that the relation is transitive, and, if she is right, this particular problem can be avoided ("Phenomenal Continua and the Sorites," *Mind*, forthcoming). But the question is far from settled.

<sup>19</sup> Marcel Proust, *Remembrance of Things Past*, trans. C. K. Scott Montcrieff and Terence Kilmartin, 3 vols. (New York: Random House, 1981), vol. 3, p. 185.

What you do need is to examine those things for yourself, since if they share their aesthetic features at all, they share them only with what looks exactly like them. That in turn explains why the aesthetic and the perceptual are so closely connected, even though, as many have often noticed but seldom squarely faced, they are not the same: both require direct contact with their object, but for different reasons. Aesthetic awareness is perceptual only if its object is itself perceptual, which is why discussions of aesthetic properties always revolve around painting, to which perception is crucial, and are so embarrassed by literature, in which perceptual features like assonance, alliteration, and rhythm are a small part of what matters. Finally, this idea explains why interpretation must also be direct. No matter how much I tell you about a painting or a novel that has changed my life, no matter how well you learn my account, my interpretation will never be yours unless you are able to work it out directly on your own; until then you will only be accepting mine. Unlike knowledge and like understanding (also not a perceptual matter), interpretation cannot be transmitted from one person to another. Making beautiful things part of my life is not a metaphor: I must literally spend it in their presence and company. I know what I think of Walter de la Mare's *Epitaph*,

Here lies a beautiful lady,  
 Light of step and heart was she;  
 I think she was the most beautiful lady  
 That ever was in the West County,

but not if he was right (though I have my suspicions), nor what the beauty of his lady was like.

I do know that Manet's *Olympia* (fig. 1) is one of the world's great paintings. Art historians, I suppose, would find that to verge on the banal (although some *would* disagree, and most of the rest of the world would have no idea what I was talking about). What I said tells you nothing about the painting; it may tell you something—a little—about me. I am magnetized by the work, have looked at it long and hard, spoken about it with friends and colleagues, tried to find people who share my feelings for it and others who dispute them, and I have read about it. I have rushed to converse both with the *Olympia* and about it. I have learnt about the social structure of 1860s Paris, about the way prostitution became identified with the working classes and the effect the depiction of such a working-class woman in a classic pose had on Manet's

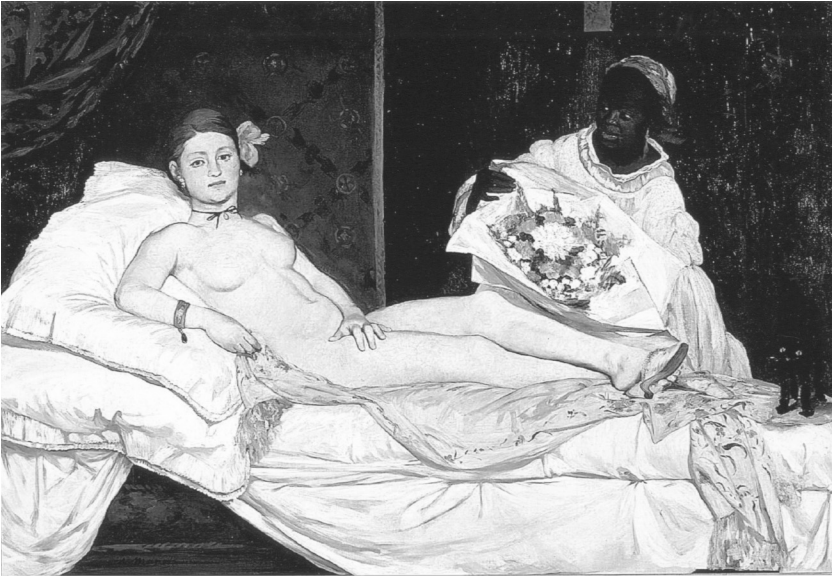


Fig. 1. Edouard Manet, *Olympia*. (Copyright Réunion des Musées Nationaux/ Art Resource, NY)

contemporaries, and about the significance of the disjointed way the body is painted:

The achievement of *Olympia*... is that it gives its female subject a particular sexuality as opposed to a general one. And that particularity derives... not from there being *an order* to the body on the bed but from there being too many, and none of them established as the dominant one. The signs of sex are present in plenty, but they fail, as it were, to add up. Sex is not something evident and all of a piece in *Olympia*; that a woman has a sex at all—and certainly Olympia has one—does not make her immediately *one thing*, for a man to appropriate visually; her sex is a construction of some kind, or perhaps the inconsistency of several.<sup>20</sup>

I have also learnt about the work's sources, about the relation between Manet and what Michael Fried calls the generation of the 1860s, painters like Henri Fantin-Latour, Whistler, and Alphonse Legros, about the way Manet's works of that period face their beholder in a way that might help explain the sheer incomprehension with which contem-

<sup>20</sup> T. J. Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and His Followers* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), ch. 2. The quotation is from p. 132.



porary critics received the work—an incomprehension I still feel when I look at the painting:

Manet, in his struggle against absorption, found himself compelled to seek not just an alternative compositional route to intensity and strikingness, but also an alternative mode of execution, one that would be consistent with, that would somehow “project,” the facingness and instantaneousness that were his main resort.... The means by which he tried to bring this about not only were powerless to enforce such a reading, they threatened, by their glaring departure from traditional norms of finish, to doom his already difficult art to total incomprehensibility.<sup>21</sup>

I also learnt that the figure who for Clark is simply a “Negress” or a “maid” and for Fried a “black maid” was probably based on a woman by the name of Laure,<sup>22</sup> who was born in Paris, to parents unnamed, on April 19, 1839, and whom Manet had sketched at least once before he put her in his painting. She is not simply “black,” just as Victorine Meurent is not simply “white,” not just a stock character, but an African-Caribbean-French woman, a native of the city. Dressed in a typical Parisian dress at least a size too large for her, and so either a hand-me-down or bought at a secondhand shop, she is herself, like Olympia, a working-class woman, not simply a figure of “primitive or exotic sexuality,”<sup>23</sup> or “inert and formulaic, a mere painted sign for Woman in one of her states.”<sup>24</sup> *Olympia* is, then, also connected to the popular Orientalist paintings of the time, which displaced actual desire and sensuality to an imaginary Orient: The categories that painters like Jean-Léon Gérôme were projecting to this imaginary construction were present in the everyday world in which the painting’s audience moved and lived. The work’s

doubled femininity...places the painting in a critical relation to Orientalist myth by making its modernity explicit both through what the painting does to locate the white woman in time, space and class relations and through its calculated and strategic revisions to

<sup>21</sup> Michael Fried, *Manet’s Modernism, or the Face of Painting in the 1860s* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996). The quotation is from p. 307.

<sup>22</sup> Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life*, pp. 133, 138; Fried, *Manet’s Modernism*, p. 318. And see the general discussion in Theodore Reff, *Manet: Olympia* (New York: Viking Press, 1977), ch. 3.

<sup>23</sup> Reff, *Manet: Olympia*, p. 93.

<sup>24</sup> Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life*, p. 133.

the trope of the African woman—now also signalled as a figure located in time, space and class relations, that is in the history of the present, as another Parisian proletarian.<sup>25</sup>

All that, of course, forced me to turn to other paintings, contemporary with, earlier than, and later than the *Olympia*. I had to learn more about Manet himself, his sources, the work of his contemporaries, art criticism in mid-nineteenth-century Paris, the Orientalist tradition in painting, the history of the nude. Each of these projects in turn sent me to still other works, which I then discussed with people or read about. Of course, I looked at the obvious works the critics discuss—Titian's *Venus of Urbino*, Francisco de Goya's *Naked Maja*, Jean Ingres's *Venus Anadyomene* and *Large Odalisque*, Diego Velázquez's *Venus with a Mirror* (which, I found out, was once hanging not demurely on the walls of the National Gallery, but salaciously from the ceiling over its owner's bed, for reasons both obvious and disturbing to a naive aesthete like me), Robert Morris's performance piece *Site*, Mel Ramos's *Manet's Olympia*, and scores of others. And I also saw, for myself, that Manet is playing havoc with François Boucher's portrait of his wife (fig. 2). Madame Boucher, of course, is dressed, lying on her proper *chaise-longue*, coyly glancing away, surrounded by symbols of domesticity—books, letters, sewing materials, bibelots—while Olympia lies naked on a messy bed that has no place in a bourgeois home, gazing, somehow, at the beholder. Yet, apart from their right arm,<sup>26</sup> their poses are strikingly similar. Both women lift themselves from the plush pillows behind them; each has her left hand between her legs—although Madame Boucher's gesture, of course, is not a dare to the spectator; their slippers are alike, and in both cases one is dangling slightly. The naked Olympia seems to have kept the bracelet and neck ribbon of the dressed Madame Boucher, while the bow on Madame's headdress has turned into an orchid—a transformation that did in fact not prove easy to recognize: Olympia's flower has often been interpreted as a bow.<sup>27</sup> The flower draws the eye to the left, where her hair, pulled back in front, frames her forehead in a

<sup>25</sup> Griselda Pollock, "A Tale of Three Women," in her *Differencing the Canon: Feminist Desire and the Writing of Art's Histories* (London: Routledge, 1999), pp. 247–317. The quotation is from p. 294.

<sup>26</sup> Manet had experimented with that position in a number of preliminary sketches for *Olympia* and in other works; see Reff, *Manet: Olympia*, pp. 67–74.

<sup>27</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 108.



Fig. 2. François Boucher, *Madame Boucher*. (Copyright The Frick Collection, New York)

stern curve recalling the shape of Madame Boucher’s neat cap. Madame Boucher’s hair, naturally, is thoroughly tucked under her cap, while the rest of Victorine’s red-brown hair floats like a cloud—extremely difficult to see and, once seen, to keep in sight<sup>28</sup>—over her left shoulder. And just as Victorine’s hair hovers in and out of sight as we look at the

<sup>28</sup> It may actually have been missed by many in the work’s early audiences (as it still is by many casual observers today). The many contemporary caricatures of the *Olympia* leave it out altogether. Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life*, p. 137, suggests that this was because the flowing hair, once you see it, changes the overall effect: “[T]his body has abundance after all; it has a familiar sex.” Though seeing Victorine’s hair does make a serious difference, I am not sure it has quite that effect. If anything, it complicates the already complex and inconsistent information the painting provides about its subject: the face is still sternly framed by the pulled-back hair, but an *additional* softness is added to Victorine. Clark writes that it is difficult to make it “part of the face it belongs to. Face and hair are incompatible.” My own reaction is that it is Victorine’s hair itself that does not add up to one thing—not just the hair and her face. It is important to note that Henri Fantin-Latour (1883), Paul Gauguin (1889), and Pablo Picasso (1901) all omitted that shock of frizzy hair from their sketches or caricatures of the work (in contrast to Paul Cézanne’s version of 1875–77 and Gauguin’s full copy of 1890–91).

*Olympia*, so Olympia hovers in and out of sight as we look at *Madame Boucher*. Manet kept the screen and drapery of Boucher's painting, but transposed them from right to left, as in a mirror image. When we look at the luminous, respectable Madame Boucher, what we see, through a glass, darkly, is the questionable shadow of Olympia.

I still feel the magic of that painting, which attracts me with the promise of a secret it is still keeping back. I am focused now on Olympia's eyes. Michael Fried writes that Victorine Meurend confronts the viewer directly,<sup>29</sup> but that can't be right, for I cannot lock eyes with her. Her look, which is as direct as it is vague, as confrontational as it is yielding, as arrogant as it is tender, acknowledges me precisely as it ignores me. If she is smiling, is she indicating surrender, defiance, resignation, or indifference? Does she look affectionate, professional, jaded, or sad? Is she looking at me or somewhere over my left shoulder? That is not the look of the traditional nude.<sup>30</sup> It directs me to something else altogether; perhaps blasphemously, Victorine Meurend's regard reminds me of eyes I have sometimes seen in Byzantine and post-Byzantine icons, particularly of the Virgin Mary, like the anonymous Athonite *Galaktotrophousa* or its contemporary *Virgin Paraklesis* painted in 1783 by Michael of Thessaloniki.

My attraction to the *Olympia* has literally changed the shape of my life. Its beauty has in no way removed me from the everyday, as Schopenhauer might have thought, unless we take that to mean that it created a different everyday than I would have faced without it. It has directed me to paintings and literary works that I would have paid no attention to or that I would have understood quite differently if I did not have Manet in mind. It has led me to people I would not have known otherwise, per-

<sup>29</sup> Fried, *Manet's Modernism*, p. 469n26.

<sup>30</sup> I believe Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life*, pp. 132–33, has something similar in mind when he contrasts Olympia's look to the look of *Venus Anadyomene* or the *Venus of Urbino* and describes it as "blatant and particular, but also...unreadable, perhaps deliberately so...candid but guarded, poised between address and resistance." By contrast, he finds that Laure, whom as we have seen he does not consider an individual character, expresses simple compliance. But, once alerted to the particularity of Laure and its implications for the interpretation of the work, we can begin to see that her look, too, is complex and elusive. There is no simple compliance there. Is she looking at Victorine with a trace of contempt, as she offers the flowers to her? Or is there a hint of pity in her eyes? If she is smiling, does her smile (as faint and enigmatic as Victorine's own) indicate pride in the small triumph that the extravagant bouquet represents? Or is it a sign of uncertainty, the quizzical expression on the face of someone who doesn't yet know how Victorine is likely to react? Laure, once we begin to see her as a concrete individual, becomes pictorially as well as ideologically complex.

sonally or through their writing. I am reasonably sure that none of these friends, colleagues, and authors has been bad for me. I am not as sure about the works to which my fascination with the *Olympia* has steered me: I don't know whether the motives that led me to the vast numbers of female nudes I have looked at or the pleasures I have received from them are altogether innocent. I really don't know exactly how they have affected me, whether, from a currently relevant moral point of view, they have caused me benefit or harm. Not that after a half hour with the *Rokeby Venus* in the National Gallery I came home with a keener appreciation for pornographic pictures of women's naked bodies. Culture, as Plato was the first to notice, works in subtler ways, gradually and imperceptibly.<sup>31</sup> He never thought that a performance of Euripides' *Medea* would cause its audience to go home and strangle their children (although some have thought that he did). He was worried whether his citizens were over the long run being "brought up on images of evil, as if in a meadow of bad grass, where they crop and graze in many different places every day until, little by little, they unwittingly accumulate a large evil in their soul."<sup>32</sup> I don't know, and I may possibly never learn, whether my love of the *Olympia* has led me to such a meadow of bad grass.

What I do know, and what I hope my discussion has intimated, is that the further I go into the *Olympia* itself, the more I need to know about ever more other things. By inducing us to look for the aesthetic features of things, the sense of beauty attracts us to what is most distinctive and individual in the objects we love. To capture a beautiful thing in its particularity we must see how it differs from others, and to do that we must come to know, as exactly as we can, what those things are, and how each one of them in turn differs from the rest of the world. Loving something is inseparable from wanting to know and understand it. We cannot love what we are not absorbed in, but the contrary of absorption is not always theatricality. Far from closing us off from the rest of the world, absorption often leads further into it. As always, Plato was there first: the *Symposium* and the *Phaedrus* give voice to his vision of beauty's power to draw its lover further along. A metaphysical picture may have led him to think that beauty ultimately leads to a world of its own, but

<sup>31</sup> See M. F. Burnyeat, "Culture and Society in Plato's *Republic*," Tanner Lectures, Harvard 1997.

<sup>32</sup> Plato, *Republic*, translated by G. M. A. Grube and C. D. C. Reeve (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1993), 401c.

his vision doesn't require that picture: "What happens when there is no immortal realm behind the beautiful person or thing is just what happens when there *is* an immortal realm behind the beautiful person or thing: the perceiver is led to a more capacious regard for the world."<sup>33</sup> We understand things better not when we delve into their depths, in mutual isolation, but when we see how they are like and unlike every thing that surrounds them—and that, in the end, is everything.

We often think interpretation discounts an object's appearance and uncovers the real meaning hidden behind it. That image, once forcefully expressed by Susan Sontag, led her to reject interpretation altogether: "Interpretation says, Look, don't you see that X is really—or, really means—A? . . . Interpretation . . . presupposes a discrepancy between the clear meaning of the text and the demands of (later) readers. . . . The manifest content must be probed and pushed aside to find the true meaning—the latent content—beneath."<sup>34</sup> Interpretation, she argued, "is the revenge of the intellect upon art," even "upon the world,"<sup>35</sup> based on "an overt contempt for appearances."<sup>36</sup> "In place of a hermeneutics," it was her famous conclusion, "we need an erotics of art."<sup>37</sup>

But hermeneutics and erotics, as Plato knew, do not exclude each other; that's why Socrates was the great erotic. Love and interpretation cannot be separated. We want to interpret the object of our love, and we want to be interpreted, and affected, by it. That is to place the beautiful object in as broad a context as possible in order to see how it differs from everything else, how it accomplishes something—if it does—that nothing else accomplishes. Interpretation does not proceed from how something merely seems to what it really is but, rather, from how it seems or is (the difference now hardly matters) at first to how it seems or is when we have come to know it better. And to know it better is to know how it is similar to and different from all the things to which we can connect it. Since these are indefinitely many, interpretation, like our sense of beauty itself, is in principle inexhaustible.

<sup>33</sup> Elaine Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), pp. 47–48. Scarry, I think, believes that when I perceive the beauty of one thing, I become open to the beauty of others. That is true. What is also true, and what I am trying to say here, is that to perceive the beauty of one thing, which is in most cases not a one-time affair but a longer story, sometimes even an affair of a lifetime, is *identical* with perceiving the beauty of others.

<sup>34</sup> Susan Sontag, "Against Interpretation," in *Against Interpretation*, pp. 5–7.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14.

That is, I believe, what Proust's narrator finally recognizes, despite his talk of uncovering the meaning and essence of things through the part of himself that exists outside time—that part to which, sitting in the library of the Guermites, he attributes the happiness he had once felt while tasting a madeleine dipped in tea and finding himself transported to his childhood in Combray or when, on his way to the Guermites', he stepped on two uneven paving stones that unaccountably brought him back to Venice.<sup>38</sup> For, having finally decided to begin working on his book, during his long reflection on its nature, he comes to see “that it would be impossible to depict our relationship with anyone whom we have even slightly known without passing in review, one after another, the most different settings of our life.” Nothing is what it is independently of anything else; no moment, person, or thing has a meaning in and of itself:

Life is perpetually weaving fresh threads which link one individual and one event to another, and...these threads are crossed and re-crossed, doubled and redoubled, to thicken the web, so that between any slightest point of our past and all the others a rich network of memories gives us an almost infinite variety of communicating paths to choose from.

Marcel modifies his earlier thoughts on timeless objects that carry their meaning in themselves. His story will be a story of time, in time. And his awareness that, to take account of these communicating paths, the story of his life will have

to use not the two-dimensional psychology which we normally use but a quite different sort of three-dimensional psychology added a new beauty to those resurrections of the past which my memory had effected while I was following my thoughts alone in the library, since memory by itself, when it introduces the past, unmodified, into the present—the past just as it was at the moment when it was itself the present—suppresses the mighty dimension of Time which is the dimension in which life is lived.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>38</sup> Proust, *Remembrance of Things Past*, vol. 3, pp. 900–904.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 3, pp. 1086, 1087. I have discussed that idea in more detail, again in connection with Proust, in “Writer, Text, Work, Author,” in *Literature and the Question of Philosophy*, ed. Anthony J. Cascardi (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1987), pp. 267–91; Richard Rorty has recently given his own version of it in “Being That Can Be Understood Is Language,” *London Review of Books*, March 16, 2000, pp. 23–25.

If interpretation is interminable and if we can never know to what and to whom it will lead us, how the search for beauty will affect our moral character remains always unpredictable. Many people believe that attention to the arts is important because it is morally beneficial. For Richard Rorty, Vladimir Nabokov and George Orwell are valuable because they make us more aware, and less tolerant, of the ways in which we are cruel to one another. Interpreting a particular image in Nabokov's *Pale Fire*, Rorty writes: "That poor lame boy trying to get his spastic brother out of the range of the stones hurled by schoolchildren will remain a familiar sight in all countries, but a slightly less frequent one in countries where people read novels."<sup>40</sup> That is a view I wish I could share, but I can find no reason for it. For Elaine Scarry, beautiful things promote our sense of justice.<sup>41</sup> I can't see that: not that they can't, but that they simply don't have to. The ancient Athenians adored beauty, practiced democracy, and were vicious to friend and foe alike. Again and again, history has smashed to pieces Plato's idea that to love the beautiful is to desire the good ("Good speech...good accord, good shape and good rhythm follow upon goodness of character").<sup>42</sup> Beautiful villains, graceful outlaws, tasteful criminals, and elegant torturers are everywhere about us. Salome, Scarpia, and Satan do not exist only in fiction. And neither, of course, does Quasimodo.

Perhaps, one might say, the moral dangers of the arts are small, whatever their benefits. But let me confess that when my eyes get tired of trying to catch Olympia's elusive gaze, they often turn to the vicious, violent world of *Oz*—not simply to relax or "just" for entertainment, but for the serious pleasures in it. How do I know these pleasures are serious? Well, I have watched a lot of television, I have written a little about it, I talk to people who also watch it a lot, and I read those who write about it. Am I wasting my time and ruining my character or are you missing something that could add to your life? The questions now sound more urgent. The dangers of the popular arts seem greater, aesthetically and morally, since the jury, so to speak, is still out and they don't yet have a place within the higher halls of culture. It is less risky to take it for granted that they lead to degradation: we can then wait safely until they are either admitted into those halls or left to disappear. That

<sup>40</sup> "Introduction" to Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire* (New York: Everyman's Library, 1992), p. xvii.

<sup>41</sup> Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just*, ch. 2.

<sup>42</sup> *Republic* 400d–e.



assumption has a long history. It goes, once again, back to Plato, who used it against tragedy—not to play it safe, of course, but actually to make it disappear. He failed, as we can see by the fact that it is Greek tragedy (along with Plato himself—how he would have hated that!) to which we now appeal in order to denounce the popular media. Plato's assumption has always been with us, for the very same reason that popular art has always been and will continue to be with us. Henry Prynne excoriated Shakespeare by appealing to the Bible, Samuel Taylor Coleridge appealed to Shakespeare in order to show that the novel destroys the mind, and a German tract of 1796 condemned reading itself in the most uncanny anticipation of the language and imagery of today's attacks against mass culture, television, or popular music:

Readers of books...rise and retire to bed with a book in their hand, sit down at table with one, have one lying close by when working, carry one around with them when walking, and who, once they have begun reading a book are unable to stop until they are finished. But they have scarcely finished the last page of a book before they begin looking around greedily for somewhere to acquire another one; and when they are at the toilet or at their desk or some other place, if they happen to come across something that fits with their own subject or seems to them to be readable, they take it away and devour it with a kind of ravenous hunger. No lover of tobacco or coffee, no wine drinker or lover of games, can be as addicted to their pipe, bottle, games or coffee-table as those many hungry readers are to their reading habit.<sup>43</sup>

None of this is to say that watching television is bound to be morally benign. Works of art—and some works of television are works of art—have often had significant moral and political effects—some for good (one thinks of Charles Dickens, perhaps of Goya), some for bad (here all today are likely to think of *Triumph of the Will*; some, of Richard Wagner; others, perhaps, of the nude), and most in ways that are deeply debatable (what should we say of Virgil's championing of Augustus? of Caravaggio's advertising for the Counter-Reformation? of Jacques-Louis David's glorification of revolution and empire?). The judgment of taste, even at its most specific, implicates a vast number of other works and a large variety of other people: it commits you to nothing less than

<sup>43</sup> Quoted in Guglielmo Cavallo and Roger Chartier, eds., *A History of Reading in the West*, trans. Lydia G. Cochrane (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999), p. 285.

a whole mode of life. What that life will bring is impossible to predict: you can't know in advance the sort of person it will make you. You can't even know for sure that what you will eventually find is something you will consider to have been worth your while. Perhaps you will feel about the work you once loved as Swann came to feel about Odette after all the time he devoted to her: "To think that I have wasted years of my life, that I've longed to die, that I've experienced my greatest love, for a woman who didn't appeal to me, who wasn't even my type!"<sup>44</sup> Perhaps—that might be worse—the beautiful thing or person you loved may have actually led you to a degraded life, which, degraded as you have become, you can no longer recognize for what it is.

Beauty, Stendhal said, is a promise of happiness. To take that seriously, as I do, is to be willing to live with ineradicable uncertainty. Nothing can match the elated conviction that comes at the moment a new beauty enters our life; what's to come is still unsure. I know, now, that I want what beauty promises, but not what it is, whether I'll get it, or what will become of me if I do. Beauty and certainty, Nietzsche saw, are in conflict:

One day the wanderer slammed a door behind himself, stopped in his tracks, and wept. Then he said: "This penchant and passion for what is true, real, non-apparent, certain—how it aggravates me! Why does this gloomy and restless fellow keep following and driving *me*? I want to rest, but he will not allow it. How much there is that seduces me to tarry! Everywhere Armida's gardens beckon me; everywhere I must keep tearing my heart away and experience new bitternesses. I must raise my feet again and again, weary and wounded though they be; and because I must go on, I often look back in wrath at the most beautiful things that could not hold me—*because* they could not hold me."<sup>45</sup>

Uncertainty is essential to life, suffusing it so completely that we are no longer aware of it. Beauty is its visible image, a call to look more attentively at ourselves and the world and, so, to see how little we see.

Why, then, tarry in Armida's gardens? Why, if seeing better need not reveal better things? Why pursue beauty if it can lead to harm? Because, perhaps, in finding it we may produce it ourselves. Nietzsche, again: "I want to learn more and more to see as beautiful what is necessary in

<sup>44</sup> Proust, *Remembrance of Things Past*, vol. 1, p. 415.

<sup>45</sup> *The Gay Science*, p. 309.

things; then I shall be one of those who make things beautiful.”<sup>46</sup> But making beautiful things is a way of being beautiful—and that is reason enough. For beauty is valuable, although its value is always in question—perhaps precisely because its value, like the value of life, is always in question.<sup>47</sup>

Beautiful things are not produced only by great artists. Sometimes they don’t even have to be particular artifacts. They can be the aesthetic choices through which we manifest our character and style—the range of things we find beautiful and what we find beautiful about them. In the end, the justification of all aesthetic action depends on whether it manages to constitute a whole that is coherent enough to stand as an object in its own right and different enough from others in a way that provokes admiration and interest; then others will be attracted to us not only for the things to which we give them access, but for our own sake as well. Our style will be itself a thing of beauty. Proust wrote that

style for the writer, no less than colour for the painter, is a question not of technique but of vision: it is the revelation, which by direct and conscious means would be impossible, of the qualitative difference, the uniqueness of the fashion in which the world appears to each one of us, a difference which, if there were no art, would remain the secret of every individual.<sup>48</sup>

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., p. 276.

<sup>47</sup> Elaine Scarry has pointed out that although one can pursue goodness, justice, or truth in the hope of becoming good, just, or knowledgeable, “it does not appear to be the case that one who pursues beauty becomes beautiful. It may even be accurate to suppose that most people who pursue beauty have no interest in becoming themselves beautiful.” She argues that producing beauty is not enough of a parallel because those who pursue goodness want two distinct things: to produce greater goodness *and* to become themselves good (*On Beauty and Being Just*, pp. 87–88). But I am not sure that these are really distinct. One can, of course, do good for all sorts of base motives, but that doesn’t qualify as pursuing goodness, and no one can be good without doing good: to be good is just to do good for the right reasons. Scarry also argues, on her way to claiming that beauty ultimately leads to justice, that one might think that people who pursue beauty “become beautiful in their interior lives” but rejects the idea because of the essential connection between beauty and external appearance (pp. 88–89). Here, I believe, the distinction between external appearance and interior life is too stark. Not everyone who looks at beautiful things, of course, is capable of producing them as well (just as not everyone who pursues justice or goodness succeeds at becoming just or good—“knowledgeable,” by the way, does not seem to me parallel). But those who do thereby acquire the unity of style or character that, I am arguing, constitutes a way of being beautiful that transcends that stark distinction. Not every thing or person I find beautiful is *good-looking*: Most people, in fact, are found beautiful by someone or other in the course of their lives, and most are certainly not good-looking; good looks are the last thing one would associate with Francis Bacon’s tortured paintings and “external” beauty is not an obvious feature of Arnold Schoenberg’s compositions.

<sup>48</sup> Proust, *Remembrance of Things Past*, vol. 3, pp. 931–32.

I can see such a difference revealed not only in artists, but also in critics I read and people I know. I think I can see it in everything and everyone I find beautiful. It is what makes me find them beautiful, what draws me to them with the promise that it is a difference worth making part of the fashion in which the world appears to me.

Our world is a world of art. Beauty, which has a place in both, makes life and art continuous. Some people are admirable, despite their moral defects, because their achievements display the power, the originality, and the distinctiveness—the beauty—that are essential to great works of art. As long as we discern a single taste, we detect something of value, whatever other defects it may reveal, however questionable its contents. The great enemy of the beautiful is not the ugly, which at least engages and provokes and may for that reason eventually reveal an unexpected beauty, but the indifferent, the common, the nondescript, what we are not able even to notice. Although, of course, others might do so some day, and in that way redeem both what we ignored and themselves.

Individuality and distinctiveness, the demonstration that more is possible than we had imagined before, are values not only of art but of life. But individuality and distinctiveness presuppose coherence and unity: without them, nothing can stand on its own as an object either of admiration or of contempt. If those are discernible in my aesthetical choices, in what I have found beautiful, in what I have in turn found of beauty in it, in the various groups to which my choices have led me, in what I received from them and what I in turn had to give them—if my choices both fit with one another and also stand out from the rest, then I have managed to put things together in my own manner and form. I have established, through the things I have loved, a new way of looking at the world and left it richer than I first found it.

In “The Soul of Man under Socialism,” Wilde wrote:

A man is called selfish if he lives in the manner that seems to him most suitable for the full realization of his own personality; if, in fact, the primary aim of his life is self-development. But this is the way in which everyone should live. *Selfishness is not living as one wishes to live, it is asking others to live as one wishes to live.* And unselfishness is letting other people’s lives alone, not interfering with them. Selfishness always aims at creating around it an absolute uniformity of type. Unselfishness recognizes infinite variety of type as a delightful thing, accepts it, acquiesces in it, enjoys it.<sup>49</sup>

<sup>49</sup> *The Works of Oscar Wilde*, ed. and with an introduction by G. F. Maine (London: Collins, 1948), p. 1040.

There is a dimension of life of which this is true, and we must finally admit its importance—we cannot continue to keep our eyes closed to the central role of aesthetic features in our interactions with one another. I doubt that the primary aim of life is self-development, since I doubt that life has a primary aim. And for that reason I also doubt there is an “infinite variety of type.” There are in fact many types, as there are many tastes. That no single type is best of all doesn’t mean that every type is as good as another. But, in the end, the question is not how to rank these types but what to make of them, how to appreciate them, understand them, and use them to create a type, a taste, that is, if we are able and lucky, truly our own. The passion for ranking and judging, the fervor for verdicts, which has for so long dominated our attitude toward the arts, and our lives, is simply another manifestation of selfishness.