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Alexander Nehamas: Only a Promise of Happiness

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Plato or Schopenhauer?

All beautiful things, the Greek philosopher Plotinus wrote in the third century A.D., produce “awe and a shock of delight, passionate longing, love and a shudder of rapture.” *All* beautiful things: natural objects and works of art, bodies and souls, ways of life, knowledge, virtue, and much else besides. Our time, by contrast, has confined such feelings to everyday life. It has drawn a heavy curtain between them and the true pleasures of art, which ordinary people, as Ortega y Gasset charged in 1925, are incapable of experiencing: “To the majority of people aesthetic pleasure means a state of mind which is essentially indistinguishable from their ordinary behavior. As they have never practiced any other attitude but the practical one in which a man’s feelings are aroused and he is emotionally involved, a work that does not invite sentimental intervention leaves them without a cue”; ordinary people wallow in emotions not only different “from true artistic pleasure, but . . . incompatible with aesthetic enjoyment proper.”

Philosophy, too, has abandoned Plotinus's broad vision. Suspicious of passion, it limited itself to a kind of beauty to which desire seemed inappropriate—the beauty in great art and the wonders of nature, concentrated in museums and national parks. And so the beauty that mattered to philosophy, to criticism, and often to the arts themselves, if it mattered at all, was separated from the beauty that mattered to the rest of the world, to whom it seemed irrelevant and empty: the higher and more refined its pleasures, the less like pleasures they seemed.

How did that happen? Is it purification or impoverishment? And what, if anything, are we—philosophers, critics, historians, the “educated” public that looks down on the “masses,” and the masses themselves, who, when they bother to think about any of this, make fun of the educated—to do about it?

Plotinus's words were a conscious echo of Plato's description of a man who sees a beautiful boy for the first time. Such a man, Plato writes in the *Phaedrus*, first

shudders in cold fear . . . and gazes at the boy with reverence, as if he were a god. . . . But gradually his trembling gives way to a strange feverish sweat, stoked by the stream of beauty pouring into him through his eyes and feeding the growth of his soul's wings. . . . He cares for nothing else. Mother, brothers or friends mean nothing to him. He gladly neglects everything else that concerns him; losing it all would make no difference to him if only it were for the boy's sake.

Plato and the ancients were not afraid of the risky language of passion because they thought that beauty, even the beauty of lowly objects, can gradually inspire a longing for goodness and truth. In the *Symposium*, Plato describes a long process that leads from the love of a single individual to a life governed by the love of all the beauty of the world, which is for him the life of philosophy itself. Passion in pursuing that life, its wisdom and virtue, and everything that leads to them, is just what the ancients encouraged and valued, and the pleasures they promised in return were vivid and intense.

The fiery reaction to beauty Plato and Plotinus describe was still comprehensible to lovers of beauty and art like John Ruskin, Walter Pater, and Oscar Wilde in the nineteenth century, but beauty had long ago ceased to go hand in hand with wisdom and goodness; it had eventually come to be, as it is to most of the world today, largely irrelevant and often opposed to them. Even Ruskin, the most moralizing of modern aestheticians, had to acknowledge the breach between beauty and morality, and his advice to painters reveals the conflict he faced: “Does a man die at your feet—your business is not to help him, but to note the colour of his lips. . . . Not a specially religious or spiritual business this, it might appear.”

And so it did. Mistrustful of passion, the twentieth century gradually came to doubt beauty itself. The contrast between helping the suffering and painting them, between fighting for them and writing about them, became starker and deeper. Wary of the ability of art to transmute the greatest horrors into objects of beauty, philosophy disavowed it and relegated the beauty of human beings and ordinary things, inseparable as it is from yearning and from the body, to biology and psychology, to fashion, advertising, and marketing. It preserved the beauty of art and its equivocal satisfactions as its rightful subjects only by means of thinking of them as “aesthetic,” a category that obliterated the vision that had once kindled Plato’s imagination.

The aesthetic made it possible to isolate the beautiful from all the sensual, practical, and ethical issues that were the center of Plato’s concern. The concept itself is part of the legacy of Immanuel Kant, who established the modern field of Aesthetics in the late eighteenth century. In an enigmatic formulation whose influence nevertheless permeates our attitude toward the arts and, as we shall see, countless aspects of everyday life, Kant disavowed the ancients. Beauty, he claimed, is manifested only through a contemplation of nature or art that produces “a satisfaction without any interest.” The pleasure (“satisfaction”) we find in beautiful things is completely independent of their relations to the rest of the world—of their uses and effects. We have no interest in possessing them or in their consequences for ourselves or others. It is a pleasure bereft of desire.

The beautiful is according to Kant different from both the “agreeable” and the good. The agreeable is anything that we like and enjoy in the most everyday sense of the word—strawberry ice cream, the smell of jasmine, silk, a large house or a good meal and perhaps canary wine (Kant’s own example) to go with it. The pleasure such things give spurs the desire to possess them; we want them to continue to be, along with other things like them, available to us. That is, Kant says, to have a serious interest “in their existence.” It is an attitude we also have toward good things—things that are either useful or morally valuable. Useful things are those that lead to an agreeable end—an ice-cream maker, for instance, if I like ice cream—and I have an interest in their existence, since I desire to possess the ends to which they are the means. Morally valuable things, finally, are valuable in themselves, things we want to be the case for their own sake—which is also to have an interest in their existence. But no such interest enters when we are concerned with the beauty of something: “If the question,” Kant writes, “is whether something is beautiful, one does not want to know whether there is anything that is or that could be at stake, for us or for someone else, in the existence of the thing, but rather how we judge it in mere contemplation.” Is such a thing pleasant to have? Is it good for us to have it? Is it good that it exists? Does it exist in the first place or is it a figment of my imagination? None of that matters. A palace can be beautiful despite being ostentatious, useless, and the product of oppression. If I want to own a painting because I find it beautiful or praise a novel because of its moral point of view, my judgement is undermined:

Everyone must admit that a judgment about beauty in which there is mixed the least interest is very partial and not a pure judgment of taste. One must not be in the least biased in favor of the existence of the thing, but must be entirely indifferent in this respect in order to play the judge in matters of taste.

Aesthetic pleasure is a pleasure we take in things just as they stand before us, without regard to their effects on our sensual, practical,

or moral concerns. Moreover, beauty is not a feature of things themselves: the judgment of taste—“This is beautiful”—does not so much describe its object as it reports the feeling of pleasure we are experiencing. The judgment of taste, he writes, is made only on the basis of “the feeling of pleasure and displeasure, by means of which nothing at all in the object is designated, but in which the subject feels itself as it is affected by the representation.”

Kant’s views on the nature of beauty and art and their relationship to the rest of life are immensely complex. Although he dissociated beauty from desire, he did not himself limit it to the arts; the tradition that followed him, though, emphasized not only what has come to be known as the “disinterestedness” of beauty but, even more, the “autonomy” of art. Neither beauty nor art bears (or should bear) any relation to the everyday world of desires, and both move us (or should move us) as nothing else in that world does. Long before Modernism taught us to prize the difficult, the discomfiting, and the edifying instead of the lovely or the attractive, the beauty that was important to philosophy had already been transformed from the spark of desire to the surest means of its quenching. For Arthur Schopenhauer in the mid-nineteenth century, desire can never be fully satisfied; no matter what we accomplish, we want more, our ultimate goal always hovering, like Tantalus’s fruit, just beyond our reach. Desire is for him unending torture, from which only the contemplation of art can deliver us. But when the beauty of art lifts us above the everyday,

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.

Schopenhauer values art because he thinks of beauty as a liberation from the disturbing travails and the distracting details of ordinary life. He believes that art reveals to us the real nature of things, the

“persistent form” of their species. By focusing on the universal features that things have in common, we are removed from the vicissitudes of the specific and particular; we leave active participation behind and enter the realm of pure contemplation, where pain is absent: “Happiness and unhappiness have vanished; we are no longer the individual; that is forgotten; we are only the pure subject of knowledge. We are only that *one* eye of the world which looks out from all knowing creatures.”

Nothing could be farther from Plato’s celebration of desire in the *Symposium* than Schopenhauer’s hymn to its cessation. For Plato, the only reaction appropriate to beauty is *erōs*—love, the desire to possess it. Moreover, all beautiful things draw us beyond themselves, leading us to recognize and love other, more precious beauties, culminating in the love of the beauty of virtue itself and the happy life of philosophy. Plato agrees that beauty provides knowledge—love and understanding go hand in hand—but he also sees that it gives more: the philosopher is actively involved in the world, moved to act on it by love and able to act well through understanding. He also never leaves the body behind. He describes a long and difficult “ascent” that ends in the knowledge and love of the very Form of Beauty—the essential nature of beauty that is manifested in every beautiful thing in the world and explains why it is beautiful. But the first steps of that philosophic ascent are firmly rooted in the world of the senses—in sexual, paederastic desire. The whole process begins with a man falling in love with a beautiful boy—a common phenomenon in Classical Athens whose dimensions were not only sexual but also social and ethical. In return for the boy’s affection, the older man was expected to provide him with the motivation and knowledge necessary for success and distinction in life—what the Greeks called *aretē* and we often misleadingly understand as moral virtue.

In the phenomenon of paederasty, Plato saw an opportunity not only for the boy but for the man as well, at least if he was philosophically inclined. Such a man would want to understand what made the boy beautiful and sparked his desire. Desire for the boy, then, leads

to a desire for understanding, and that desire leads to the beauty of the human body in general—the features all beautiful bodies share with one another and which, according to Plato’s way of looking at things, make each beautiful individual beautiful. But since the reaction appropriate to beauty is love, a more philosophical man would now want to understand what makes the human body in general beautiful and inspires him to love it and what in turn accounts for the beauty of that, and would go on asking until he reached a full and final answer. Every new step reveals another beauty, and the man’s desire to possess the boy is gradually amplified to a desire for more, and more abstract, things: not just the beauty of the human body but also that of the soul, which is for Plato responsible for bodily beauty; the beauty of the cultures whose laws and institutions produce people with beautiful souls; the beauty of the knowledge and understanding needed to establish such laws and institutions; and, at the end, the single and immutable essence of beauty, its “Form,” which animates the beauty of everything that leads a lover to it—that is, of everything in the world. And though these “higher” beauties are abstract and seemingly impersonal, they never cease to provoke action and inspire desire and longing. Even the very last stage, when the philosopher understands through reason alone what beauty really is, is not a moment of pure contemplation: his understanding is inseparable from the truly successful and happy life he is now able to lead; his desire has not been sublimated into some sort of higher, disembodied phenomenon. Tellingly, the philosopher wants from the Form just what ordinary men who know no better want of beautiful boys: intercourse (*sunousia*)—without a second thought, Plato applies to the highest point of this philosophic ascent the very same word he uses for its lowest. In that way, he reminds us that beauty cannot be sundered from understanding or desire. The most abstract and intellectual beauty provokes the urge to possess it no less than the most sensual inspires the passion to come to know it better. Any satisfactory account of beauty must acknowledge that fundamental fact. No easy distinction between body and spirit, inner and outer, superficial and deep can accommodate its complexity.

That complexity is just what Schopenhauer refuses to accommodate. He wants to exclude passion and desire from the serious, contemplative aspects of life, and worst of all is sexual desire, which lurks behind every manifestation of love:

All amorousness is rooted in the sexual impulse alone, is in fact absolutely only a more closely determined, specialized, and indeed, in the strictest sense, individualized sexual impulse, however ethereally it may deport itself. . . . It is the ultimate goal of almost all human effort; it has an unfavorable influence on the most important affairs, interrupts every hour the most serious occupations, and sometimes perplexes for a while even the greatest minds. . . . It appears on the whole as a malevolent demon, striving to pervert, to confuse, and to overthrow everything.

Although, unlike many other philosophers, Schopenhauer pays serious attention to sexuality, he does so only to denounce it with an almost desperate determination. He builds a great wall between beauty and what we might call attractiveness or sensual appeal (another form of the distinction between the inner and the outer) and insists that even the body's beauty cannot be discerned unless we divorce perception from desire. As long as we find someone's body attractive we are failing to see it aesthetically, by which he means contemplating it as if it were a landscape or a work of art—disinterestedly, without any regard for its effects on us or anything else in the world. He admits that it is hard to appreciate the human form in that way. "Amorousness" is a constant danger and so is the body itself, even when it is merely being represented. He rejects nude figures "calculated to excite lustful feelings in the beholder" because they demolish aesthetic contemplation and defeat the purpose of painting or sculpture. He even finds still life painting that depicts "edible objects, [which] necessarily excite the appetite" distasteful: "This is just a stimulation of the will which puts an end to any aesthetic contemplation of an object" (fruit, however, turns out to be acceptable: in art, he believes, we see it only as an organic development of the flower, not as food!). The will "springs from lack, from deficiency, and thus from suffering" and gives only ephemeral

satisfaction, “like the alms thrown to a beggar, which relieve him today so that his misery may be prolonged until tomorrow.” To want is to lack and is a source of unrelieved misery. Wherever desire is present, there is also pain. Pain can be avoided only when desire has been left behind, in the pure contemplation of beauty, which shields us, if only for a moment, from the will’s incessant demands.

It is hard to imagine a starker opposition. Schopenhauer is appalled by the fact that as long as desire persists, something always remains beyond its reach. In that sense, desire can never be satisfied; desire fulfilled is desire killed, and destroying it altogether is the only way of escaping its insatiable demands. Plato celebrates it. He personifies *erōs* as the child of two gods, Resource and Poverty, whose features he combines: “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 [because of his mother] anything he gets close to slips away, and so he is never completely without means nor is he ever rich.” It is exactly that combination that makes *erōs* as wily in the pursuit of beauty and wisdom as he is unable to possess them fully: both lover and philosopher. Where Schopenhauer sees the pain of deficiency, Plato finds the hope of fulfillment. So long as we find anything beautiful, we feel that we have not yet exhausted what it has to offer, and that forward-looking element is, as we shall see, inseparable from the judgment of beauty.

For Plato and the long tradition that came after him beauty is the object of love, the quarry of *erōs*. But beauty can be deceptive, and love has its dark side: who knows what beauty will bring eventually to light? who knows what we find beautiful and why we love as we do? Plato and his followers tried to answer such questions and escape the dangers they indicate by means of a vast philosophical picture, eventually appropriated by a current within Christian thought, according to which beauty, when it is properly pursued, provides a path to moral perfection and is aligned with goodness and virtue. But the sense that a higher authority—reason or God—secured that alignment was gradually lost and the picture gradually faded, only the dangers of beauty remaining in the traces it left behind. The desires beauty sparks and the



Figure 1
Masolino de Panicale, *The Original Sin*, c. 1427, S. Maria del Carmine, Florence, Italy

pleasures it promises began to seem dubious. Beauty itself was often taken to be the seductive face of evil, a delightful appearance masking the horrid skull beneath the skin. And even if it was not always the face of *evil*, once its connection with goodness was severed, beauty was still always a *face* (fig. 1), capable of promising one thing and delivering another: a mere surface and for that reason alone morally questionable. It became a feature and, if there can be virtues in appearance, a virtue of appearance and no longer a subject worthy of philosophy. Although the word continued to be used, beauty itself was replaced by the aesthetic, which, completely isolated as it is from all relationships with the rest of the world, promises nothing that is not already present in it, is incapable of deception, and provokes no desire.

Everyone knows, of course, that works of art actually can elicit the most extraordinary reactions. Pliny tells us that Praxiteles' statue of the Cnidian Aphrodite caused such lust in one man that the stains that marked the consummation of his passion were still visible in the marble hundreds of years later. Titian's *Venus of Urbino* (fig. 2) is "the foulest, the vilest, the obscenest picture the world possesses," Mark Twain



Figure 2
Titian (Tiziano Vecellio), *Venus of Urbino*, c. 1538, Uffizi, Florence, Italy

complains: “It isn’t that she is naked and stretched out on a bed—no, it is the attitude of one of her arms and hand. If I ventured to describe that attitude there would be a fine howl—but there the Venus lies for anybody to gloat over that wants to—and there she has a right to lie, for she is a work of art, and art has its privileges.” But although there are innumerable such cases, it has always seemed easier to believe that desire is less ardent when it comes to paintings or books than when real bodies are involved. For that reason, although the erotic elements that have always been part of our love for the arts have not always disqualified the works that provoke them, it is now the conventional wisdom that they are always irrelevant to aesthetic appreciation.

If beauty inspires the desire to possess and own its object or to use it for some further purpose, especially if it involves sex, it might seem reasonable to believe that those who value art for its beauty are either philistines or perverts. Philistines attracted to the beauty of a painting would be treating it no better than a carpet or a sofa—an expensive piece of private or corporate decoration—or else a trophy—a yacht or a private jet or, for some men, a wife. Perverts attracted to the beauty of its subject would be treating it pornographically. Pliny’s young man knew very well what he was doing with Aphrodite’s statue. Others may be less knowing. The men who admired the sprawling, naked, and vulnerable women in many nineteenth-century paintings (fig. 3) did not have to be aware that “fed in their youth with fantasies of woman as the all-suffering household nun and constrained in their own sexual development by images created by their fathers, [they] were now seeking relief in daydreams of invited violence, of an abandonment to aggression for which they could not be held personally responsible.” Or one could be a little of both philistine and pervert, trying to claim possession of both painting and subject, as Charles II may have done by means of the portrait of Nell Gwynne painted for him by Sir Peter Lely (fig. 4).

Writing early in the twentieth century, Clive Bell extended Schopenhauer’s radical version of Kant’s idea of disinterestedness even further when he declared that representation is altogether immaterial to art: “To appreciate a work of art we need bring with us nothing from life, no



Figure 3
Arthur Hacker, *Pelagia and Philammon*, 1887, Walker Art Gallery, National Museums, Liverpool, UK



Figure 4
Sir Peter Lely. *Portrait of Nell Gwynne [1650–87] as Venus, with her son, Charles Beauclerk [1670–1726] as Cupid* (oil on canvas), Army and Navy Club, London, UK

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.” Bell was not moved by Schopenhauer’s metaphysical anxieties. His purpose was to defend and justify what his British contemporaries considered as deformations of nature in the painting of Cezanne, Matisse, and Gauguin, and he urged them not to pay attention to what these works were about but to respond to their formal characteristics—what he called “significant form”—instead. But since representational content—bodies, objects, recognizable situations more generally—is where the desires prompted by works of art are focused, his rejection of representation resulted in an even stronger barrier between the aesthetic and the beautiful. Bell was quite explicit about it. Significant form is the only cause of that “peculiar emotion provoked by works of art” that is characteristic of a correct aesthetic response. “Beautiful,” by contrast, “is more often than not synonymous with ‘desirable,’” and for that reason “the word does not necessarily connote any aesthetic reaction whatever.” And since most people “are apt to apply the epithet ‘beautiful’ to objects that do not provoke that peculiar [aesthetic] emotion produced by works of art . . . it would be misleading to call by the same name the quality that does.”

Unlike Kant and like Schopenhauer, Bell confined beauty—“real” beauty, the beauty that matters, anyway—to the arts. Even more radically, he thought that significant form can distinguish works of art from everything else in the world because it is a *feature* that belongs only to the former and never to the latter. Things either do or don’t have significant form, and the judgment of taste does not simply distinguish things that elicit a particular feeling from those that don’t, as Kant had thought, but also things that are works of art from things that aren’t—one kind of thing, that is, from every other: the judgment of taste has now become equivalent to saying, “This is a work of art.”

However inadequate Bell’s formalism is as a general theory of art, his way of handling beauty was not a single critic’s isolated gesture. It was made in tandem with Roger Fry’s extraordinarily influential, less polemical and more sophisticated, privileging of “design” over

content, and it was repeated, for example, by the philosopher R. G. Collingwood, who, precisely because he agreed with Plato that beauty is the object of love, 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 . . . aesthetic theory is not the theory of beauty but of art.”

With that, Schopenhauer’s version of beauty, which extended radically Kant’s idea of the aesthetic and opened an unbridgeable chasm between beauty and the will, gained absolute dominion over art. Beauty as Plato had described it and most of us experience it, beauty that inspires passion and desire, the source of the keenest pleasure and the deepest pain, was exiled to the everyday. In 1948, during the glory years of Abstract Expressionism in New York, Barnett Newman said it all in one famous sentence: “The impulse of modern art was to destroy beauty.”

A Feature of Appearance?

It was an impulse common to the arts, to criticism, and to philosophy. It made its way from slogans and programmatic statements to everyday practice. It affected the look and feel, the sound and structure of what artists produced, the goals and standards of each individual art, the role of the arts in the economy of life and their relationship to their audience. It also marked the complete victory of a particular conception of the nature and role of criticism—a conception that had been gaining power in step with the rise of criticism itself as an institution since the middle of the eighteenth century, when both artists and audiences began to grow at an unprecedented pace.

At that time, both the Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture in Paris, which had been founded in 1648, and the newly established Royal Academy of Art in London began to take an active role in making art available to a wide public whose tastes they were eager to shape. Attendance at various exhibitions, most notably the Paris

Salon, which was faced with so many submissions that it established a jury system in 1748, increased year by year. The new public, which was mostly drawn from the emerging middle classes, was much less familiar with the arts than the much smaller group of rich patrons and connoisseurs of the past. Much of what they knew came from newspapers or magazines like the *Review*, *The Tatler*, and *The Spectator* in London or *Journal de Paris* and *Mercure de France* in Paris. Critics, among whom Samuel Johnson and Denis Diderot are probably the best known, became the prime mediators between this new public and the arts that were increasingly absorbing its attention.

The elements of the model that came to dominate the understanding of criticism were already in place in the educational system of Rome at the time of Cicero, perhaps the earliest effort at a humanistic education, which was designed to prepare cultured and eloquent men suited for civic life. Once they had completed their primary education, the sons of wealthy families (and a few gifted daughters, who, however, could not continue past that stage) came under the supervision of a teacher called the *grammaticus*. They mostly studied Greek and Latin poetry and they became familiar with the works assigned them in four consecutive (though not always clearly distinct) stages. They began with *lectio*—elementary reading, distinguishing individual words (manuscripts at the time did not include spaces), inserting the proper marks of punctuation, and memorizing. *Lectio* was followed by *emendatio*, the effort to establish the authentic parts of each text and correct various errors according to principles they were taught concurrently. Once the text was established, *enarratio* produced interpretative commentaries on various words, lines, and extended passages. And once interpretation was complete, it was followed by *judicium*, a considered judgment on a work's value that came at the very end of this process.

And there, more or less, it has remained. Isn't the purpose of criticism, after all, to use the interpretation of a work of art in order to reach a judgment of its value, and doesn't criticism then arrive at its conclusion? Why do we argue with one another about the arts? Isn't it in order to decide the quality of a work, an exhibition, or an artist? Criticism enables an audience to confront its object with confidence,

understand it, and, finally, determine its value. Although most of it is interpretation, its result is a verdict, a little bit like a civil or criminal trial that places the critic in the position of a judge.

All that seems very far from the issues regarding beauty with which we began, and, in any case, next to the artistic upheavals of the last two hundred years, nothing that happened to criticism can seem nearly as important. In fact, though, criticism has not only followed, it has actually cleared the way for the changing role of beauty in art. The *Critique of the Power of Judgment* begins with the words, “In order to *decide* whether or not something is beautiful . . .” and that decision is exactly what judgment—the judgment of taste—expresses. Despite the nuances and complications of Kant’s own position, it is now almost an article of faith that the end of our interaction with the arts comes when we are in a position to make a judgment of value. Arnold Isenberg, the most important American aesthetician of the mid-twentieth century, endorsed that idea and claimed that the purpose of criticism “is the evaluation of the immediate experience”; Monroe Beardsley took it for granted in his influential introduction to aesthetics: critics, he wrote, “are interested in describing and interpreting works of art because they want to evaluate them.” This Kantian view is the starting point of many philosophical theories of aesthetic value, and finds a clear expression in Alan Goldman’s book on that issue: “The purpose of interpretation itself [is] to guide perception toward maximal appreciation and therefore fair evaluation of a work.” It has connived, as we will see, in purging beauty both from the arts and from aesthetics; but even Mary Mothersill, in her ambitious and spirited defense of beauty, agrees that criticism aims at “removing 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.”

The position of judgment in criticism is in real conflict with the place of beauty in art. We can only judge a work after we have given it an adequate interpretation: “An evaluation can only be argued for by means of a detailed description and interpretation of a work.” Even Isenberg’s “immediate experience” is not a first reaction but something

that comes later, when we arrive at an interpretation we can accept and “with a sense of illumination we say, ‘Yes, that’s it exactly,’ . . . giving expression to the *change* which has taken place in our aesthetic apprehension.” But it takes time to develop an interpretation—sometimes a very long time indeed. And so the value that interpretation reveals, whatever it is, can’t possibly be what Joseph Addison had in mind when he observed how easy it is to experience the pleasures of the imagination: “It is but opening the Eye, and the Scene enters. . . . We are struck, we know not how, with the Symmetry of any thing we see, and immediately assent to the beauty of an Object without enquiring into the particular Causes and Occasions of it.” If the beauty of things strikes us as soon as we are exposed to them, beauty can’t be the same as the value that criticism is supposed to determine through the interpretations it offers. Johann Joachim Winckelmann was in love with the beauty of ancient Greek sculpture, but in his *History of Ancient Art* (1764), the founding work of art history, he introduced it in terms that contrasted with its traditional conception and foreshadowed Kant’s understanding of the aesthetic: “The first view of beautiful statues is . . . like the first glance over the open sea; we gaze on it bewildered, and with undistinguishing eyes, but after we have contemplated it repeatedly the soul becomes more tranquil and the eye more quiet, and capable of separating the whole into its particulars.”

Both experience and a long philosophical tradition stand behind the idea that the effect of beauty is immediate. For Plato, who stands at that tradition’s origins, beauty is the most arresting and “lovable” of the ideal Forms because unlike the others, which are grasped only through reason, it alone is perceived through the eyes: we see it, “sparkling, through the clearest of our senses.” But the very immediacy that makes beauty the first step to the rest of the Forms and the good life for Plato makes it irrelevant to art for Arthur Danto, one of the tradition’s most recent exponents. Beauty as we ordinarily think of it is perceived through the senses; it is “really as obvious as blue: one does not have to work at seeing it when it is there.” But the beauty that is important to art is only disclosed gradually and “requires discernment and critical intelligence.” That wrenches beauty away from aesthetic

value. Since ordinary beauty and the beauty of art are so different, Danto follows the lead of Collingwood and Bell: “Why use the word beauty at all in the latter case?”

As a matter of fact, we don’t—we certainly use it less often than we might believe, as Wittgenstein remarked: “It is remarkable that in real life, when aesthetic judgements are made, aesthetic adjectives such as ‘beautiful,’ ‘fine,’ etc., play hardly any role at all. . . . The words you use are more akin to ‘right’ and ‘correct’ (as these words are used in ordinary speech) than to ‘beautiful’ and ‘lovely.’” Although Wittgenstein’s point has been often repeated, along with J. L. Austin’s advice to pay more attention to “the dainty and the dumpy” than to the beautiful, we will see that not using the *word* for beauty and not being affected by beauty *itself* are two very different things. Still, it is not difficult to understand why using the word might seem dangerous. That was the danger Addison had in mind when he warned his readers to limit themselves to the genuine pleasures of the imagination, “find in them such a satisfaction as a wise man would not blush to take,” and avoid the sensual delights that “suffer the mind to sink into . . . negligence and remissness.”

The problem Addison faced is that if “but opening the Eye” is enough for beauty to strike, everyone whose eyes are working will perceive every kind of beauty—simple or complex, high or low, vulgar or refined—and its rewards at the same time. But that makes it impossible to separate the subtle appeal of the “serious” arts from the crude attraction of the “popular,” or, for that matter, the satisfactions of the arts generally from the seductions of the everyday. Imagine, for example, that Thomas Kinkade’s *Dogwood Chapel* seems to me as beautiful as Van Gogh’s *Church at Auvers-sur-Oise* (fig. 5, *Plate 1*) seems to you and that both of us experience the pleasure these works produce in the same amount of time. How can we now distinguish between the upper regions and the lower depths? How does the thrill I get from Kinkade differ from your admiration of Van Gogh? You may try to explain the difference by contrasting the harsh and emphatic brushwork of *Church at Auvers-sur-Oise*, which contributes to the sense of anguish that haunts Van Gogh’s late works, to the hazy



Figure 5
Vincent van Gogh, *Church at Auvers-sur-Oise*, 1890, Musée d’Orsay, Paris, France

Unfortunately, Thomas Kinkade has refused to give his permission to print an illustration of *Dogwood Chapel*. Interested readers may want to consult one of the following web sites for a version of the painting: http://www.kinkadecapitola.com/dogwood_chapel.htm or http://www.christcenteredmall.com/stores/art/kinkade/dogwood_chapel.htm



Figure 6
Balthasar Klossowski de Rola (Balthus),
Therese Dreaming, 1938, The
Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

smoothness that seems almost designed to rob *Dogwood Chapel* of any hint of individuality. Its shifting, snake-like outline makes Van Gogh's church seem unstable and sinuous and gives it an air both threatened and threatening, while Kinkade's chapel, nesting comfortably within a postcard-like scene of stream, bridge, forest, and distant peaks, is what every tourist might expect to see in some country that doesn't exist during a trip that is never taken. Lit brightly from above, Kinkade's sky may remind the cultured viewer in you of Tiepolo or Luca di Giordano, but its only effect is to reinforce the picture's mawkish sense of comfort (God is in His heaven and all's well with the world), while the gradual darkening of the upper sky in *Church at Auvers-sur-Oise* announces an impending doom, perhaps Van Gogh's suicide barely a month after completing the picture. All that is fine. But is it more than just talk, unrelated to the original experience? If the experience of beauty is already complete, no sophisticated analysis can affect it, and the aesthete's urbane appreciation begins to look like a deceitful version of the lowbrow's sentimental bliss.

Imagine now that both of us are looking at *Therese Dreaming* (fig. 6), which, like all of Balthus's paintings of young girls, hovers near the pornographic, and that we are both attracted to the picture at the same time. I can see how it affects you by your sly smile, and that makes me uncomfortable. I want to show—to you and to me both—that it appeals to me in a different way, subtle and refined. I may admit that the picture is charged with eroticism (but what does “eroticism” mean in this context? I am tempted to say that it provides a way of claiming that *others*—not I—will find it exciting and that my awareness of its power should raise some questions about my sincerity). I may also cite a critic who admires it because “the clear white of the girl's skirts and undergarments surrounds her legs like a paper cornucopia wrapped around a romantic bouquet of flowers [while] echoes of Morandi and Cézanne are sounded in the simple vases” in the background. But, once again, it won't be easy to convince you (or, I suspect, myself) that the pleasure we both felt was in my case discerning enjoyment while you were in the grip of vulgar lust.

What strikes us first about things in the world is their appearance. If beauty, then, strikes as swiftly as Addison believed, it is a feature of appearance. Let's leave aside for now the question whether that, as many people believe, makes beauty "subjective" and closer to the "agreeable" than Kant would ever have wanted. Let's turn instead to the problem that appearance, according to yet another tradition that goes back to Plato, is the foremost object of desire, especially desire of the most questionable kind, rooted in sense and sensuality. The desires elicited by how things look, and not by what they really are, aim at pleasures that Plato says are neither "true" nor "pure." It is the philosophers, who know the nature of things, who experience the "truest" pleasures and enjoy them without becoming their slaves. Like illusionist paintings, the pleasures of appearance mislead their pursuers about nature and value. If beauty is confined to appearance (that, by the way, is not at all Plato's view), it can't be a reliable guide to the nature of things. If it is limited to the equivocal desires appearance elicits, it can't be an authentic mark of their value. It is not only superficial but also seductive.

Not everyone, of course, sees the harm of that. Many defenders of beauty agree with its opponents that it belongs to appearance, and for that reason see appearance in a positive light. In the fact that design has now become essential to every aspect of everyday life, Virginia Postrel, for example, sees a victory for aesthetics, which she takes to be "the way we communicate through the senses . . . the art of creating reactions without words, through the look and feel of people, places, and things." She considers it a great achievement of contemporary culture to have finally realized that "surfaces matter, in and of themselves." For her, design provides a way of differentiating between different objects that perform the same function equally well, and she values it because she believes that it furnishes their owners with a means for expressing their individual character through their possessions. In what is surely the best known part of her book she declares that "the toilet brush is an unusually pure example of aesthetic demands. . . . A brush hidden in the corner of the bathroom, a bathroom your neighbor will quite likely never see, is surely just a brush, an object acquired for its own sake. . . . The look and feel of your toilet brush are just that—sensory



Figure 7
Michael Graves, *Toilet Brush*

pleasures, expressions of what you find appealing” (fig. 7). Although it is central to the argument I will be making in this book that we need to understand both beauty and aesthetics as generously as possible, this seems to me more like profligacy—not because toilet brushes are incapable of expressing a personality but because ownership is not by itself enough for that purpose. Aesthetic preferences are essential to the expression of character—that is one of their most important functions—but to do so they must fit into a coherent whole. My toilet brush—or, for that matter, my Tuomo Manninen photograph—may tell you something about my social class or my financial resources, but neither one manifests anything more specific about me. Character is manifested only through a pattern of choices, and not everything that is part of my household is also part of a pattern.

We will have to look at that question carefully later on. For the moment, I want to point out that not everyone agrees that aesthetics has won the day. The critic Dave Hickey, for example, locates beauty squarely within appearance but is far less optimistic about the fate of surfaces and the place of beauty in contemporary art. On the contrary, he believes that the most powerful figures in the art world are people who “distrust the very idea of appearance and distrust most of all the appearance of images that, in virtue of the pleasure they give, are efficacious in their own right.” Hickey, who lacks Postrel’s wide-eyed enthusiasm for the ethical benefits of beauty, values it simply for the pleasure it gives. That does not mean that he thinks it serves no other function. On the contrary, Hickey attributes to beauty a crucial role: it is, he claims, visual rhetoric, intended to offer pleasure to a picture’s beholders in order to capture their attention and dispose them positively toward the message the picture communicates. But rhetoric can be deceptive, and the content of the image may be anything but benign. Beauty encourages the audience to “valorize” the content of the image, but if that content is indeed “in need of valorization” the value of beauty cannot lie in what it serves to communicate. It consists, Hickey argues, only in the pleasure it provides and that makes it valuable in itself, whatever its consequences.

But that is just what beauty cannot be for those who value messengers only if they welcome their messages. Some—like Dada, which

against the background of the Great War declared that “Goethe and Schiller and Beauty added up to killing and bloodshed and murder” or some strands of feminism faced with the glorification of glamor—take the radical view that it is *bad* to be beautiful. Others, more moderately, simply refuse to believe that being beautiful is always *good*. They do not regard beauty as a virtue in its own right, its mere presence enough to make its bearer more valuable than it would be without it. Arthur Danto, for instance, locates beauty wholly on the surface of things, and finds many great works of art beautiful but does not believe that they are ever great *because* they are beautiful. That is for him the great lesson of Modernism: “The discovery that something can be good art without being beautiful [is] one of the great conceptual clarifications of twentieth-century philosophy of art, though it was made exclusively by artists.”

On such an understanding, beauty—what we might call “good looks”—can sometimes be a definite fault. It is exactly because their beauty seems inappropriate to their content that Sebastião Salgado’s photographs of the displaced (fig. 8), Mapplethorpe’s depictions of sadomasochism (fig. 9), Bouguereau’s fantasies of naked women



Figure 9
Robert Mapplethorpe, *Elliot and Dominick*, 1979



Figure 8
Sebastião Salgado, *Rwandan refugee camp of Benako, Tanzania*, 1994.
© Sebastião Salgado / Amazonas / nbpictures



Figure 10
William-Adolphe Bouguereau,
The Nymphaeum, 1878, The Haggin
Museum, Stockton, CA



Figure 11
Raffaello di Sanzio (Raphael), *The
Transfiguration*, 1518–20, Pinacoteca,
Vatican Museums, Vatican State

(fig. 10) or even Raphael's visionary *Transfiguration* (fig. 11) are objectionable to people with particular moral, political, and religious sensibilities.

The view that the beauty of art is all on the surface mirrors some common sentiments about the beauty of people: We are attracted to beautiful people; we often admire them; we sometimes fall in love with them. But looks can be misleading and in the long run they always fade away. Unless our lovers are intelligent, spirited, kind, or understanding, unless their “inner” character is attractive, love is bound to fade away as well. Beauty alone cannot sustain it, although it may sometimes give love its spark. But most of the unattractive people in the world, which is to say most of the people in the world, have been loved without it. In the end, beauty is as irrelevant to the genuine worth of human beings as it is alien to the real value of the arts.

None of these common sentiments is true. Beauty and love are much more intimately connected, as Plato knew, but before we try to say how, we must follow this line of thought to its conclusion. Once it is agreed that the most ravishing picture is not a good picture, if it is good, because it is ravishing, and that the ravishing is all done by its surface, it is natural to take a further step. If the value of a work of art does not lie in its appearance, it must depend on features that lie more deeply within it. It is therefore difficult both to discern and to appreciate, and it is revealed only through the laborious efforts of criticism. That step leads directly into the heart of a certain understanding of the various arts of Modernism.

Modernist Voices

One of the central characteristics of Modernism, both critics and admirers agree, was an effort—largely successful—to detach the value of art from its appearance. Some of the most representative modernist works illustrate, among other things, a sense that neither the appearance of the world nor the surface of a painting is where their value lies. Various movements and individuals converged on that idea from many independent directions. Kasimir Malevich, for example,

thought that figurative painting was “doubly” dead because “first it depicts culture in decay and, second, it kills reality in the very act of depicting it.” His *Black Square* (fig. 12) was much more complex than it seemed: “The world as feeling . . . the ideas—that is in essence the content of art. A square is not a picture, just as a switch or a plug is not electricity. Anyone who . . . saw the icon as . . . a picture was mistaken. For he mistook the switch, the plug, for a picture of electricity.” Wassily Kandinsky was equally explicit. “Color makes a momentary and superficial impression on a soul whose sensibility is slightly developed. . . . But to a more sensitive soul the effect of colors is deeper and intensely moving. . . . They produce a correspondent spiritual vibration, and it is only as a step towards this spiritual vibration that the physical impression is of importance.”

That kind of disregard for the obvious and the physical is not limited to abstraction. Arthur Danto refuses to see any connection with beauty—artistic beauty, that is—even in the phantasmagoric colors of Matisse. He doesn’t think that Matisse’s bold early work, *Blue Nude* (fig. 13, *Plate 2*), could possibly be considered beautiful:

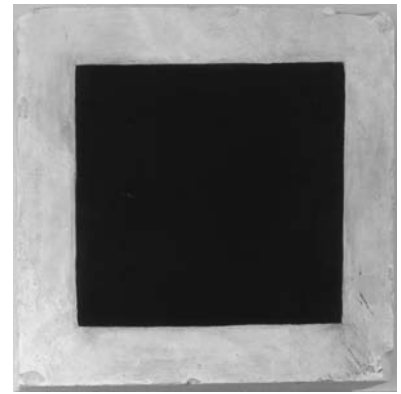


Figure 12
Kazimir Malevich, *Black Square*,
c. 1923–30, Musée National d’Art
Moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou,
Paris, France



Figure 13
Henri Matisse, *Blue Nude*, 1907, The Baltimore Museum of Art:
The Cone Collection, Baltimore, MD



Figure 14
Pablo Picasso, *Seated Bather* [*La Baigneuse*], 1930. Oil on canvas, 64 ¼ x 51". Mrs. Simon Guggenheim Fund. (82.1950) The Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY, USA. Reproduced by permission from Art Resource, NY. Pablo Picasso (1881–1973) © ARS, NY. Photo credit: Digital Image © The Museum of Modern Art / Licensed by SCALA / Art Resource

When one says that *Blue Nude* is beautiful, one is merely expressing admiration for its strength and power, for Matisse's decision to present us with a powerful painting rather than a pleasant one, to draw our attention to the painting rather than to the woman. . . . One has . . . to work at seeing a painting as good despite its not being beautiful, when one had been supposing that beauty was the way artistic goodness was to be understood.

Matisse, I think, would not have agreed. When he said that in *Blue Nude* “it was no longer the woman that was beautiful, but the picture,” he didn't mean that the picture was merely strong and powerful, but he also didn't have to mean simply that his picture was good-looking. William Carlos Williams, too, seems to have found beauty in the painting: “In the french sun, on the french grass in a room on Fifth Ave. [he saw *Blue Nude* in New York], a french girl lies and smiles at the sun without seeing us.” Beauty is not identical with an attractive appearance, although it is not nearly as independent of it as our easy dichotomies between “inner” and “outer,” “sensual” and “moral,” “physical” and “spiritual,” or “ordinary” and “artistic” make it comfortable to believe. Their relationship is much more vexed and complex: beauty is always manifested in appearance without ever being limited to it, and I will have more to say about that later in this book.

In the meantime, though, I want to turn to Danto's reasons for thinking that *Blue Nude* can't be beautiful. He gives two: one is that Matisse painted as blue what in reality was pink; the other, that he painted as hideous what in reality might have been beautiful (but what if it wasn't?). The first assumes that in order to be beautiful a representation must be faithful to the appearance of its subject (else why question the color of the woman's body in the painting?), the second, that the perception of beauty—unlike, say, the perception of power—is always accompanied by pleasure (else why say that Matisse created a powerful picture “rather than” a pleasant one?). Both seem puzzling to me: the first, because it is often necessary to falsify appearances in order to produce a beautiful representation; the second, because beauty elicits reactions that are much too complex to be

thought of simply as pleasure. Still, since everyone who has thought about beauty seems to agree that its connection with pleasure is obvious, it would be fair to say that if, like Danto, you believe that Modernism pushed beauty aside but, unlike him, you find no comparable satisfaction in power, you will understand why Dave Hickey laments “the continuing persistence of dated modernist conventions concerning . . . the inconsequence of ‘beauty’ in twentieth-century images” and the loss of figuration and illusionistic space that has left us “content to slither through [the] flatland of Baudelairian modernity.”

Take away Danto’s exuberance and Hickey’s melancholy (not to mention Matisse’s doubts), and it does seem hard to deny that there is some truth in such accounts of Modernism. Already in 1907, before Roger Fry and Clive Bell forced a large international audience to question the importance of beauty and Dada tried to produce art out of ugliness, Picasso had begun his lifelong game of hide-and-seek with beauty in *Les Femmes d’Alger*. It was a game he sometimes played by recreating famous works by other painters—*Las Meninas*, *Déjeuner sur l’herbe*, *The Rape of the Sabines*—in his own vocabulary. Leo Steinberg has shown that a technical problem—how to depict a body simultaneously both from the front and the back—was at the heart of Picasso’s many versions of Delacroix’s *Femmes d’Alger*, but, whatever else they are about, all his great works in this genre are also about eliminating the traditional figures of beauty from their models. Nowhere is that more obvious than in his *Seated Bather* (fig. 14, *Plate 3*), which must surely be a version of Bouguereau’s own version of the same popular subject (fig. 15, *Plate 4*).

The open picture plane and spatial recession of Bouguereau’s picture issue an invitation to the viewer and encourage him—this is primarily a painting for men—to enjoy the radiant sensuality of the young woman’s flesh, soft and bright against the dark craggy background. Exuding innocence and guile in equal parts, she seems aware of being watched, and her look is both somewhat embarrassed and also a bit gratified. Her legs are drawn close to her body, perhaps in an attempt to cover her nakedness, but her pose is too carefully arranged and her face is too composed to convince that she doesn’t realize that her right breast,



Figure 15
William-Adolphe Bouguereau, *Seated Bather*, 1884, the Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, Williamstown, Massachusetts, USA

to which the eye is drawn by her midriff, creased by the effort to clasp her arms together over her legs, is partially and invitingly exposed. Her shoulders, which are slightly hunched, and her pensive expression give her an air of vulnerability—although, if you look carefully, you may notice the barest shadow of a knowing smile on her face.

Bouguereau himself may have been thinking of another painter here: his bather is a tame, domesticated version of Victorine Meurent in Manet's *Déjeuner sur l'herbe* (fig. 16). Her semi-abstracted look is



Figure 16
Edouard Manet, *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe* (*Luncheon on the grass*), 1863, Musée d'Orsay, Paris, France

worlds away from Victorine's unyieldingly self-conscious stare. Her body displays the same slight flaws as Victorine's, but their effect is altogether different. Manet, like Courbet, had used the wrinkles and pouches that seldom mar the academic nude as insults—insults to his audience and the type of painting they were familiar with. Victorine's imperfections (imperfections, that is, relative only to the academy's archetypes) were designed to jolt the audience, especially the men among them, into acknowledging that what they were enjoying was not a painted canvas or an idealized figure with an edifying message but a naked woman of their own place and time: their pleasure was nowhere near as innocent as they would have liked to think. But Bouguereau's picture, like his bather, is fully at his viewer's service. Instead of thrusting her into the harsh light of the everyday, the folds in her midriff are a sign of her innocence and delicacy and the response they ask for is not prurient but tender. The painting aims to provoke in its audience a desire to possess the girl at the same time that it encourages in them the urge to protect her. If we leave aside what might be a disturbing allusion to the blue veil characteristic of the iconography of the Madonna, it is clear that the picture is contrived to give pleasure without troubling its male viewers (or the women who would also inevitably see it). Its purpose is to make things easy, to stir a sensual desire but let it emerge as a generous, compassionate impulse.

Picasso inverts all that, beginning with the pose of his bather, which is a mirror image of Bouguereau's, accurate down to the high arch of her forward foot. Bouguereau painted his *Seated Bather* for his audience; Picasso, we could say, *against* them. Moving his figure forward, Picasso closes the picture plane, and the painting no longer invites its viewer to enter and look; on the contrary, it is now the predatory, threatening figure, almost protruding from the canvas, that is doing the watching. Bouguereau's soft, light-colored flesh has become a collection of stone-like limbs darker than the background against which they are placed—the darkness from which the girl might have to be saved has been transformed into a peaceful view of sea and sky marred by a menacing presence. Picasso has rotated the body of his figure toward the front of the composition, with legs spread apart,

and lets her expose everything Bouguereau had primly concealed. But because her face (if her saw-like teeth and her blank eyes add up to a face) can't possibly express anything, it is impossible to tell if she sits in plain view because, like an insect, she lives in a world to which human observers are altogether irrelevant or because—as the aggressive forward thrust of her right leg may suggest—she is daring the viewer to draw near as he would have approached the gentle girl of which she is the sinister transformation. This picture makes nothing easy. A casual viewer wouldn't think to ask himself why he should rest his eyes on Bouguereau's bather (at least if he had no moral objections to nudes or aesthetic ones to academic painting), but Picasso's makes you ask why you should look at her at all. If this *Seated Bather* is worth looking at, it can't be because of its beauty.

The modernist arts and the rhetoric that surrounds them made much of the idea that artistic value, even when they called it “beauty” and connected it with pleasure, is independent of beauty and pleasure as we usually think of them. The confusion of terms made it even more difficult to give this obscure idea precise expression, forcing Guillaume Apollinaire, one of the first apologists of Modernism, to resort to the manner of negative theology:

Modern art rejects all the means of pleasing that were employed by the greatest artists of the past: the perfect representation of the human figure, voluptuous nudes, carefully finished details, etc. . . . Today's art is austere. . . . If the aim of painting has remained what it always was—namely, to give pleasure to the eye—the works of the new painters require the viewer to find in them a different kind of pleasure from the one he can just as easily find in the spectacle of nature.

A picture like Botticelli's *Birth of Venus* appeals easily to large groups of anonymous viewers from many backgrounds, either because that is exactly what beauty, as visual rhetoric, does or else because, having become available to a large public for various other reasons, it gradually became part of the standards of what counts as a beautiful painting. In either case, beauty goes hand in hand with drawing power, which

is one reason why Modernism, which exploited the popular arts but was never itself intended for a popular audience, looked at it with disdain. It was not out of respect for the public that Stéphane Mallarmé, whose views on art and literature established what counted as advanced art in France in the late nineteenth century, urged concern for the audience:

Every work of art, apart from its inner treasure, should provide some sort of outward—or even indifferent—meaning through its words. A certain deference should be shown the people: for, after all, they *are* lending out their language, and the work is going to turn it to some unexpected account.

Often self-consciously difficult, the modernist arts shifted the burden of communication from the work of art to its audience. It was no longer the work that had to attract its audience and bring it around, but the audience itself that became responsible for taking the initiative and making an effort to understand it and establish its value—a value that, since the work was seldom immediately appealing, must for a certain length of time be taken for granted. Genuine value is not obvious pleasure: the obvious is common. It is no better than decoration, and decoration, the Viennese architect Adolph Loos sneered in his famous essay of 1908, is fit only for the low, the primitive, and the deprived:

I can accept the African's ornament, the Persian's, the Slovak peasant woman's, my shoemaker's, for it provides the high point of their existence, which they have no other means of achieving. *We* have the art that has superseded ornament. After all the toil and tribulations of the day, we can go to hear Beethoven or *Tristan*. My shoemaker cannot. I must not take his religion away from him, for I have nothing to put in its place. But anyone who goes to the *Ninth* and then sits down to design a wallpaper pattern is either a fraud or a degenerate.

As long as we continue to identify beauty with attractiveness and attractiveness with a power of pleasing quickly and without much

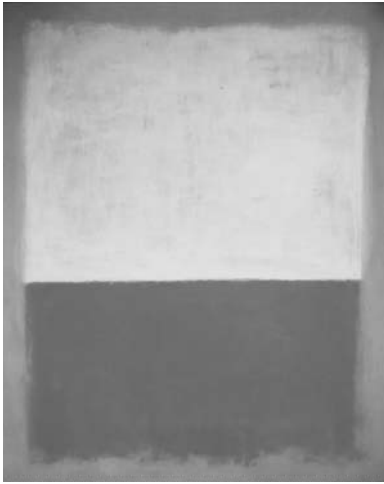


Figure 17
Mark Rothko, *Untitled*, 1998

thought or effort, we can't even begin to think of many of the twentieth century's great works as beautiful. Even when they are, their value must be sought elsewhere. And so, following in Kandinsky's footsteps, we go looking for the deep spiritual meaning of Mark Rothko's late works (fig. 17), hoping to find in them "a harmony, an equilibrium, a wholeness in the Jungian sense, that enabled him to express universal truths in his breakthrough works, fusing the conscious and the unconscious, the finite and the infinite, the equivocal and the unequivocal, the sensual and the spiritual." He uses colors as signs, and the murals in the Rothko chapel in Houston evoke "his belief in the passion of life, the finality of death, the reality of the spirit. Red, so often the principal carrier of Rothko's emotions and ideas, is now accompanied by black, which symbolizes his state of mind and the character of his existence in the latter part of his life." No wonder that, approached with such ideas in mind, Rothko's work is surrounded by the most vacant and bewildered faces you are likely to see in a museum.

Modernist Appropriations

Apollinaire's rhetoric of radical difference became less appropriate once Modernism gradually established itself and needed to consolidate its success by showing that it was continuous with the great art of the past: the establishment has respect for itself. To make that connection, modernist theory looked for the separation of beauty from aesthetic value, which had so far been limited to twentieth-century artists, in their worthy predecessors as well. Clement Greenberg, the major voice in American art criticism and theory in the mid-century, and T. S. Eliot, whose magisterial tone set the course of literary practice and criticism over much of the same period, led the way.

A select group of nineteenth-century artists, Greenberg argued in his very first published essay, having absorbed the "scientific revolutionary thought" of their time, detached themselves from capitalist society and created a completely new phenomenon: avant-garde culture. At the same time, industrialization brought huge masses of

workers from the country into the cities, where, deprived of their genuine “folk” traditions, they required a totally new form of distraction and entertainment: “ersatz culture, kitsch.” The gap between avant-garde art and kitsch is absolutely unbridgeable. The avant-garde art wants nothing to do with the decadence that surrounds it: “The avant-garde poet or artist tries in effect to imitate God by creating something valid solely on its own terms, in the way nature itself is valid.” The avant-garde renounces representation and, in the end unable to imitate God, it turns to the imitation of “the disciplines and processes of art and literature itself.” It takes its own medium as its proper subject matter and as source of its inspiration. Purged of representation, it seems austere, barren, and mysterious to the vast, uncultivated majority of the public and forces them to turn to the quick and crude satisfactions of kitsch, which demand nothing from them “except their money—not even their time.” While kitsch takes everything for granted and is easy for everyone to assimilate, having no purpose other than diversion, avant-garde art questions the world as we know it and requires hard work and a special public, because its aim is, literally, to create a new culture:

The ultimate values which the cultivated spectator derives from Picasso [the avant-garde, fig. 18], are derived at a second remove, as the result of reflection upon the immediate impression left by the plastic values. . . . Where Picasso paints *cause*, [Ilya] Repin [kitsch, fig. 19], paints *effect*. Repin predigests art for the spectator and spares him effort, provides him with a short cut to the pleasure of art that detours what is necessarily difficult in genuine art. Repin, or kitsch, is synthetic art.

Between them, uneasily, stands the *New Yorker*: “high-class kitsch for the luxury trade” (fig. 20).

Greenberg has only contempt for kitsch, which relies essentially on representation, narration, and drama—features central to the traditional arts—but that doesn’t prevent him from admiring Giotto, Michelangelo and Raphael, Shakespeare, and Rembrandt—even the medieval artist who worked under the Church’s direction: “Precisely



Figure 18
Pablo Picasso (1881–1973), *Three Musicians*, 1921. Oil on canvas, 6'7" x 7'3 ¾". Mrs. Simon Guggenheim Fund. (55.1949), The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Reproduced by permission from Art Resource, NY. Photo credit: © The Museum of Modern Art / Licensed by SCALA / Art Resource, NY



Figure 19
Ilya Repin, *St. Nicholas Delivers Three Unjustly Condemned Men from Death*, 1888, State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg, Russia



Figure 20
Theodore G. Haupt, *New Yorker*.
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because his content was determined in advance, the artist was free to concentrate on his medium. . . . For him the medium became, privately, professionally, the content of his art, even as his medium is today the public content of the abstract painter's art." On the contrary, Greenberg wants to vindicate the judgment of "the cultivated of mankind" over the ages, and he attributes their agreement on what is good and bad art to "a fairly constant distinction . . . between those values only to be found in art and the values which can be found elsewhere." What that means is that great art has always been concerned with its own medium and devoted to "formal" problems and that its best audience has always appreciated it for that reason. Modernism just made explicit what had been up to then unknowing and unselfconscious. It showed that content that is easy to understand, telling a story, "sunset, exploding shells, running and falling men"—whatever a coarse peasant might find attractive—lies outside the proper content of art, the investigation of what painting or poetry, *as* painting or poetry, can legitimately accomplish. Aesthetic value has never resided in what goes by the name of beauty, although it took the austerity of Modernism to show that only kitsch holds proper dominion over its facile pleasures.

Greenberg eventually transformed this idea into a sweeping, metaphysical account of the essence of art. Like Kant, who investigated rationally how far reason can go without lapsing into the irrational, modernist artists used their medium in order to establish the limits beyond which it is no longer pure and uncontaminated by features that belong to different arts. Each art, in Kantian terms, sought to establish the conditions of its own possibility. Painting, in particular, tried to isolate the features of a painting that make it just painting and not, say, sculpture or theater, and so it discovered "the ineluctable flatness of the support." Neither three-dimensional space nor stories that require it but only flatness, two-dimensionality, is the condition painting shares with no other art. Turning away from sculptural and theatrical elements, painting abandoned "the representation of the kind of space that recognizable, three-dimensional objects can inhabit" and rested content with flatness, the norm that has governed the making of pictures "since pictures first began to be made." Modernism didn't

change the practice of painting; it “never meant a break with the past [and] left most of our value judgments intact.” It only made plain what was always and necessarily true of painting, vindicating the great masters while showing that “though the past did appreciate masters like these justly, it often gave wrong or irrelevant reasons for doing so.” Beauty, or what we ordinarily take beauty to be, was first among these wrong or irrelevant reasons, and has nothing to do with the value of art. Greenberg, who had no difficulty with the word, could write that “what is thought to be Pollock’s bad taste is in reality simply his willingness to be ugly in terms of contemporary taste. In the course of time this ugliness will become a new standard of beauty.” But what he understood by it was something that did not even belong to art as a whole: it was the exclusive feature of high art. He saw Modernism as “a kind of bias or tropism: towards esthetic value, esthetic value as such and as an ultimate,” a response to “a growing relaxation of esthetic standards at the top of Western society” in the mid-nineteenth century that aimed at maintaining or restoring “a most essential continuity: continuity with the highest esthetic standards of the past.” Modernism’s success was the victory of those standards over the debased principles by which the arts had been in danger of being judged—a victory of the pure passion of the few over the maculate velleity of the many: the modernist arts succeeded in “demonstrating that the kind of experience they provided was valuable in its own right and not to be obtained from any other kind of activity.”

Greenberg’s attitude toward the art of the past seems moderate and conciliatory compared to T. S. Eliot’s wholesale rejection of the poetry which, as he saw it, separated him from his real predecessors—Donne, Chapman, Marvell, Herbert, and the other “metaphysical” poets of the late Elizabethan era. “A direct sensuous apprehension of thought, or a recreation of thought into feeling,” a true harmony between reason and emotion, lifts their poetry above everything that intervenes because the harmony was lost in the seventeenth century, and under the influence of Milton and Dryden “a dissociation of sensibility set in, from which we have never recovered.” As the language of poetry became ever more urbane and sophisticated while

the feelings it communicated were constantly getting more common and crude, a later generation of poets rejected reason and description as the enemies of deep and refined emotion and fell into an exaggerated sentimentalism. The lowest point of that downward trend is the poetry Eliot's public had been brought up on: of Tennyson's or Browning's sensibility, it is better to "say nothing"; of their intellect, the best is that they "ruminate."

Eliot was willing to dismiss two centuries of English poetry as both intellectually overrefined and emotionally coarse because his purpose was to argue that Modernism had rediscovered the essential virtues of poetry (he mentioned Baudelaire, Laforgue, and Corbière, and was coyly silent about himself). Metaphysical poetry was distinguished from everything that followed it by the very same harmony of feeling and thought that distinguished Modernism from everything that preceded it and made them both equally incomprehensible to a public that had been brought up on neoclassical dryness and romantic excess. Nothing written during that time could possibly accomplish, and none of those who took pleasure in it could ever appreciate, the serious, complex task both modernists and metaphysicals had set themselves:

It appears likely that poets in our civilization, as it exists at present, must be *difficult*. Our civilization comprehends great variety and complexity, and this variety and complexity, playing upon a refined sensibility, must produce various and complex results. The poet must become more and more comprehensive, more allusive, more indirect, in order to force, to dislocate if necessary, language into his meaning.

Despite his historical vocabulary, Eliot didn't believe that the task of poetry changes with the times. The value of the metaphysical poets is "something permanently valuable, which subsequently disappeared, but ought not to have disappeared." Nothing comparable can ever be found in poets who, however accomplished, "do not feel their thought as immediately as the odour of a rose," and the most obvious mark of their poetry is—these are *his* words—that it is not various or complex,

comprehensive, allusive or indirect, able to force or dislocate language; in short, that it is *easy*. Deprived of the paradoxical conjunction of feeling and thought that is the soul of poetry, it offers distraction without edification, pleasure without insight. That is what Tennyson's and Browning's admirers think of as beauty and (for good reason) cannot find in Donne, Laforgue, or Eliot himself: *their* poetry has nothing to do with the easy satisfactions of those for whom poets "look into our hearts and write." But such poets are too simple and "not deep enough; Racine or Donne looked into a good deal more than the heart. One must look into the cerebral cortex, the nervous system, and the digestive tracts." Beauty, if we still want to use the word at all, does not even belong to high art as a whole but only to a small subdivision within it.

For Greenberg, what most people take beauty to be is mostly irrelevant to the value of art. With Eliot, it turned out to be serious art's frivolous but deadly enemy. While Modernism held sway and the dependence of art on beauty, with its connections to the rest of the world, kept diminishing, the rule of the aesthetic expanded until, as Modernism began to lose ground and continued to do so, it too came under attack, especially during the 1980s. In the introduction to *The Anti-Aesthetic*, an influential anthology that both expressed and determined that period's attitudes, Hal Foster wrote that

the very notion of the aesthetic, its network of ideas, is in question here: the idea that aesthetic experience exists apart, without "purpose," all but beyond history, or that art can now effect a world at once (inter)subjective, concrete and universal—a symbolic totality. Like "postmodernism," then, "anti-aesthetic" marks a cultural position on the present: are categories afforded by the aesthetic still valid?

My own answer to all these questions is "No." But to the extent that they raise problems for the aesthetic, they leave beauty untouched, for beauty, the rest of this book will try to show, is part of the everyday world of purpose and desire, history and contingency, subjectivity and incompleteness. That is the only world there is, and nothing, not even the highest of the high arts, can move beyond it.