



Dædalus

Journal of the American Academy of Arts & Sciences

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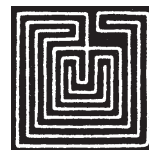
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Inside front cover: Detail from Manet's "Olympia" (1863; oil on canvas, Musée d'Orsay, Paris). When first exhibited in the Salon of 1865, Manet's image of the nude painter Victorine Meurent, his longtime model, muse, and mistress, provoked anger and popular outrage. Émile Zola reacted differently: "When other artists correct nature by painting Venus they lie. Manet asked himself why he should lie. Why not tell the truth?" See Alexander Nehamas on *The art of being unselfish*, pages 57 – 68. Credit: Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY.

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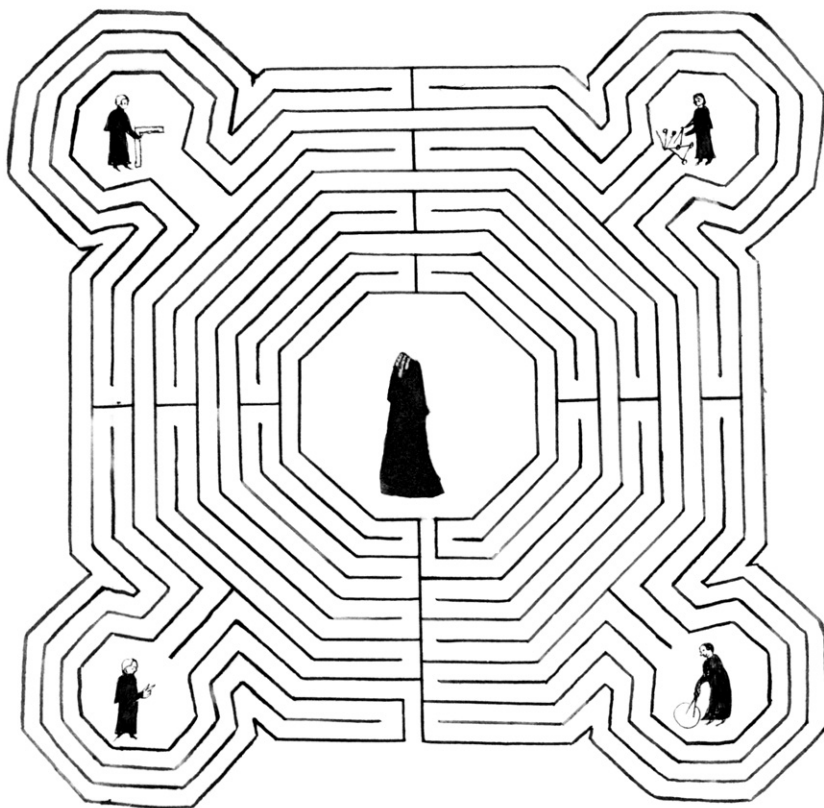
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The pavement labyrinth once in the nave of Reims Cathedral (1240), in a drawing, with figures of the architects, by Jacques Cellier (c. 1550 – 1620).

Dædalus was founded in 1955 and established as a quarterly in 1958. The journal's namesake was renowned in ancient Greece as an inventor, scientist, and unriddler of riddles. Its emblem, a maze seen from above, symbolizes the aspiration of its founders to "lift each of us above his cell in the labyrinth of learning in order that he may see the entire structure as if from above, where each separate part loses its comfortable separateness."

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The unsettled legacy of the Cold War

On May 24, 2002, at a summit meeting in Moscow, Russian President Vladimir Putin and U.S. President George W. Bush signed a treaty and issued a declaration of political accommodation promising, in Bush's words, to "liquidate the legacy of the Cold War." That is, of course, an appealing phrase and an aspiration every reasonable person will endorse. But it is certainly not an imminent accomplishment – not yet even the predominant trend.

The underlying reality is that U.S. military forces are being prepared for extended confrontation, not political accommodation. Their projected capabilities are inherently provocative not only to Russia, but to China as well. They are also vulnerable to Russian and Chinese reactions, particularly in space, where some of the most critical assets are based. Soothing rhetoric cannot indefinitely obscure the ominous implications.

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It is time for everyone to pay attention.

The treaty negotiated in Moscow limits the number of strategic nuclear warheads that are to be operationally deployed by their respective military establishments on December 31, 2012 – on which day the treaty expires. At first glance, that appears to establish the principle of legal restraint for both nuclear forces. But the treaty sets *no* significant limit on destructive capabilities. The imposed ceiling of 2,200 operationally deployed nuclear warheads permits the United States, for instance, a sufficient number of immediately available nuclear weapons to destroy much of the Russian nuclear arsenal in a first strike – and to simultaneously devastate Russia's conventional forces, political leadership, and industrial base. Moreover, the treaty covers only those weapons that are present at the operational bases of intercontinental range forces, allowing both signatories to retain 'reserve' inventories greatly in excess of the 2,200 warhead ceiling. Reserve warheads could be 'uploaded' onto delivery vehicles and returned to immediately available status in a short period of time.

So, for the foreseeable future, both nations will retain nuclear weapons far in excess of the number needed for any conceivable purpose – and there are no supplementary restraints. As a result, compliance with the treaty will not meaningfully diminish the lethal potential of either nation's nuclear force. Nor will the treaty establish an equitable or stable strategic balance, since Russia

does not have the resources to safely maintain its nuclear forces at the size and alert rates envisaged by the United States. Over time, a deteriorating Russian arsenal will become increasingly vulnerable to preemptive attack, particularly as the United States undertakes planned modernization of nuclear forces and the deployment of missile defenses.

If this agreement were seriously expected to carry any burden whatsoever, it would not pass even the most rudimentary scrutiny. Despite its glaring inadequacies, Congress appears poised to ratify the Moscow Treaty, no questions asked.

It is tempting, of course, to believe that the spirit of accommodation rhetorically proclaimed in Moscow might gradually dissolve the operational confrontation of the two nuclear forces that has prevailed continuously since the 1950s. To achieve that result, all weapons would have to be consigned to secure storage; none could be held available for immediate use; and preparations for massive, rapidly enacted retaliation would have to be decisively terminated. If all that were to occur, managerial control of each arsenal would be assured at a much higher standard than currently prevails, and the practical significance of residual disparities between them would be substantially diminished. That would come much closer to liquidating dangerous legacies.

Unfortunately, the Bush administration appears to have no interest in altering either the Cold War configuration of the U.S. nuclear arsenal or the Cold War mindset that underlies it.

Under the current planning guidance issued for U.S. nuclear forces, thousands of nuclear weapons are to be maintained indefinitely on continuous alert status. Those forces will continue to retain the capacity to devastate any foe on a few-

minutes notice. As at the height of the Cold War, their massively destructive firepower will be directed primarily against Russia and China, even if that fact is not announced as bluntly as it once was. Moreover, the American nuclear arsenal will be coupled with increasingly capable conventional forces, able to undertake increasingly intrusive operations on a global scale. The traditional emphasis on responding to aggression is being overlaid with a new stress on *initiating* attacks against terrorist networks and 'evil' states suspected of seeking weapons of mass destruction. The forces instructed to develop and preserve this array of capabilities are supported by a U.S. defense budget larger than the combined defense expenditures of the twenty-five countries ranked next highest in defense spending.

These forces, moreover, are being directed by increasingly nationalistic security policies. The Bush administration has conducted an assault on the major elements of the multilateral legal framework that had been developed to regulate security policies and force deployments. The United States abrogated the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, which stood for thirty years as a widely acknowledged pillar of restraint. It forced termination of efforts to negotiate a compliance protocol for the Biological Weapons Convention. It has repeatedly denigrated and refused to ratify the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, despite international consensus on the necessity of such a ban. Some senior Bush officials have even publicly questioned the negative security assurances that previous administrations issued in support of the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty.

These policies are a sharp departure from past administrations of both parties, and do not reflect majority sentiment as measured in opinion polls. The

American political system has nevertheless not responded to this dramatic shift in policy and approach; for the moment, the political system appears to be far more interested in wielding effective force than in promoting global reassurance.

There is good reason to expect that a more balanced attitude will eventually emerge. Globalization, particularly the attendant process of economic engagement, creates a strong incentive to pursue seriously the political accommodation declared at the Moscow summit. The impulse for assertive superiority emanating from the American military planning system is not realistic and does not reflect the broader interests of the United States. A democratic process worthy of the name will eventually have to represent those interests, and in doing so will have to pursue equitable accommodation not just with Russia, but with China and all of the other major societies currently outside of our alliance system.

There are serious questions, however, as to how gracefully the necessary adjustments might occur. There could be some painful lessons along the way.

One implication of the Moscow summit is that Russia will pursue incremental accommodation over some period of time. In the initial stages, that effort will require Russia to accept both the inequitable force balances that will result from the Moscow treaty and significant institutional discrimination imposed by the NATO – Russia Council Agreement announced in Rome shortly after the Moscow summit. That implicit strategy reflects an impressively prudent judgment in the face of what Russian leaders in earlier times would undoubtedly have treated as hostile provocation. By tolerating some immediate indignity, the Russians have gained time to try to in-

duce the United States and its allies to be more forthcoming than they currently intend. Meanwhile there is no specific situation likely to generate a sudden confrontation with the United States, and the stark disparities in military investment will not become urgently dangerous to Russia for another decade or so.

In the long run, however, if the strategy of incremental accommodation does not produce solid results, future Russian leaders are likely to devise a more forceful reaction. They cannot advertise that possibility without undermining the effort to achieve meaningful accommodation, but the logic they are likely to use is already visible in China.

In recent years, China has pursued economic accommodation with all the industrial democracies much more assertively and effectively than has Russia. That effort was consolidated with China's entry into the World Trade Organization. China's attempts to establish corresponding security arrangements have not been successful, however. There are no treaties regulating its security relationship with the United States, and China considers the most relevant political document – a 1982 communiqué intended to limit arms sales to Taiwan – to have been violated by the United States. Many Chinese officials view U.S. military planning projections with growing alarm and have concluded that China is now the principal target for the advanced capabilities the United States is developing. These officials worry that the U.S. ballistic missile defense program is a direct threat to the minimal nuclear deterrent force that China has chosen to maintain.

Unlike the Russians, who have the option of playing for time, the Chinese are confronted with the prospect of near-term confrontation over the status of Taiwan – a reasonable assessment in

light of the identification of a conflict over Taiwan as one of a handful of 'immediate contingencies' in the U.S. *Nuclear Posture Review*. The Chinese are especially concerned that increasingly sophisticated American capabilities for preemptive attack might be used to support Taiwanese independence.

Although it is common in the United States to depict China as a rising power bent on regional domination, the security assessments provided by Chinese leaders are much more circumspect. Their central planning documents identify internal economic development as the overriding national priority, and frankly admit the constraint this imposes on military development. After allowing defense expenditures to decline for the first fifteen years of its economic reform program, China began to increase its defense effort in the 1990s. Still, China's military investment remains substantially below that of the United States, certainly in absolute amount and probably as a percentage of overall defense spending as well.

The maintenance of a large U.S. nuclear arsenal, coupled with advanced space systems including missile defenses, creates concern in Beijing about the survivability of the Chinese nuclear deterrent. In the necessarily pessimistic assessment of the weaker party, China's leaders are compelled to consider whether the deployment of missile defense systems might allow the much stronger United States, perhaps during a crisis over Taiwan, to become confident that it could conduct a disarming first strike against China's two-dozen or so intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs). The Chinese worry that the United States might believe that missile defenses would be able to intercept in flight any Chinese missiles that were not destroyed on the ground. The United States could also use

space-based surveillance, reconnaissance, and precision strike assets to find and destroy the mobile ICBMs that China hopes to deploy in the next eight to ten years, in order to increase the survivability of its deterrent.

The Chinese were particularly alarmed by a 1998 long-range planning document released by the then United States Space Command (USSPACECOM). That document outlined a concept called *global engagement* – a combination of global surveillance, missile defense, and space-based strike capabilities that would enable the United States to undertake effective preemption anywhere in the world and would deny similar capability to any other country.

USSPACECOM was frank about the controversial nature of such a proposal. "At present," the authors wrote, "the notion of weapons in space is not consistent with U.S. national policy. Planning for the possibility [of weapons in space] is a purpose of this plan should our civilian leadership decide that the application of force from space is in our national interest."

Most recently, prominent civilian officials have endorsed the change of policy that would be required to pursue the USSPACECOM vision. The congressionally mandated Commission to Assess United States National Security Space Management and Organization warned of a "Pearl Harbor in space" unless the United States developed the capability to "project power in, through, and from space." Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, who chaired the Commission before his nomination, identified outer space as one of a small number of key goals for defense transformation and implemented many of the organizational recommendations contained in the Space Commission report. The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of

Staff, Air Force General Richard Myers, is the former Commander in Chief of USSPACECOM and a strong proponent of *global engagement*. Under Rumsfeld and Myers, the Defense Department has imposed changes in doctrine, organization, and budgets in support of a *global engagement* capability. The Department drafted a new *Nuclear Posture Review*, which reportedly advocates the use of space-based assets to enhance conventional and nuclear strike missions; combined USSPACECOM with United States Strategic Command, which maintains operational control of U.S. nuclear forces, to create a single entity responsible for early warning, missile defense, and long-range strikes; and requested \$1.6 billion over fiscal years 2003 – 2007 to develop space-based lasers and kinetic kill vehicles to intercept satellites and ballistic missiles.

As a practical matter, China has no real hope of matching the military capabilities currently being developed by the United States. China's leaders clearly understand that fact – but they have no intention of submitting to intimidation, either.

They are therefore exploring the feasibility of what U.S. officials term an 'asymmetric' military response. They have identified U.S. assets in space as the prime target for such a response. Space assets are exceedingly valuable – and exceedingly vulnerable. They can be successfully attacked at a small fraction of the cost and effort required to develop, protect, or replace them. Acts of interference or direct destruction would entail no immediate human casualties but could be monumentally disruptive to military and commercial support services. The mere prospect of discreet 'asymmetric' acts of that sort can be expected to induce a more inclusive and more penetrating discussion of national inter-

ests within the American political system. If Chinese leaders are skillful enough to present that possibility as a legitimate reaction to provocation, they could expect to attract very substantial support from an international community increasingly interested in commercial space activities.

There is some risk, of course; an asymmetric strategy of this sort might backfire in the United States. Advocates of expanding U.S. military activities in outer space might successfully use threats of interference to confirm the aggressive intentions they have been projecting to justify their efforts. In that event, China would have to develop sufficient capacity for interference – against dedicated resistance – to discourage U.S. preemptive operations. The feasibility of that project remains to be demonstrated, but it is certainly a plausible aspiration.

The earliest stages of a confrontation between the United States and China are already occurring at the United Nations Conference on Disarmament (CD) in Geneva. That is a forum that does not attract general public attention or directly affect the main channels of diplomacy. It therefore provides a means of issuing official warnings that can readily be retracted.

In recent years, the Chinese delegate to the CD has repeatedly stated that the plans for the military use of outer space projected by USSPACECOM are not consistent with the 1967 Outer Space Treaty. The preamble of this treaty provides legal protection for existing space assets, provided that they are peaceful in character. The introduction of weapons for offensive purposes would violate that provision, China's delegates have contended, and would therefore remove legal protection for any asset that could contribute to military operations, a formulation that potentially includes com-

mercial assets as well. Denial of legal protection is the first step in a strategy of legitimized interference.

China's delegates have also repeatedly asked for a formal mandate for the CD to negotiate a supplemental treaty, specifically to prohibit the placement of weapons in space, and to define more explicitly the acceptable terms of military support activities. Such a display of benign intent would be the second step in a Chinese strategy to win international support. The U.S. delegate has helped to validate both steps by repeatedly rejecting any effort to negotiate a new treaty.

This dispute has deadlocked the CD, which operates on the basis of consensus, leaving it without a plan of work since 1998. The intransigence displayed by the United States appears to be alienating many allies who worry about the impact of U.S. missile defense deployments on international stability.

Just days after the Moscow summit, the Russian delegate joined his Chinese

counterpart in presenting a draft working paper that outlined tentative suggestions on a treaty to prohibit the placement of weapons and use of force in outer space. The coincidence of timing was undoubtedly not an accident, as the Russians are fond of saying.

The development of rules to regulate activity in space in the emerging global security situation is admittedly a complex matter. There are reasonable disagreements about how best to proceed. It should be obvious, however, that equitable accommodation is overwhelmingly in the general interest and that the incipient confrontation now in its earliest stages is a preventable calamity. If there is to be a reasonable outcome, then the most insidious of the Cold War legacies – the apparent commitment of the United States to active military confrontation for decisive national advantage – will have to be adjusted in reality, not merely in words.

Denis Donoghue

Speaking of beauty

It is not clear why we talk about beauty unless we have nothing else to talk about. It may be urgent to have a theory of truth or, better still, a principle of truth, so that we can decide whether a particular statement counts as true or false. A principle of justice is necessary if we are to decide whether a particular act is reprehensible or not. Discussions of these issues are likely to be difficult, and perhaps interminable, as Alasdair MacIntyre maintains in *After Virtue*. Some philosophers hold to a theory of truth as a demonstrable correspondence of a statement to the facts of the matter, while others insist on pragmatic usefulness, contingency, or the social construction of truth. Scholars of justice may think that justice is a value dependent on one's informed conscience, or on a social contract, a consideration of

someone's need, or a consequence of natural law. At least we know what the main issues are, if not how to reach agreement in specific cases. And yet we continue to say without much hesitation that such-and-such and so-and-so are beautiful: tulips, roses, certain women, certain men, children, a page of Chinese written characters, an African mask, a mathematical process, a piece of music, the view from Portofino, a certain sunset, a full moon, some animals (but not the rhinoceros), most birds, kingfishers, dragonflies, the air at Brighton, Alexander Kipnis's voice, the weather when noon's a purple glow. These, we say, are beautiful, but we let our appreciation rest on the adjective; we feel no need to go questing from adjective to noun.

Suppose you are walking with a friend in a gallery of modern art, hovering to look at this Brancusi or that Modigliani, murmuring "beautiful, beautiful" or other words to that effect: gorgeous, ravishing, exquisite. It would be tiresome if your friend said: "yes, but what do you mean by beautiful?" It would not be enough to say that the painting excites you or that it illuminates your life. The conversation would have to take a different tone, or move to another topic, which suggests that such words as 'beautiful' belong to the structure of social

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amenities and are not expected to do much work in cognition or elucidation. They indicate that a conversation is in place, not that anything substantive is being transacted.

The best reason to talk about beauty is probably the hope of saving it from the mercenary embrace of television and advertisements. The hope is a frail one, since these forces make their money by affecting strong links of association between beauty, health, high spirits, and sex. They are not interested in a theory of beauty, unless such a theory proves necessary to keep the links of desirable associations in place. There is no sign of that. The associations are mutually and reliably sustaining. So a theory of beauty – or talk of beauty – is likely to be sought only by people who want to round out their informal exclamations – “beautiful, beautiful” – by giving them a larger and more explicit context of speech. Schiller had this in view in the sixteenth letter on the aesthetic education of mankind, where he distinguished between ‘the man of action’ and ‘the reflective man’:

The reflective man conceives of virtue, truth, happiness; but the man of action will only exercise virtues, only apprehend truths, only enjoy happy days. To lead back these latter to the former – to achieve instead of moral practices, morality, instead of things known, knowledge, instead of happy experiences, happiness, is the business of physical and ethical education; to make Beauty from beautiful objects is the task of aesthetic education.¹

This is a worthy aim, if only because it would add to the number of occasions on which we know what we are talking

1 Friedrich Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, trans. Reginald Snell (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1954), 82 – 83.

about. But there are special problems when the theme is beauty.

One of them is the general decline in the use (except for professional purposes of law and the courts) of abstractions or ‘terms of concept,’ as Josephine Miles calls them. In the literature of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries it was commonplace to invoke such terms as *goodness*, *truth*, and *beauty* without even having to personify them: they exerted their force as values simply by being named. As in Donne’s “Communitie”:

Good we must love, and must hate ill,
For ill is ill and good, good still.²

Miles has pointed out that beauty persisted through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in a vocabulary involving “the love of the God of nature”:

It was the Protestant belief that the goodness of God expressed itself especially through the world of nature, through mountains, seas, skies, receivable as images directly through man’s senses and therefore an aesthetic as well as an ethical message. Protestants scorned the intrusive human endeavor in the art of stained glass in church windows, for example; they wanted their windows to be pure clear glass to reveal the aesthetic sensory truth of the universe outside. Though the triad of values including beauty [and truth and goodness] had been familiar since Plato, increasingly the scenes and shapes and colors of nature had something to do with God’s meaning for man, and words like *light* and *dark*, *green* and *golden* in their abundance supported the sensory meaning of beauty. So *good* and *true* began to be subordinated.³

2 Quoted in Josephine Miles, “Values in Language; or, Where Have *Goodness*, *Truth*, and *Beauty* Gone?” *Critical Inquiry* 3 (1) (Autumn 1976): 3.

3 *Ibid.*

Since the nineteenth century, in literature as in conversation, the concept of beauty has fallen into disuse. It is unusual to find a modern poet, as here James Merrill, writing –

Some who have perfect beauty do not
grieve,
As I, when beauty passes. They've known
merit

In word, emotion, deed:

Lone angels round each human grave – ,⁴

– and even in that case Merrill had to support his abstractions with four earlier stanzas describing one version of beauty, the peacock's. More often, beauty as a term of concept has been replaced by “the language of bodies and houses as it adapts itself to the tradition of concepts, scenes, feelings, and objects.” Beautiful things, in modern poetry, are rarely called beautiful, but, as Miles says, “they are shown to be so by the constructed centers of care in which they are presented.”⁵

The meaning of beauty depends on social classes and the different delicacies of conversation they feature. In some countries and among certain classes, talk of beauty is regarded as shocking unless the speaker is homosexual: then concessions are made. In heterosexual society, references to beauty are rare. Only the succulence of a hot gammon makes it plausible, in “The Waste Land,” for Lil and Albert to ask their garrulous friend in to dinner “to get the beauty of it hot.”⁶

4 James Merrill, *From the First Nine: Poems, 1946 – 1976* (New York: Atheneum, 1982), 19.

5 Miles, “Values in Language; or, Where Have Goodness, Truth, and Beauty Gone?” 10.

6 T. S. Eliot, *Collected Poems 1909 – 1962* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1984), 59.

“Beauty,” by the contemporary American poet B. H. Fairchild, starts with a man and his wife, tourists in Florence, looking at Donatello’s *David* in the Bargello Museum:

We are at the Bargello in Florence, and
she says,
What are you thinking? And I say, *Beauty*,
thinking
of how very far we are now from the
machine shop
and the dry fields of Kansas, the treeless
horizons
of slate skies and the muted passions of
roughnecks
and scabble farmers drunk and romantic
enough
to weep more or less silently at the
darkened end
of the bar out of, what else, loneliness,
meaning
the ache of thwarted desire, of, in a word,
beauty,
or rather its absence, and it occurs to me
again
that no male member of my family has
ever used
this word in my hearing or anyone else’s
except
in reference, perhaps, to a new pickup or
dead deer.
*By God, Henry, that’s a beauty.*⁷

Fairchild’s speaker – we may call him Fairchild, the poem being clearly autobiographical – is probably not thinking, there in the Bargello, about beauty, but wondering why the *David* is so beautiful. Then the discrepancy strikes him between looking at the beautiful bronze and being back in Kansas. He recalls, as a boy in 1963, watching television and being astonished to see Robert Penn Warren and Paul Weiss talking about beauty:

7 B. H. Fairchild, “Beauty,” *The Southern Review* 33 (3) (Summer 1997): 434 – 441.

Here were two grown men discussing beauty seriously and with dignity as if they and the topic were as normal as normal topics of discussion between men, such as soybean prices or why the commodities market was a sucker's game or Oklahoma football or Gimpy Neiderland almost dying from his hemorrhoid operation. They were discussing beauty and tossing around allusions to Plato and Aristotle and someone named Pater, and they might be homosexuals.⁸

Other memories: Fairchild's Uncle Ross from California calling his mother's Sunday dinner centerpiece *lovely* and his father leaving the room in embarrassment; the assassination of President Kennedy and the Zapruder film repeatedly on television, and Fairchild and other men sitting around in the machine shop –

staring at the tin ceiling like a giant screen,
What a strange goddamned country, as
Bobby Sudduth
arches a wadded Fritos bag at the time
clock and says,
Oswald, from that far, you got to admit, that
*shot was a beauty.*⁹

– two workers from California stripping off their clothes in the middle of the shop; Bobby Sudduth killing himself with a single shot of a twelve gauge. The poem ends with Fairchild and his wife still in the Bargello:

8 Ibid., 435.

9 Ibid., 437.

What are you thinking? She asks again, and so I begin to tell her about a strange afternoon in Kansas, about something I have never spoken of, and we walk to a window where the shifting light spreads a sheen along the casement, and looking out, we see the city blazing like miles of uncut wheat, the farthest buildings taken in their turn, and the great dome, the way the metal roof of the machine shop, I tell her, would break into flame late on an autumn day, with such beauty.¹⁰

Kansas can't be the only place where a heterosexual man never uses the word 'beauty' except to refer to a dead deer, a new pickup, or Lee Harvey Oswald's prowess with a rifle. Or where a young man needs to go to Florence in the equal company of his wife and stand with her to look at Donatello's *David* before he can surmount the inhibition preventing him from talking about beautiful things. Still, it is an achievement to note the shifting light spreading a sheen along the casement in the gallery, and to compare Florence to "miles of uncut wheat," the comparison honoring both parts of it and the sun that shines impartially on each.

Even in polite society, beauty is difficult to talk about, if only because the words nearest to it are equivocal. "It is a beauteous evening, calm and free." Of Wordsworth's three adjectives, only one is doing any work. We know what a calm evening is like, and being out and about in it may make one feel free, but we don't know what makes an evening

10 Ibid., 440 – 441.

beauteous. In the lines that follow, 'beauteous' and 'free' are not further clarified; they yield at once to intimations of a religious, worshipful scene in which the need for clarification is sublimed away. No prosaic requirement asserts itself in lines hushed by these words and phrases: holy, nun, adoration, heaven, eternal, divine, "in Abraham's bosom," worship'st, Temple, shrine, and ultimately "God being with thee when we know it not."¹¹ Wordsworth is not using 'beauteous' and 'free' irresponsibly: he is relying upon the spiritual implications of the later words to fulfill the latency of the earlier ones by drawing them into a context that they have hardly as much as adumbrated.

In an essay on Shakespeare's "The Phoenix and Turtle," Barbara Everett calls the poem "brilliant and beautiful," and refers to "the surreal (and very beautiful, if sometimes almost mocking) intellectuality of the middle stanzas." The poem is "a Renaissance jewel, beautiful but (compared to *Hamlet*) troublingly unvoiced, relatively toneless, unchangeably small." She speaks again of "the arcanelly beautiful court dialect of love" in the poem and, comparing it with the songs in Sidney's *Astrophel and Stella*, names the eighth of these, the one that begins "In a grove most rich of shade," as "the most beautiful of them."¹²

'Beautiful' in Everett's sentences is not a word of description or designation, nor is it an empty gesture; it is a tribute, a smile, a celebration that leaves to other words the task of saying more precisely

what is being celebrated. She doesn't try to make 'beautiful' touch upon the reasons she has for thinking the poem beautiful. This, by the way, may be warranted by the poem itself, which ends with four stanzas of lament, the first of which takes it for granted that the values it honors are absolute, such that they require no adjectives or further reasons in their favor:

Beauty, truth, and rarity,
Grace in all simplicity,
Here enclos'd in cinders lie.¹³

Five terms of concept are gathered by the emphatic 'Here' to lie not destroyed in cinders but enclosed in them: their values don't need to be protected, but they are.

Anthony Lane has tried, in a recent essay on A. E. Housman, to keep the word 'beauty' close to the reasons he has for invoking it. He quotes the second and third stanzas of "Tell me not here, it needs not saying":

On russet floors, by waters idle,
The pine lets fall its cone;
The cuckoo shouts all day at nothing
In leafy dells alone;
And traveller's joy beguiles in autumn
Hearts that have lost their own.
On acres of the seeded grasses
The changing burnish heaves;
Or marshalled under moons of harvest
Stand still all night the sheaves;
Or beaches strip in storms for winter
And stain the wind with leaves.¹⁴

Lane remarks of these stanzas that "sometimes a single word is enough to

11 William Wordsworth, *Selected Poems and Prefaces*, ed. Jack Stillinger (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1965), 170.

12 Barbara Everett, "Set Upon a Golden Bough to Sing: Shakespeare's Debt to Sidney in 'The Phoenix and Turtle,'" *Times Literary Supplement* (5107) (16 February 2001): 13–15.

13 Shakespeare, *Complete Works*, ed. Hardin Craig and David Bevington (Glenview, Ill.: Scott, Foresman, 1973), 464.

14 A. E. Housman, *Collected Poems and Selected Prose*, ed. Christopher Ricks (London: Allen Lane; New York: The Penguin Press, 1988), 141.

crack the mood, and to rescue the beautiful from the menace of the pretty.” “Shouts, heaves, strip, stain: this was not a writer who turned up his nose or averted his gaze.”¹⁵ Lane evidently assumes that ‘the pretty’ is a menace, a temptation, it gives itself to us when our attention is distracted, and that we achieve ‘the beautiful’ by rejecting these blandishments. Leafy dells are pretty, and pretty cheap, but shouts, heaves, strip, and stain are more demanding, and yield beauty in the end. The verbs he doesn’t mention – lets fall, beguiles, have lost, and stand – are presumably not stern enough.

The difference between beautiful and pretty is that you have to keep your nose to the ground and your gaze concentrated to achieve one but not the other. In the days of the New Criticism this degree of attention was called not beauty but irony: the quality was enough to distinguish good poets from bad, because good poets did not allow themselves to be beguiled by poetic diction to the extent of pretending that other factors, recalcitrant and prosaic, were not in the scene. Robert Penn Warren’s preference for impure rather than pure poetry made the same claim as Cleanth Brooks’s ‘Irony as a Principle of Structure.’ Bad poets could not run the risk of seeing awkward things that good poets insisted on seeing. But neither Brooks nor Warren produced any good reason for thinking that irony and ‘the beautiful’ were one and the same. Brooks writes of Housman’s poem:

Nature, for all her attractiveness to man, is supremely indifferent to him. This is the bedrock fact upon which the poem comes to rest, but if the fact constitutes a primal

15 Anthony Lane, “Lost Horizon,” *The New Yorker*, 19 and 26 February 2001, 214.

irony, it is accepted in this poem without rancor or any fierce bitterness.¹⁶

The acceptance is beautiful as a certain behavior, but Brooks doesn’t say so. Lane writes as if irony and the beautiful were the same, but he does not give reasons that cover the case.

Nor has he seen that Housman’s irony – to call it that rather than beauty – stops short of his own presence in the landscape. William Empson thinks the poem beautiful, but he recognizes as a problem the fact that Housman exempts himself from his own irony. Empson can’t explain how such a childish attitude can still leave a poem intact:

I think the poem is wonderfully beautiful. But a secret gimmick may well be needed in it to overcome our resistances, because the thought must be about the silliest or most self-centred that has ever been expressed about Nature. Housman is offended with the scenery, when he pays a visit to his native place, because it does not remember the great man; this is very rude of it. But he has described it as a lover, so in a way the poem is only consistent to become jealous at the end.¹⁷

The jealous stanza is the last one:

For nature, heartless, witless nature,
Will neither care nor know
What stranger’s feet may find the meadow
And trespass there and go,
Nor ask amid the dews of morning
If they are mine or no.¹⁸

16 Cleanth Brooks, *A Shaping Joy* (London: Methuen, 1971), 312.

17 William Empson, *Argufying: Essays on Literature and Culture*, ed. John Haffenden (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1987), 151.

18 Housman, *Collected Poems and Selected Prose*, 141.

Jealousy may be a sufficient gimmick, and if it is, we can hardly complain about the degree of it in ‘heartless, witless,’ ‘stranger’s feet,’ and ‘trespass.’ But it should make a problem for Lane, who seems to think that the beauty of the poem is the sole consideration and that it subsumes everything negative that one might, like Empson, say about it. It makes a problem for anyone who insists, beyond a reasonable degree, on the autonomy of the object claimed for beauty. Beauty may seem to cover every detail, as Lane evidently thinks, but the claim should not be pushed to the point of insisting that every detail is impeccable. Empson, too, wants to save the poem for beauty, and has found in forgivable jealousy an excuse for saving it. He extends the human situation, on Housman’s behalf, to include the natural silliness of being jealous, and so manages to save all the appearances.

A few trial sentences. Beauty is a value, to be perceived in its diverse manifestations. Aesthetics is the theory of such perception. Aesthetics and the theory of beauty are not the same, because the theory of beauty may be concentrated on objects and appearances but aesthetics is concerned with perceptions and perceivers. Usually, aesthetics is labor shared among philosophers and psychologists. So far as it is thought about more commonly and unprofessionally, it seems to be regarded as a vacation exercise, a luxury, a leisure activity for the middle and upper classes. But it is possible to take a quite different view of it, at least in the field of education and therefore of politics.

Schiller gives us warrant for this. In his twentieth letter he says that every phenomenon may be thought of in four different connections:

A thing may relate directly to our sensuous condition (our being and well-being);

that is its *physical* character. Or it can relate to our reason, and furnish us with knowledge; that is its *logical* character. Or it can relate to our will, and be regarded as an object of choice for a rational being; that is its *moral* character. Or finally, it can relate to the totality of our various powers, without being a specific object for any single one of them; that is its *aesthetic* character . . . This last has as its aim the cultivation of the whole of our sensuous and intellectual powers in the fullest possible harmony.¹⁹

Those people are entirely right, Schiller acknowledges, “who declare the Beautiful, and the mood into which it transports our spirit, to be wholly indifferent and sterile in relation to *knowledge* and *mental outlook*.” They are right, because beauty “gives no individual result whatever, either for the intellect or for the will; it realizes no individual purpose, either intellectual or moral; it discovers no individual truth, helps us to perform no individual duty, and is, in a word, equally incapable of establishing the character and clearing the mind.” At this point, Schiller has made all the concessions he is willing to make:

A man’s personal worth or dignity, then, insofar as this can depend upon himself, remains completely undetermined by aesthetic culture, and nothing more has been accomplished except that it has been rendered possible for him *on the part of Nature* to make of himself what he chooses – that he has had completely restored to him the freedom to be what he ought to be.²⁰

This freedom is the highest gift, the gift of humanity. Beauty as a value is “our second creator,” comparable to our first, who “similarly conferred on us nothing

19 Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, 99n.

20 *Ibid.*, 101.

beyond the capacity for humanity, but left its exercise to our own volition.” Every other exercise gives the mind “some particular aptitude,” but also imposes a particular limitation. Only the aesthetic makes us free of our passions and predilections.

Such freedom, in Schiller’s version of it, is comparable to the artist’s freedom in subduing the material with which he is dealing:

In a truly beautiful work of art the content should do nothing, the form everything; for the wholeness of Man is affected by the form alone, and only individual powers by the content. However sublime and comprehensive it may be, the content always has a restrictive action upon the spirit, and only from the form is true aesthetic freedom to be expected. Therefore, the real artistic secret of the master consists in his *annihilating the material by means of the form*.²¹

I don’t think this way of putting the question of content and form resolves an incorrigible issue. The dualism remains, and it is regrettable. In looking at a work of art, we are impelled to think of distinguishing content and form, only to decide not to do so. There is only the single-minded work in front of us. Perhaps form is achieved content rather than subdued content, a notion that unfortunately goes against every Schillerian motive. He would not allow us to see the content of the work redeemed or conformed, its “restrictive action upon the spirit” being as authoritarian as it is.

I will mention – briefly, because I have adverted to it in *The Practice of Reading* – another theory that takes the aesthetic as a comprehensive rather than an ancillary term: Louise M. Rosenblatt’s theory of reading. She distinguishes between ‘ef-

21 Ibid., 106.

ferent reading,’ in which “the reader’s attention is focused on what he will take away from the transaction,” and ‘aesthetic reading,’ in which the reader’s attention is focused on what he or she “is living through during the reading event.”²² It is a distinction between reading for the gist of the text, or the plot of the novel, and reading for the whole experience of the words, first to last. Efferent reading goes with speed-reading, flicking the eyes down the page.

Aesthetic reading is the slowest reading possible, making provisional organizations of the meanings as we read, construing words not only for their local meaning but for the experience of their mutual bearing and torsion. There is always the possibility (and the risk) that the experience will change our lives.

Here is a poem by Herrick, “Upon Julia’s Voice”:

So smooth, so sweet, so silv’ry is thy voice,
As, could they hear, the Damn’d would
make no noise,
But listen to thee, (walking in thy
chamber)
Melting melodious words, to Lutes of
Amber.²³

It may not change anyone’s life, but reading it aesthetically will clear a little space in one’s mind for disinterestedness. An efferent reading is not worth bringing away, it amounts to little more than *you have a beautiful voice*. But the poem is not as simple as it looks. A modern editor glosses the last line:

22 Louise M. Rosenblatt, “On the Aesthetic as the Basic Model of the Reading Process,” *Bucknell Review* 26 (1) (1981): 21 – 25.

23 Robert Herrick, *Complete Poetry*, ed. J. Max Patrick (New York: New York University Press, 1963), 34.

... to the accompaniment of lutes inlaid either with amber, the fossilized resin, or with amber, the alloy made of four parts silver to one of gold. ... What Herrick probably intends is that the silver of her voice melts with the golden words to produce musical sounds (like those from lutes), which are thus a musical alloy analogous to metallic amber.²⁴

The first of these possibilities seems enough to me. Herrick doesn't say that Julia's words are golden; they are melodious. Melting them means dissolving them into silence; silence transformed by her voice such that – as in Eliot's "The Dry Salvages" – the music is "heard so deeply / That it is not heard at all, but you are the music / While the music lasts."²⁵

The first line – So A, So B, So C – is standard analogical hyperbole to get the tribute going, but it takes the opportunity of rhyming *voice* with *noise* and sets Herrick thinking of the howling Damn'd. The hyperbole runs so far as to suggest that even the damned in Hell could be redeemed if they were to listen to Julia's voice and share the silence into which her words reach. There is also a suggestion, according to a different tradition of myth, that Julia's voice is Orpheus's in a minor key. The first line has the merit of starting a common pattern of phrase that does not need to be repeated: it is good enough to depart from, as in the second line.

The poem, I want to say, is *beautiful* – and that for various reasons: the sinuousness of its rhythm; the propriety with which the speaker, having with the first line apparently come to the end of his adjectival resources, withdraws into

the winding cadence of "As, could they hear, the Damn'd would make no noise, / But listen to thee"; the grace with which he stays within his limitations and those of his style, giving it only the small virtues. The grammar with its sequence of subjunctives – *could they hear, would make no noise, but listen* – sends the sentence across the first couplet into the second one, establishing a countermelody without chastening the rhyme. The rhyme of *voice* and *noise* sounds the dramatic contrast of the couplet, but the sentence goes on its longer way, hovering in the middle of the third line, where the two present participles (one of them in parenthesis) direct it to the setting of the accompanying lutes. The first couplet is entirely monosyllabic. The second, with its mixture of monosyllables and disyllables – *listen, walking, chamber* – sustains the alliterative flourish of *Melting melodious words* before it subsides to the novel rhyme of *chamber* and *Amber*. The poem is at one with the music it alludes to. Herrick has learnt as much from Dowland as from Ovid.

Is what I have said enough to indicate that Herrick's poem is beautiful, and why it is?

No, though I have no right to say "of course not," since someone else might do better with it and fail not as completely. I can only place beside the poem companionable words just as abstract as 'beauty': sinuousness, propriety, grace.

I cannot define beauty or the beautiful. I can point to certain details and hope you will take my word for them as manifestations of beauty categorically undefined if not indefinable. I settle for saying the little I can say, and consign the remainder to an implicative silence, taking some cold comfort from a few remarks of E. M. Cioran: "The identity of a word conceals a number of divergent experiences." The divergences can't be

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 34n.

²⁵ T. S. Eliot, *Collected Poems 1909 – 1962* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1963), 199.

allowed for in any sentence. “The indigence of language renders the universe intelligible.”²⁶ Or rather: gives us the illusion that the universe is intelligible.

26 E. M. Cioran, *The Temptation to Exist*, trans. Richard Howard (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1968), 152.

Susan Sontag

An argument about beauty

1

Responding at last, in April of 2002, to the scandal created by the revelation of innumerable cover-ups of sexually predatory priests, Pope John Paul II told the American cardinals summoned to the Vatican, “A great work of art may be blemished, but its beauty remains; and this is a truth which any intellectually honest critic will recognize.”

Is it too odd that the Pope likens the Catholic Church to a great – that is, beautiful – work of art? Perhaps not, since the inane comparison allows him to turn abhorrent misdeeds into something like the scratches in the print of a silent film or craquelure covering the surface of an Old Master painting, blemishes that we reflexively screen out or

see past. The Pope likes venerable ideas. And beauty, as a term signifying (like health) an indisputable excellence, has been a perennial resource in the issuing of peremptory evaluations.

Permanence, however, is not one of beauty’s more obvious attributes; and the contemplation of beauty, when it is expert, may be wreathed in pathos, the drama on which Shakespeare elaborates in many of the Sonnets. Traditional celebrations of beauty in Japan, like the annual rite of cherry-blossom viewing, are keenly elegiac; the most stirring beauty is the most evanescent. To make beauty in some sense imperishable required a lot of conceptual tinkering and transposing, but the idea was simply too alluring, too potent, to be squandered on the praise of superior embodiments. The aim was to multiply the notion, to allow for kinds of beauty, beauty with adjectives, arranged on a scale of ascending value and incorruptibility, with the metaphorized uses (‘intellectual beauty,’ ‘spiritual beauty’) taking precedence over what ordinary language extols as beautiful – a gladness to the senses.

The less ‘uplifting’ beauty of face and body remains the most commonly visited site of the beautiful. But one would hardly expect the Pope to invoke *that* sense of beauty while constructing an exculpatory account of several genera-

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tions' worth of the clergy's sexual molestation of children and protection of the molesters. More to the point – his point – is the 'higher' beauty of art. However much art may seem to be a matter of surface and reception by the senses, it has generally been accorded an honorary citizenship in the domain of 'inner' (as opposed to 'outer') beauty. Beauty, it seems, is immutable, at least when incarnated – fixed – in the form of art, because it is in art that beauty as an idea, an eternal idea, is best embodied. Beauty (should you choose to use the word that way) is deep, not superficial; hidden, sometimes, rather than obvious; consoling, not troubling; indestructible, as in art, rather than ephemeral, as in nature. Beauty, the stipulatively uplifting kind, perdures.

2

The best theory of beauty is its history. Thinking about the history of beauty means focusing on its deployment in the hands of specific communities.

Communities dedicated by their leaders to stemming what is perceived as a noxious tide of innovative views have no interest in modifying the bulwark provided by the use of beauty as unexceptionable commendation and consolation. It is not surprising that John Paul II, and the preserve-and-serve institution for which he speaks, feels as comfortable with beauty as with the idea of the good.

It also seems inevitable that when, almost a century ago, the most prestigious communities concerned with the fine arts dedicated themselves to drastic projects of innovation, beauty would turn up on the front line of notions to be discredited. Beauty could not but appear a conservative standard to the makers and proclaimers of the new; Gertrude Stein said that to call a work of art beautiful means that it is dead. Beautiful has come

to mean 'merely' beautiful: there is no more vapid or philistine compliment.

Elsewhere, beauty still reigns, irrepressible. (How could it not?) When that notorious beauty-lover Oscar Wilde announced in *The Decay of Lying*, "Nobody of any real culture ever talks about the beauty of a sunset. Sunsets are quite old-fashioned," sunsets reeled under the blow, then recovered. *Les beaux-arts*, when summoned to a similar call to be up-to-date, did not. The subtraction of beauty as a standard for art hardly signals a decline of the authority of beauty. Rather, it testifies to a decline in the belief that there is something called art.

3

Even when Beauty was an unquestioned criterion of value in the arts, it was defined laterally, by evoking some other quality that was supposed to be the essence or *sine qua non* of something that was beautiful. A definition of the beautiful was no more (or less) than a commendation of the beautiful. When, for example, Lessing equated beauty with harmony, he was offering another general idea of what is excellent or desirable.

In the absence of a definition in the strict sense, there was supposed to be an organ or capacity for registering beauty (that is, value) in the arts, called 'taste,' and a canon of works discerned by people of taste, seekers after more rarefied gratifications, adepts of connoisseurship. For in the arts – unlike life – beauty was not assumed to be necessarily apparent, evident, obvious.

The problem with taste was that, however much it resulted in periods of large agreement within communities of art lovers, it issued from private, immediate, and revocable responses to art. And the consensus, however firm, was never more than local. To address this defect, Kant – a dedicated universalizer – proposed a distinctive faculty of 'judgment'

with discernable principles of a general and abiding kind; the tastes legislated by this faculty of judgment, if properly reflected upon, should be the possession of all. But 'judgment' did not have its intended effect of shoring up 'taste' or making it, in a certain sense, more democratic. For one thing, taste-as-principled-judgment was hard to apply, since it had the most tenuous connection with the actual works of art deemed incontrovertibly great or beautiful, unlike the pliable, empirical criterion of taste. And taste is now a far weaker, more assailable notion than it was in the late eighteenth century. *Whose taste?* Or, more insolently, *who sez?*

As the relativistic stance in cultural matters pressed harder on the old assessments, definitions of beauty – descriptions of its essence – became emptier. Beauty could no longer be something as positive as harmony. For Valéry, the nature of beauty is that it cannot be defined; beauty is precisely 'the ineffable.'

The failure of the notion of beauty reflects the discrediting of the prestige of judgment itself, as something that could conceivably be impartial or objective, not always self-serving or self-referring. It also reflects the discrediting of binary discourses in the arts. Beauty defines itself as the antithesis of the ugly. Obviously, you can't say something is beautiful if you're not willing to say something is ugly. But there are more and more taboos about calling something, anything, ugly. (For an explanation, look first not at the rise of so-called political correctness, but at the evolving ideology of consumerism, then at the complicity between these two.) The point is to find what is beautiful in what has not hitherto been regarded as beautiful (or: the beautiful in the ugly).

Similarly, there is more and more resistance to the idea of 'good taste,' that is, to the dichotomy good taste/bad

taste, except for occasions that allow one to celebrate the defeat of snobbery and the triumph of what was once condescended to as bad taste. Today, good taste seems even more retrograde an idea than beauty. Austere, difficult 'modernist' art and literature have come to seem old-fashioned, a conspiracy of snobs. Innovation is relaxation now; today's E-Z Art gives the green light to all. In the cultural climate favoring the more user-friendly art of recent years, the beautiful seems, if not obvious, then pretentious. Beauty continues to take a battering in what are called, absurdly, our culture wars.

4

That beauty applied to some things and not to others, that it was a principle of *discrimination*, was once its strength and appeal. Beauty belonged to the family of notions that establish rank, and accorded well with social order unapologetic about station, class, hierarchy, and the right to exclude.

What had been a virtue of the concept became its liability. Beauty, which once seemed vulnerable because it was too general, loose, porous, was revealed as – on the contrary – excluding too much. Discrimination, once a positive faculty (meaning refined judgment, high standards, fastidiousness), turned negative: it meant prejudice, bigotry, blindness to the virtues of what was not identical with oneself.

The strongest, most successful move against beauty was in the arts: beauty, and the caring about beauty, was restrictive; as the current idiom has it, elitist. Our appreciations, it was felt, could be so much more inclusive if we said that something, instead of being beautiful, was 'interesting.'

Of course, when people said a work of art was interesting, this did not mean that they necessarily liked it – much less

that they thought it beautiful. It usually meant no more than they thought they ought to like it. Or that they liked it, sort of, even though it wasn't beautiful.

Or they might describe something as interesting to avoid the banality of calling it beautiful. Photography was the art where 'the interesting' first triumphed, and early on: the new, photographic way of seeing proposed everything as a potential subject for the camera. The beautiful could not have yielded such a range of subjects; and soon came to seem uncool to boot as a judgment. Of a photograph of a sunset, a beautiful sunset, anyone with minimal standards of verbal sophistication might well prefer to say, "Yes, the photograph is interesting."

5

What is interesting? Mostly, what has not previously been thought beautiful (or good). The sick are interesting, as Nietzsche points out. The wicked, too. To name something as interesting implies challenging old orders of praise; such judgments aspire to be found insolent or at least ingenious. Connoisseurs of the interesting – whose antonym is the boring – appreciate clash, not harmony. Liberalism is boring, declares Carl Schmitt in *The Concept of the Political*, written in 1932 (the following year he joined the Nazi Party). A politics conducted according to liberal principles lacks drama, flavor, conflict, while strong autocratic politics – and war – are interesting.

Long use of 'the interesting' as a criterion of value has, inevitably, weakened its transgressive bite. What is left of the old insolence lies mainly in its disdain for the consequences of actions and of judgments. As for the truthfulness of the ascription – that does not even enter the story. One calls something interesting precisely so as not to have to commit to a

judgment of beauty (or of goodness).

The interesting is now mainly a consumerist concept, bent on enlarging its domain: the more things that become interesting, the more the marketplace grows. The boring – understood as an absence, an emptiness – implies its antidote: the promiscuous, empty affirmations of the interesting. It is a peculiarly inconclusive way of experiencing reality.

In order to enrich this deprived take on our experiences, one would have to acknowledge a full notion of boredom: depression, rage (suppressed despair). Then one could work toward a full notion of the interesting. But that quality of experience – of feeling – one would probably no longer even *want* to call interesting.

6

Beauty can illustrate an ideal; a perfection. Or, because of its identification with women (more accurately, with Woman), it can trigger the usual ambivalence that stems from the age-old denigration of the feminine. Much of the discrediting of beauty needs to be understood as a result of the gender inflection. Misogyny, too, might underlie the urge to metaphorize beauty, thereby promoting it out of the realm of the 'merely' feminine, the unserious, the specious. For if women are worshiped because they are beautiful, they are condescended to for their preoccupation with making or keeping themselves beautiful. Beauty is theatrical, it is for being looked at and admired; and the word is as likely to suggest the beauty industry (beauty magazines, beauty parlors, beauty products) – the theatre of feminine frivolity – as the beauties of art and of nature. How else to explain the association of beauty – i.e., women – with mindlessness? To be concerned with one's own beauty is to risk the charge of narcissism

and frivolity. Consider all the beauty synonyms, starting with the ‘lovely,’ the merely ‘pretty,’ which cry out for a virile transposition.

“Handsome is as handsome does.” (But not: “Beautiful is as beautiful does.”) Though it applies no less than does ‘beautiful’ to appearance, ‘handsome’ – free of associations with the feminine – seems a more sober, less gushing way of commending. Beauty is not ordinarily associated with gravitas. Thus one might prefer to call the vehicle for delivering searing images of war and atrocity a ‘handsome book,’ as I did in the preface to a recent compilation of photographs by Don McCullin, lest calling it a ‘beautiful book’ (which it was) would seem an affront to its appalling subject.

7

It’s usually assumed that beauty is, almost tautologically, an ‘aesthetic’ category, which puts it, according to many, on a collision course with the ethical. But beauty, even beauty in the amoral mode, is never naked. And the ascription of beauty is never unmixed with moral values. Far from the aesthetic and the ethical being poles apart, as Kierkegaard and Tolstoy insisted, the aesthetic is itself a quasi-moral project. Arguments about beauty since Plato are stocked with questions about the proper relation to the beautiful (the irresistibly, entrancingly beautiful), which is thought to flow from the nature of beauty itself.

The perennial tendency to make of beauty itself a binary concept, to split it up into ‘inner’ and ‘outer,’ ‘higher’ and ‘lower’ beauty, is the usual way that judgments of the beautiful are colonized by moral judgments. From a Nietzschean (or Wildean) point of view, this may be improper, but it seems to me unavoidable. And the wisdom that

becomes available over a deep, lifelong engagement with the aesthetic cannot, I venture to say, be duplicated by any other kind of seriousness. Indeed, the various definitions of beauty come at least as close to a plausible characterization of virtue, and of a fuller humanity, as the attempts to define goodness as such.

8

Beauty is part of the history of idealizing, which is itself part of the history of consolation. But beauty may not always console. The beauty of face and figure torments, subjugates; that beauty is imperious. The beauty that is human, and the beauty that is made (art) – both raise the fantasy of possession. Our model of the disinterested comes from the beauty of nature – a nature that is distant, overarching, unpossessable.

From a letter written by a German soldier standing guard in the Russian winter in late December of 1942: “The most beautiful Christmas I had ever seen, made entirely of disinterested emotions and stripped of all tawdry trimmings. I was all alone beneath an enormous starred sky, and I can remember a tear running down my frozen cheek, a tear neither of pain nor of joy but of emotion created by intense experience. . . .”¹

Unlike beauty, often fragile and impermanent, the capacity to be overwhelmed by the beautiful is astonishingly sturdy and survives amidst the harshest distractions. Even war, even the prospect of certain death, cannot expunge it.

9

The beauty of art is better, ‘higher,’ according to Hegel, than the beauty of

¹ Quoted in Stephen G. Fritz, *Frontsoldaten: The German Soldier in World War II* (Lexington, Ky.: University Press of Kentucky, 1995), 130.

nature because it is made by human beings and is the work of the spirit. But the discerning of beauty in nature is also the result of traditions of consciousness, and of culture – in Hegel’s language, of spirit.

The responses to beauty in art and to beauty in nature are interdependent. As Wilde pointed out, art does more than school us on how and what to appreciate in nature. (He was thinking of poetry and painting. Today the standards of beauty in nature are largely set by photography.) What is beautiful reminds us of nature as such – of what lies beyond the human and the made – and thereby stimulates and deepens our sense of the sheer spread and fullness of reality, inanimate as well as pulsing, that surrounds us all.

A happy by-product of this insight, if insight it is: beauty regains its solidity, its inevitability, as a judgment needed to make sense of a large portion of one’s energies, affinities, and admirations; and the usurping notions appear ludicrous.

Imagine saying, “That sunset is interesting.”

Plotinus

On beauty

translated by Stephen MacKenna

Editor's Note: One of the earliest works written by Plotinus (A.D. 204 – 70), this elegant short treatise, published as “Ennead I, 6,” follows Plato’s “Symposium” and “Phaedrus” in equating beauty with the good – an association analyzed elsewhere in this issue by Susan Sontag and Arthur C. Danto. The most prominent Neoplatonist of the Hellenistic period, and a source of inspiration for such early Christian theologians as St. Augustine, Plotinus was rediscovered during the Renaissance. His way of thinking – a characteristic blend of mysticism and reasoned argument – has subsequently influenced philosophers and poets from Berkeley and Hegel to Goethe and Emerson.

1

Beauty addresses itself chiefly to sight; but there is a beauty for the hearing too, as in certain combinations of words and in all kinds of music, for melodies and cadences are beautiful; and minds that lift themselves above the realm of sense to a higher order are aware of beauty in the conduct of life, in actions, in character, in the pursuits of the intellect; and there is the beauty of the virtues. What loftier beauty there may be, yet, our argument will bring to light.

What, then, is it that gives comeliness to material forms and draws the ear to the sweetness perceived in sounds, and

what is the secret of the beauty there is in all that derives from Soul?

Is there some One Principle from which all take their grace, or is there a beauty peculiar to the embodied and another for the bodiless? Finally, one or many, what would such a Principle be?

Consider that some things, material shapes for instance, are gracious not by anything inherent but by something communicated, while others are lovely of themselves, as, for example, Virtue.

The same bodies appear sometimes beautiful, sometimes not; so that there is a good deal between being body and being beautiful.

What, then, is this something that shows itself in certain material forms? This is the natural beginning of our enquiry.

What is it that attracts the eyes of those to whom a beautiful object is presented, and calls them, lures them, towards it, and fills them with joy at the sight? If we possess ourselves of this, we have at once a standpoint for the wider survey.

Almost everyone declares that the symmetry of parts towards each other and towards a whole, with, besides, a certain charm of colour, constitutes the beauty recognized by the eye, that in visible things, as indeed in all else, univer-

sally, the beautiful thing is essentially symmetrical, patterned.

But think what this means.

Only a compound can be beautiful, never anything devoid of parts; and only a whole; the several parts will have beauty, not in themselves, but only as working together to give a comely total. Yet beauty in an aggregate demands beauty in details; it cannot be constructed out of ugliness; its law must run throughout.

All the loveliness of colour and even the light of the sun, being devoid of parts and so not beautiful by symmetry, must be ruled out of the realm of beauty. And how comes gold to be a beautiful thing? And lightning by night, and the stars, why are these so fair?

In sounds also the simple must be proscribed, though often in a whole noble composition each several tone is delicious in itself.

Again since the one face, constant in symmetry, appears sometimes fair and sometimes not, can we doubt that beauty is something more than symmetry, that symmetry itself owes its beauty to a remoter principle?

Turn to what is attractive in methods of life or in the expression of thought; are we to call in symmetry here? What symmetry is to be found in noble conduct, or excellent laws, in any form of mental pursuit?

What symmetry can there be in points of abstract thought?

The symmetry of being accordant with each other? But there may be accordance or entire identity where there is nothing but ugliness: the proposition that honesty is merely a generous artlessness chimes in the most perfect harmony with the proposition that morality means weakness of will; the accordance is complete.

Then again, all the virtues are a beauty of the soul, a beauty authentic beyond

any of these others; but how does symmetry enter here? The soul, it is true, is not a simple unity, but still its virtue cannot have the symmetry of size or of number: what standard of measurement could preside over the compromise or the coalescence of the soul's faculties or purposes?

Finally, how by this theory would there be beauty in the Intellectual-Principle, essentially the solitary?

2

Let us, then, go back to the source, and indicate at once the Principle that bestows beauty on material things.

Undoubtedly this Principle exists; it is something that is perceived at the first glance, something which the soul names as from an ancient knowledge and, recognising, welcomes it, enters into unison with it.

But let the soul fall in with the Ugly and at once it shrinks within itself, denies the thing, turns away from it, not accordant, resenting it.

Our interpretation is that the soul – by the very truth of its nature, by its affiliation to the noblest Existents in the hierarchy of Being – when it sees anything of that kin, or any trace of that kinship, thrills with an immediate delight, takes its own to itself, and thus stirs anew to the sense of its nature and of all its affinity.

But, is there any such likeness between the loveliness of this world and the splendours in the Supreme? Such a likeness in the particulars would make the two orders alike: but what is there in common between beauty here and beauty There?

We hold that all the loveliness of this world comes by communion in Ideal-Form.

All shapelessness whose kind admits of pattern and form, as long as it remains

outside of Reason and Idea, is ugly by that very isolation from the Divine-Thought. And this is the Absolute Ugly: an ugly thing is something that has not been entirely mastered by pattern, that is by Reason, the Matter not yielding at all points and in all respects to Ideal-Form.

But where the Ideal-Form has entered, it has grouped and coordinated what from a diversity of parts was to become a unity: it has rallied confusion into cooperation: it has made the sum one harmonious coherence: for the Idea is a unity and what it moulds must come to unity as far as multiplicity may.

And on what has thus been compacted to unity, Beauty enthrones itself, giving itself to the parts as to the sum: when it lights on some natural unity, a thing of like parts, then it gives itself to that whole. Thus, for an illustration, there is the beauty, conferred by craftsmanship, of all a house with all its parts, and the beauty which some natural quality may give to a single stone.

This, then, is how the material thing becomes beautiful – by communicating in the thought that flows from the Divine.

3

And the soul includes a faculty peculiarly addressed to Beauty – one incomparably sure in the appreciation of its own, never in doubt whenever any lovely thing presents itself for judgement.

Or perhaps the soul itself acts immediately, affirming the Beautiful where it finds something accordant with the Ideal-Form within itself, using this Idea as a canon of accuracy in its decision.

But what accordance is there between the material and that which antedates all Matter?

On what principle does the architect, when he finds the house standing before him correspondent with his inner ideal

of a house, pronounce it beautiful? Is it not that the house before him, the stones apart, is the inner idea stamped upon the mass of exterior matter, the indivisible exhibited in diversity?

So with the perceptive faculty: discerning in certain objects the Ideal-Form which has bound and controlled shapeless matter, opposed in nature to Idea, seeing further stamped upon the common shapes some shape excellent above the common, it gathers into unity what still remains fragmentary, catches it up and carries it within, no longer a thing of parts, and presents it to the Ideal-Principle as something concordant and congenial, a natural friend: the joy here is like that of a good man who discerns in a youth the early signs of a virtue consonant with the achieved perfection within his own soul.

The beauty of colour is also the outcome of a unification: it derives from shape, from the conquest of the darkness inherent in Matter by the pouring-in of light, the unembodied, which is a Rational-Principle and an Ideal-Form.

Hence it is that Fire itself is splendid beyond all material bodies, holding the rank of Ideal-Principle to the other elements, making ever upwards, the subtlest and sprightliest of all bodies, as very near to the unembodied; itself alone admitting no other, all the others penetrated by it: for they take warmth but this is never cold; it has colour primarily; they receive the Form of colour from it: hence the splendour of its light, the splendour that belongs to the Idea. And all that has resisted and is but uncertainly held by its light remains outside of beauty, as not having absorbed the plenitude of the Form of colour.

And harmonies unheard in sound create the harmonies we hear, and wake the soul to the consciousness of beauty, showing it the one essence in another

kind: for the measures of our sensible music are not arbitrary but are determined by the Principle whose labour is to dominate Matter and bring pattern into being.

Thus far of the beauties of the realm of sense, images and shadow-pictures, fugitives that have entered into Matter – to adorn, and to ravish, where they are seen.

4

But there are earlier and loftier beauties than these. In the sense-bound life we are no longer granted to know them, but the soul, taking no help from the organs, sees and proclaims them. To the vision of these we must mount, leaving sense to its own low place.

As it is not for those to speak of the graceful forms of the material world who have never seen them or known their grace – men born blind, let us suppose – in the same way those must be silent upon the beauty of noble conduct and of learning and all that order who have never cared for such things, nor may those tell of the splendour of virtue who have never known the face of Justice and of Moral-Wisdom beautiful beyond the beauty of Evening and of dawn.

Such vision is for those only who see with the Soul's sight – and at the vision, they will rejoice, and awe will fall upon them and a trouble deeper than all the rest could ever stir, for now they are moving in the realm of Truth.

This is the spirit that Beauty must ever induce, wonderment and a delicious trouble, longing and love and a trembling that is all delight. For the unseen all this may be felt as for the seen; and this the Souls feel for it, every soul in some degree, but those the more deeply that are the more truly apt to this higher love – just as all take delight in the beauty of the body but all are not stung as

sharply, and those only that feel the keener wound are known as Lovers.

5

These Lovers, then, lovers of the beauty outside of sense, must be made to declare themselves.

What do you feel in presence of the grace you discern in actions, in manners, in sound morality, in all the works and fruits of virtue, in the beauty of souls? When you see that you yourselves are beautiful within, what do you feel? What is this Dionysiac exultation that thrills through your being, this straining upwards of all your Soul, this longing to break away from the body and live sunken within the veritable self?

These are no other than the emotions of Souls under the spell of love.

But what is it that awakens all this passion? No shape, no colour, no grandeur of mass: all is for a Soul, something whose beauty rests upon no colour, for the moral wisdom the Soul enshrines and all the other hueless splendour of the virtues. It is that you find in yourself, or admire in another, loftiness of spirit; righteousness of life; disciplined purity; courage of the majestic face; gravity; modesty that goes fearless and tranquil and passionless; and, shining down upon all, the light of god-like Intellection.

All these noble qualities are to be revered and loved, no doubt, but what entitles them to be called beautiful?

They exist: they manifest themselves to us: anyone that sees them must admit that they have reality of Being; and is not Real-Being, really beautiful?

But we have not yet shown by what property in them they have wrought the Soul to loveliness: what is this grace, this splendour as of Light, resting upon all the virtues?

Let us take the contrary, the ugliness of the Soul, and set that against its beauty:

to understand, at once, what this ugliness is and how it comes to appear in the Soul will certainly open our way before us.

Let us then suppose an ugly Soul, dissolute, unrighteous: teeming with all the lusts; torn by internal discord; beset by the fears of its cowardice and the envies of its pettiness; thinking, in the little thought it has, only of the perishable and the base; perverse in all, it's the friend of unclean pleasures; living the life of abandonment to bodily sensation and delighting in its deformity.

What must we think but that all this shame is something that has gathered about the Soul, some foreign bane outraging it, soiling it, so that, encumbered with all manner of turpitude, it has no longer a clean activity or a clean sensation, but commands only a life smouldering dully under the crust of evil; that, sunk in manifold death, it no longer sees what a Soul should see, may no longer rest in its own being, dragged ever as it is towards the outer, the lower, the dark?

An unclean thing, I dare to say; flickering hither and thither at the call of objects of sense, deeply infected with the taint of body, occupied always in Matter, and absorbing Matter into itself; in its commerce with the Ignoble it has trafficked away for an alien nature its own essential Idea.

If a man has been immersed in filth or daubed with mud his native comeliness disappears and all that is seen is the foul stuff besmearing him: his ugly condition is due to alien matter that has encrusted him, and if he is to win back his grace it must be his business to scour and purify himself and make himself what he was.

So, we may justly say, a Soul becomes ugly – by something foisted upon it, by sinking itself into the alien, by a fall, a descent into body, into Matter. The dishonour of the Soul is in its ceasing to be

clean and apart. Gold is degraded when it is mixed with earthy particles; if these be worked out, the gold is left and is beautiful, isolated from all that is foreign, gold with gold alone. And so the Soul; let it be but cleared of the desires that come by its too intimate converse with the body, emancipated from all the passions, purged of all that embodiment has thrust upon it, withdrawn, a solitary, to itself again – in that moment the ugliness that came only from the alien is stripped away.

6

For, as the ancient teaching was, moral-discipline and courage and every virtue, not even excepting Wisdom itself, all is purification.

Hence the Mysteries with good reason adumbrate the immersion of the unpurified in filth, even in the Nether-World, since the unclean loves filth for its very filthiness, and swine foul of body find their joy in foulness.

What else is Sophrosyne, rightly so-called, but to take no part in the pleasures of the body, to break away from them as unclean and unworthy of the clean? So too, Courage is but being fearless of the death which is but the parting of the Soul from the body, an event which no one can dread whose delight is to be his unmingled self. And Magnanimity is but disregard for the lure of things here. And Wisdom is but the Act of the Intellectual-Principle withdrawn from the lower places and leading the Soul to the Above.

The Soul thus cleansed is all Idea and Reason, wholly free of body, intellective, entirely of that divine order from which the wellspring of Beauty rises and all the race of Beauty.

Hence the Soul heightened to the Intellectual-Principle is beautiful to all its power. For Intellection and all that pro-

ceeds from Intellection are the Soul's beauty, a graciousness native to it and not foreign, for only with these is it truly Soul. And it is just to say that in the Soul's becoming a good and beautiful thing is its becoming like to God, for from the Divine comes all the Beauty and all the Good in beings.

We may even say that Beauty is the Authentic-Existents and Ugliness is the Principle contrary to Existence: and the Ugly is also the primal evil; therefore its contrary is at once good and beautiful, or is Good and Beauty: and hence the one method will discover to us the Beauty-Good and the Ugliness-Evil.

And Beauty, this Beauty which is also The Good, must be posed as The First: directly deriving from this First is the Intellectual-Principle which is pre-eminently the manifestation of Beauty; through the Intellectual-Principle Soul is beautiful. The beauty in things of a lower order – actions and pursuits for instance – comes by operation of the shaping Soul which is also the author of the beauty found in the world of sense. For the Soul, a divine thing, a fragment as it were of the Primal Beauty, makes beautiful to the fullness of their capacity all things whatsoever that it grasps and moulds.

7

Therefore we must ascend again towards the Good, the desired of every Soul. Anyone that has seen This, knows what I intend when I say that it is beautiful. Even the desire of it is to be desired as a Good. To attain it is for those that will take the upward path, who will set all their forces towards it, who will divest themselves of all that we have put on in our descent: – so, to those that approach the Holy Celebrations of the Mysteries, there are appointed purifications and the laying aside of the garments worn be-

fore, and the entry in nakedness – until, passing, on the upward way, all that is other than the God, each in the solitude of himself shall behold that solitary-dwelling Existence, the Apart, the Unmingled, the Pure, that from Which all things depend, for Which all look and live and act and know, the Source of Life and of Intellection and of Being.

And one that shall know this vision – with what passion of love shall he not be seized, with what pang of desire, what longing to be molten into one with This, what wondering delight! If he that has never seen this Being must hunger for It as for all his welfare, he that has known must love and reverence It as the very Beauty; he will be flooded with awe and gladness, stricken by a salutary terror; he loves with a veritable love, with sharp desire; all other loves than this he must despise, and disdain all that once seemed fair.

This, indeed, is the mood even of those who, having witnessed the manifestation of Gods or Supernals, can never again feel the old delight in the comeliness of material forms: what then are we to think of one that contemplates Absolute Beauty in Its essential integrity, no accumulation of flesh and matter, no dweller on earth or in the heavens – so perfect Its purity – far above all such things in that they are non-essential, composite, not primal but descending from This?

Beholding this Being – the Choragus of all Existence, the Self-Intent that ever gives forth and never takes – resting, rapt, in the vision and possession of so lofty a loveliness, growing to Its likeness, what Beauty can the soul yet lack? For This, the Beauty supreme, the absolute, and the primal, fashions Its lovers to Beauty and makes them also worthy of love.

And for This, the sternest and the

uttermost combat is set before the Souls; all our labour is for This, lest we be left without part in this noblest vision, which to attain is to be blessed in the blissful sight, which to fail of is to fail utterly.

For not he that has failed of the joy that is in colour or in visible forms, not he that has failed of power or of honours or of kingdom has failed, but only he that has failed of only This, for Whose winning he should renounce kingdoms and command over earth and ocean and sky, if only, spurning the world of sense from beneath his feet, and straining to This, he may see.

8

But what must we do? How lies the path? How come to vision of the inaccessible Beauty, dwelling as if in consecrated precincts, apart from the common ways where all may see, even the profane?

He that has the strength, let him arise and withdraw into himself, foregoing all that is known by the eyes, turning away for ever from the material beauty that once made his joy. When he perceives those shapes of grace that show in body, let him not pursue: he must know them for copies, vestiges, shadows, and hasten away towards That they tell of. For if anyone follow what is like a beautiful shape playing over water – is there not a myth telling in symbol of such a dupe, how he sank into the depths of the current and was swept away to nothingness? So too, one that is held by material beauty and will not break free shall be precipitated, not in body but in Soul, down to the dark depths loathed of the Intellectual-Being, where, blind even in the Lower-World, he shall have commerce only with shadows, there as here.

“Let us flee then to the beloved Fatherland”: this is the soundest counsel. But

what is this flight? How are we to gain the open sea? For Odysseus is surely a parable to us when he commands the flight from the sorceries of Circe or Calypso – not content to linger for all the pleasure offered to his eyes and all the delight of sense filling his days.

The Fatherland to us is There whence we have come, and There is The Father.

What then is our course, what the manner of our flight? This is not a journey for the feet; the feet bring us only from land to land; nor need you think of coach or ship to carry you away; all this order of things you must set aside and refuse to see: you must close the eyes and call instead upon another vision which is to be waked within you, a vision, the birth-right of all, which few turn to use.

9

And this inner vision, what is its operation?

Newly awakened it is all too feeble to bear the ultimate splendour. Therefore the Soul must be trained – to the habit of remarking, first, all noble pursuits, then the works of beauty produced not by the labour of the arts but by the virtue of men known for their goodness: lastly, you must search the souls of those that have shaped these beautiful forms.

But how are you to see into a virtuous soul and know its loveliness?

Withdraw into yourself and look. And if you do not find yourself beautiful yet, act as does the creator of a statue that is to be made beautiful: he cuts away here, he smoothes there, he makes this line lighter, this other purer, until a lovely face has grown upon his work. So do you also: cut away all that is excessive, straighten all that is crooked, bring light to all that is overcast, labour to make all one glow of beauty and never cease chiselling your statue, until there shall shine

out on you from it the godlike splendour of virtue, until you shall see the perfect goodness surely established in the stainless shrine.

When you know that you have become this perfect work, when you are self-gathered in the purity of your being, nothing now remaining that can shatter that inner unity, nothing from without clinging to the authentic man, when you find yourself wholly true to your essential nature, wholly that only veritable Light which is not measured by space, not narrowed to any circumscribed form nor again diffused as a thing void of term, but ever unmeasurable as something greater than all measure and more than all quantity – when you perceive that you have grown to this, you are now become very vision: now call up all your confidence, strike forward yet a step – you need a guide no longer – strain, and see.

This is the only eye that sees the mighty Beauty. If the eye that adventures the vision be dimmed by vice, impure, or weak, and unable in its cowardly blenching to see the uttermost brightness, then it sees nothing even though another

point to what lies plain to sight before it. To any vision must be brought an eye adapted to what is to be seen, and having some likeness to it. Never did eye see the sun unless it had first become sunlike, and never can the soul have vision of the first Beauty unless itself be beautiful.

Therefore, first let each become godlike and each beautiful who cares to see God and Beauty. So, mounting, the Soul will come first to the Intellectual-Principle and survey all the beautiful Ideas in the Supreme and will avow that this is Beauty, that the Ideas are Beauty. For by their efficacy comes all Beauty else, but the offspring and essence of the Intellectual-Being. What is beyond the Intellectual-Principle we affirm to be the nature of Good radiating Beauty before it. So that, treating the Intellectual-Kosmos as one, the first is the Beautiful: if we make distinction there, the Realm of Ideas constitutes the Beauty of the Intellectual Sphere; and The Good, which lies beyond, is the Fountain at once and Principle of Beauty: the Primal Good and the Primal Beauty have the one dwelling-place and, thus, always, Beauty's seat is There.

Arthur C. Danto

The abuse of beauty

It is self-evident that nothing concerning art is self-evident any more, not its inner life, not its relation to the world, not even its right to exist.

– Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 1969

1

It is the mark of the contemporary period in the history of art that no constraints govern the way works of visual art should look. An artwork can look like anything, and be made of anything – anything is possible.

Arthur C. Danto, art critic for “The Nation” magazine and Emeritus Johnsonian Professor of Philosophy at Columbia University, has been a Fellow of the American Academy since 1980. He is the author of numerous books, including “Nietzsche as Philosopher” (1965), “The Transfiguration of the Commonplace” (1981), and “Encounters and Reflections: Art in the Historical Present,” a collection of art criticism that won the National Book Critics Circle Prize for Criticism in 1990. “The abuse of beauty” is based on the Carus Lectures presented to the American Philosophical Association in December of 2001. Danto is currently preparing a revised and greatly expanded version of these lectures that will be published as a book by Open Court Press in 2003.

For example, shortly after the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center in New York in 2001, the composer Karlheinz Stockhausen proclaimed it “the greatest work of art ever.” Since his language conveyed extreme admiration, he was instantly disgraced in the minds of most. That such a claim could be made at all underscores the total openness of the contemporary concept of art, however monstrous the consequences of conceiving art in that way.

The philosophical history of art culminates in the recognition that there is no merit in asking any longer whether this or that can be art, for the answer will always be yes, noting that limits external to the definition of art – moral considerations above all – always remain. The definition of art must accordingly be consistent with an absolute pluralism as far as works of art are concerned. I am almost certain that Adorno’s cultural despair derived from this perception, though not even that paradigmatically pessimistic thinker, whose thought was darkened by the Holocaust, would have been able to imagine a statement like Stockhausen’s, let alone the horror that occasioned it.

The publication of Adorno’s *Aesthetic Theory* in 1969 coincided with the end of a decade of remarkably intense inquiry,

conducted by artists as well as philosophers, though largely in independence of one another. Indeed, an essay with which the decade properly began – Clement Greenberg’s 1960 “Modernist Painting” – remarked upon a parallel between modernist art and a certain form of philosophical practice. Comparing contemporary art with a form of self-criticism exemplified in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Greenberg called Kant the first modernist. Self-criticism in the arts, as understood by Greenberg, consisted in purifying the relevant medium of the art form. Thus three-dimensionality was extrinsic to painting, which was essentially flat, in Greenberg’s view.

Accordingly, he believed painting should be purged of illusionism of any kind, and depth given over by right to sculpture.

Greenberg’s agenda was one of art defining itself from within, and there can be no question that this quasi-Kantian endeavor was pursued, often with a certain puritanical fervor, by a number of artists bent on making art in its conceptually purified condition. This was particularly the case with the so-called minimalists. But in truth, philosophy and avant-garde art shared a great many attitudes in the 1960s.

One aim of pop, for example, was to ironize the distinction between high and vernacular art – between the heroized painting of the previous generation of artists, the Abstract Expressionists, and the popular imagery of the comic strip and commercial advertisements – the ‘High and Low’ of a controversial exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in 1992. But comparably, it was an effort of analytical philosophy to overcome the pretensions of what we might call ‘high’ philosophy – the cosmo-tragical visions of the Existentialists or of the towering titans of metaphysics who loomed behind them – by criticizing its language

against either the standards of ordinary discourse – where we know whereof we speak – or of a scientific discourse governed by strict considerations of verifiability and confirmability. It is difficult to resist the impulse to see a cultural equivalence between the canonization of ordinary language cultivated by the Oxford School of Linguistic phenomenology and the studied aesthetic of everyday objects in Warhol’s Factory or Claes Oldenberg’s 1962 Store on East Second Street in Manhattan, where one could buy painted effigies of gym shoes, automobile tires, and women’s underpants.

How much of any of this fell within the horizons of official aesthetics is historically problematic, but some philosophers certainly grasped that the definition of art was at issue as never before. In 1965, the British philosopher Richard Wollheim published an important essay on “Minimal Art.” Though Wollheim was subsequently credited with coining the term ‘minimalism,’ he admits to having known nothing of the works that finally became so designated. His concern in his essay, rather, was whether there are minimal criteria for something being designated art. His paradigms were monochrome painting, which was generally regarded as a mere philosophical joke until perhaps 1915, and the ready-mades that Marcel Duchamp put forward as art at about that same time.

In addressing this concern, Wollheim followed the official philosophical model according to which having a concept requires criteria for picking out its instances. It was a Wittgensteinian commonplace that instances can be culled out successfully without benefit of definitions, as in the case of games. In fact there can be no criteria for distinguishing a ready-made metal grooming comb by Duchamp from an indiscernible met-

al grooming comb that was not a ready-made, nor a monochrome white painting from a panel all over which white paint had been slathered – so the question of definition became urgent after all.

Indeed, with the advent of conceptual art at the end of the 1960s, the material object was no longer required – nor did it necessarily have to be made by the artist. “I’ve stopped making objects,” the artist Douglas Huebner said in a 1969 interview. “And I’m not trying to take anything away from the world. Nor am I trying to restructure the world. I’m not trying to tell the world anything, really. I’m not trying to tell the world that it could be better by being this or that. I’m just, you know, touching the world by doing these things, and leaving it pretty much the way it is.” Leaving the world as we found it, we had been told by Wittgenstein, is the way it is with philosophy, too.

What follows from this history of conceptual erasure – and the concomitant pluralism I began by remarking – is not that art is indefinable, but that the conditions necessary for something to be art will have to be fairly abstract to fit all imaginable cases, and in particular that very little remains of ‘our concept of art’ that the framer of a real definition can rely on. In *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* (1981) I came up with two conditions, condensed as “X is an art work if it embodies a meaning.” The chief merit of this definition lay in its weakness.

Missing from my proto-definition, as from all the philosophical definitions of art put forth during the 1960s that I can recall, was any reference to beauty, which would surely have been among the first conditions to have been advanced by a conceptual analyst at the turn of the twentieth century. Beauty had disappeared not only from the ad-

vanced art of the 1960s, but from the advanced philosophy of art of that decade as well. Nor could it be part of the definition of art if anything can be an artwork, since it is certainly not true that anything is beautiful.

Not long after the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation was established in 1925, the founders saw as its immediate beneficiaries “Men and women devoted to pushing forward the boundaries of knowledge and to the creation of beauty.” Art in that era was tacitly defined in terms of creating beauty, and that creation was in turn put on equal footing with efforts at expanding the boundaries of knowledge.

Forty years later, reference to the creation of beauty was omitted from the enabling language for the National Endowment for the Arts, presumably because beauty had largely disappeared from the artistic agenda in 1965. But beauty still played a role in the thinking of the era’s politicians, many of whom dismissed modern art as depraved and destructive. Congressman George A. Dondero of Michigan wrote that “Modern art is communistic because it is distorted and ugly, because it does not glorify our beautiful country, our cheerful and smiling people, and our material progress. Art which does not beautify our country in plain simple terms that everyone can understand breeds dissatisfaction. It is therefore opposed to our government and those who create and promote it are our enemies.”

The newspaper magnate William Randolph Hearst “equated any form of artistic radicalism with communism, and assumed that the work produced in a non-traditional manner was a disguised means of communist propaganda.” This is but one instance, as we shall see, of the politicization of beauty.

In the early 1990s, the art critic Dave

Hickey was asked what he thought the central issue of the decade would be. “Snatched from my reverie, I said ‘Beauty,’ and then, more firmly, ‘The issue of the nineties will be *beauty*.’” This was greeted, he recalls, with a “total uncomprehending silence. . . . I had wandered into this *dead zone*, this silent abyss.”

Let me begin to put this silence into a certain perspective by considering the photography of Robert Mapplethorpe, who had become notorious in 1989 when his exhibition *The Perfect Moment* was cancelled by the Corcoran Museum of Art in an ill-advised preemptive move against the danger that funding for the National Endowment for the Arts might be voted down if our legislators saw what the fund was supporting. The fear was based on the charged sexual content of his signature images – though it was central to his achievement that his work was self-consciously beautiful as well. It was this, rather than its content, that alienated the photographic avant-garde against him.

When I was writing my book on Mapplethorpe, I asked an artist who was at the time experimenting with pinhole cameras what he thought of him. He dismissed Mapplethorpe as a *pompier* – an artist so concerned with elegance as to have lost touch with the limits of his medium. The imperatives of modernism, as defined by Greenberg, tended to make the simple grainy snapshot the paradigm of photographic purity. And the charge against Mapplethorpe was that his work was too beautiful to qualify for critical endorsement. Gerhard Richter recalls, “One writer claimed that if I painted sex and violence, it would have been okay, but one isn’t allowed to paint anything beautiful.”

“The changed fashion of the time,” if I may appropriate Kant’s mournful lan-

guage regarding the fate of Metaphysics, “brings beauty only scorn; a matron out-cast and forsaken.”

The twentieth century did not begin with such disdain for the concept of beauty. In a letter to Thomas Monro in 1927, George Santayana wrote of his generation that “We were not very much later than Ruskin, Pater, Swinburne, and Matthew Arnold. Our atmosphere was that of poets and persons touched with religious enthusiasm or religious sadness. Beauty (which mustn’t be mentioned now) was then a living presence, or an aching absence, day and night.” It was precisely its beauty that justified the esteem in which art was held in Santayana’s time. Here, for example, are some thoughts that are almost unintelligible today, from the early writing of Santayana’s contemporary G. E. Moore: “I cannot see but what that which is meant by beautiful is simply and solely that which is an end in itself. The object of art would then be that to which the objects of Morals are means, and the only thing to which they are means. The only reason for having virtues would be to produce works of art.”

In his early text *Art, Morals, and Religion*, Moore wrote, “Religion is merely a subdivision of art,” which he explicated this way: “Every valuable purpose which religion serves is also served by Art; and Art perhaps serves more if we are to say that its range of good objects and emotions is wider.” There can be no doubt that Moore believed that art can take religion’s purposes over because of the beauty it essentially possesses.

Now I would like to offer a historical speculation. It is that the immense esteem in which art continues to be held today is an inheritance of this exalted view of beauty. It is widely and some-

times cynically said that art has replaced religion in contemporary consciousness. My speculation is that these Edwardian attitudes have survived the abjuration of beauty itself. I will go even further to suggest that if there is a place for beauty in art today, it is connected with these survivals, which are deeply embedded in human consciousness.

Beauty's place is not in the definition or – to use the somewhat discredited idiom – the essence of art, from which the avant-garde has rightly removed it. That removal, however, was not merely the result of a conceptual but, as I shall argue, a political determination. And it is the residue of aesthetic politics that lingers on in the negativity we find in attitudes toward beauty in art today. The idea of beauty, the poet Bill Berkson wrote me recently, is a “mangled sodden thing.”

But the *fact* of beauty is quite another matter.

In a passage near the beginning of Proust's *Within a Budding Grove*, Marcel (the Narrator), traveling by train to Balbec, sees a peasant girl approaching the station in the early morning, offering coffee and milk. “I felt on seeing her that desire to live which is reborn in us whenever we become conscious anew of beauty and of happiness.”

I believe Proust's psychology profound in connecting the consciousness of beauty with happiness – providing we are not conflicted because of a negativity that had yet to inflect the idea of beauty in the generation of Proust, Moore, and Santayana.

I would like to press this further. It was the moral weight that was assigned to beauty that helps us understand why the first generation of the twentieth-century avant-garde found it so urgent to dislodge beauty from its mistaken place in the philosophy of art. It occupied that

place in virtue of a conceptual error. Once we are in a position to perceive that mistake, we should be able to redeem beauty for artistic use once again.

But conceptual analysis by itself, without the reinforcement of a kind of Foucauldian archeology, is insufficiently powerful to help us in this task. Had it not, for example, been for the artistic avant-garde in the twentieth century, philosophers almost certainly would continue to teach that the connection between art and beauty is conceptually tight.

In the latter sections of *Principia Ethica*, first published in 1903, Moore wrote, “By far the most valuable things we know or can imagine, are certain states of consciousness, which may roughly be described as the pleasures of human intercourse and the enjoyment of beautiful objects.” Moore thought the point “so obvious that it runs the risk of seeming to be a platitude.” No one, Moore claims, “has ever doubted that personal affection and the appreciation of what is beautiful in Art or Nature, are good in themselves.” Nor, he continues, “does it appear probable that any one will think that anything else has *nearly* so great a value as the things which are included under these two heads.”

Moore's confident appeals seem almost shockingly parochial, but I'll suppose they were commonplace in his world. What would not have been commonplace, however, is what he next goes on to claim, namely that “this is the ultimate and fundamental truth of Moral Philosophy,” and that these two values “form the rational ultimate end of human action and the sole criterion of social progress.” People might come to accept these as truths, but they appear, Moore said, to be “truths which have been generally overlooked.”

I think Moore must have been correct that if truths, these were generally overlooked, since they were perceived as having the force of revelation by the Bloomsbury circle, whose entire philosophy of art and of life were derived from Moore's teaching. "A great new freedom seemed about to come," according to Vanessa Bell. Love and friendship, on the one hand, and what Moore speaks of "as the proper appreciation of a beautiful object" were to suffice, without the need for religion, in satisfying the main moral needs of modern human beings.

With the exception of Hume and Hegel, the classical aestheticians drew no crucial distinction between art and nature in regard to the appreciation of beauty, and it must be borne in mind that that indifference was but rarely contested in philosophical aesthetics nor in artistic practice itself when Moore composed *Principia Ethica*. If anything, I think, Moore supposed the appreciation of natural beauty superior to the appreciation of artistic beauty, largely because "We do think that the emotional contemplation of a natural scene, supposing its qualities equally beautiful, is in some way a better state of things than that of a painted landscape; we would think that the world would be improved if we could substitute for the best works of representative art *real* objects equally beautiful."

Moore believed that so far as the pictorial arts are concerned, a beautiful painting is a painting of a beautiful subject. And this I think gave a certain importance to the museum of fine arts as a site in which to experience beauty in those years. In Henry James's *The Golden Bowl* (1905), his character Adam Verver, a man of immense wealth living abroad, has conceived the idea of building a "museum of museums" for American City, where he amassed his fortune. His

aim in this is to "release the people of his native state from the bondage of ugliness." There would be no way – or no easy way – to transform Detroit or Pittsburgh into the Catskills or the Grand Canyon. But artistic beauty was portable, so if the aesthetically deprived citizenry of American City could be put in the presence of "treasures sifted to positive sanctity," it would benefit immensely from the contemplation of beautiful objects, which Moore endorsed as the highest moral good.

The problem was that modernist painting, in the period James's novel was first published, was beginning to veer, somewhat starkly, away from the mimetic model. In 1910 and 1912, modernist painter and critic Roger Fry organized two notorious postimpressionist exhibitions at the Grafton Gallery in London. As it happens, the Bloomsbury circle, and Moore himself, praised the objective beauty of the unprecedented works on display in these exhibitions. But a great many professional art critics disagreed. The artistic representations so deviated from the motifs they transcribed that many viewers saw no way of dealing with them. "One gentleman," wrote Fry, "is so put to it to account for his own inability to understand these pictures that he is driven to the conclusion that it is a colossal hoax on the part of the organizers of the exhibition and myself in particular."

Attempting to explain the incapacity of such gentlemen to appreciate objective beauty, Fry blamed ignorance and unfamiliarity:

Almost without exception, they tacitly assume that the aim of art is imitative representation, yet none of them has tried to show any reason for such a curious proposition. A great deal has been said about

these artists searching for the ugly instead of consoling us with beauty. They forget that every new work of creative design is ugly until it becomes beautiful; that we usually apply the word beautiful to those works of art in which familiarity has enabled us to grasp the unity easily, and that we find ugly those works in which we still perceive beauty only by an effort.

The perception of these artworks as ugly was, in effect, the projection onto them of a mental confusion that a course in aesthetic education will remove. Postimpressionist painters, Fry goes on to say, affirm “the paramount importance of design, which necessarily places the imitative side of art in a secondary place.” This is the basis of Fry’s formalism.

But Fry himself made a mistake even more profound than those critics who supposed it was the aim of painting to imitate nature. His mistake was supposing it was the aim of painting to be beautiful.

I give Fry great credit for recognizing that something needed to be explained in order that those who scoffed might perceive the beauty of postimpressionist painting, but I draw special attention to the a priori view that the painting in question really *was* beautiful, if only viewers knew how to look at it.

Since Fry, it has become a commonplace that the history of modernism is the history of acceptance. This story is told over and over by docents and lecturers in art appreciation. In this view, the history of art always has a happy ending. Manet’s *Olympia*, vilified in 1865, became a world treasure two generations later: in *The Guermites Way*, Proust writes of the way “the unbridgeable gulf between what they considered a masterpiece by Ingres and what they supposed must forever remain a ‘horror’ (Manet’s *Olympia*, for example) shrank until the two canvases seemed like twins.”

How does this happen? Fry believed that it happens through critical explanation. People have to be brought to understand the work, and the way in which it is actually beautiful. That, more than the actual explanations Fry gave, is his great achievement. For it makes clear that artistic beauty often requires explanation if it is to be appreciated, something that Hume understood completely. “In many orders of beauty, particularly those of the finer arts,” Hume writes in the *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, “it is requisite to employ much reasoning in order to feel the proper sentiment; and a false relish may frequently be corrected by argument and reflection.” Hume is eager to point out that “moral beauty partakes much of this latter species.”

With qualification, I accept Fry’s point, as well as the spirit of Hume’s marvelous observation. What I want to deny, however, is that the history of appreciation always culminates in the appreciation of *beauty*. That, as I see it, is the assumption of Edwardian aesthetics, which the kind of art selected for the Grafton Gallery exhibitions ought to have called into question. The Edwardians, for example, were entirely right to begin to appreciate African art. They were even right in thinking that, on formal grounds, it could be seen as beautiful. The Victorians had thought that ‘primitive peoples’ were, in making art, trying to make beautiful objects, only they did not know exactly how – hence their ‘primitivity.’ The Edwardians thought themselves advanced because formalism enabled them to see what Fry called “Negro sculpture” as beautiful. But they were wrong in thinking that they had learned through formalism to see the beauty that was the point of African art.

That was never its point, nor was beauty the point of most of the world's great art. It is very rarely the point of art today.

Having lived through the *Sensation* exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum in 1999, with its crude exploitation of what might shock or offend, I can sympathize with Fry. The critics, pretty much to a person, condemned the art, and were certain they were being put upon. But some of us were ready to see it as a First Amendment rather than aesthetic matter, and in this we were perhaps more right than someone would have been who hoped that through argument they would see the beauty it was in some measure the object of the art to injure.

This is not to say that beauty does not have a role to play in the art of our own day. But in order to find out what that role might be, we shall have to free ourselves from the Edwardian axiom that all good art is categorically beautiful, if only we have learned to recognize how. We will have to find ways of justifying art other than those with which my narrative of the decline of beauty began. It is an achievement of the conceptual history of art in the twentieth century that we have a much more complex idea of artistic appreciation than the early modernists – or modernism in general, down to its formulation in the writing of Clement Greenberg as late as the 1960s.

2

Near the opening of *Une Saison en Enfer* – allegedly an allegorical account of his tumultuous relationship with the poet Verlaine – Rimbaud writes: “One evening, I sat Beauty on my knees; and I found her bitter, and I abused her.”

The ‘bitterness of beauty’ became epidemic in the avant-garde art of the following century, but it was a rare thought

in 1873, when Rimbaud published this poem. In Fantin-Latour's group portrait of the previous year, *Un Coin de Table*, Rimbaud is shown seated with Verlaine and a number of other bohemians in a group called *Les Villains Bonhommes* – *The Bad Eggs* – of whom Verlaine and Rimbaud were, one might say, the ‘baddest.’ The portrait of Rimbaud – the only portrait of him we possess – is of a singularly beautiful, almost angelic looking youth, shown in a pensive state. He was eighteen, and a rakehell, and the disparity between his character and his appearance, as in Dorian Grey, is a familiar failure of fit that has come to give beauty a bad name. His badness extends even to his aesthetic preferences, which he catalogs in the *Delires* section of his poem: “Idiotic pictures, shop signs, stage sets, backcloths for street-entertainers, billboards, vernacular images, old fashioned stories, church Latin, badly spelt pornography, romance novels for elderly ladies, fairy tales, little books for children, old operas, silly refrains, naïve rhythms.” What Rimbaud would not have known was that his inventory was to become the substance of an alternative aesthetic a century later.

Though I have no wish to lose myself in interpreting Rimbaud's poem, it can, perhaps must, be read as a tribute to the power of beauty, the disparities notwithstanding. Having abused Beauty in the third line, it is as if the poet were sentenced to madness – a season in hell – in penalty. He explicitly titles the section of the poem in which he declares his anti-aesthetic preferences as *Ravings*. That section ends with what feels like Rimbaud coming to his senses, though it can be read as heavy irony: “All that's behind me now. Today I know how to bow down before beauty.”

It is as if Rimbaud intuited a thought I can hardly suppose he could have read in

Kant's *Critique of Judgment* – that “the beautiful is the symbol of the morally good.” Kant’s thought is not entirely easy to follow, but he clearly wants to say that finding something beautiful is more than simply taking pleasure in experiencing it. The beautiful “gives pleasure with a claim for the agreement of everyone else.” For this reason, “the mind is made conscious of a certain ennoblement and elevation above the mere sensibility of pleasure received through sense, and the worth of others is estimated in accordance with a like maxim of their judgment.” And Kant goes on to claim that “the subjective principle in judging the beautiful is represented as *universal*, i.e., valid for every man.” The abuse of beauty in this view is the symbolic enactment of an offense against morality and hence, in effect, against humanity. “I had armed myself against justice,” Rimbaud says just after confessing his crime.

It is not clear, even if it would have been possible for him to have imagined it, that the abuse of beauty would be regarded by Kant as *ipso facto* a moral evil, since beauty only *symbolizes* morality, and between moral and aesthetic judgments there is only the kind of analogy, to use his example, that may hold between a commonwealth and a living body. So aesthetic imperatives are moral imperatives only symbolically. Kant recognizes that not everyone will agree, case by case, on questions of beauty, but the analogy requires the belief that they ought to, whatever the force of the ought. There was an Enlightenment tendency to believe that the same moral principles – the golden rule for example – were to be found in every society, so universality must have seemed co-extensive with humanity. Would there have been a parallel view in regard to beauty?

Kant interestingly handled moral and aesthetic differences in systematically parallel ways. He learned about the South Seas from reading Captain Cook’s voyages, and clearly he was struck by the otherness of the societies Cook describes. The question comes up for him whether those other lives are ones *we* would morally be able to live. In the schedule of cases in which he attempts to illustrate the working of the categorical imperative, he considers a talented individual in comfortable circumstances who “prefers indulgence in pleasure to troubling himself with broadening and improving his fortunate natural gifts.” It would be entirely consistent with the laws of nature that everyone should live like “the inhabitants of the South Seas,” so by one formulation of the categorical imperative, it would be permissible that a man “should let his talents rust and resolve to dedicate his life only to idleness, indulgence, and propagation.” But *we* “cannot possibly will that this should become a universal law of nature,” for “as a rational being, one necessarily wills that all one’s faculties should be developed inasmuch as they are given to one for all sorts of possible purposes.”

The implication is that the South Sea islanders are not quite rational, but even so ought to live in conformity with the Protestant ethic, and that is what we must teach them as moral missionaries. Kant was in no sense a moral relativist. What relativists regard as differences in culture Kant regarded as but differences in development, on the model of the differences between children and adults.

Kant similarly contests South Sea aesthetics, as he understands them. Presumably based on an anthropological illustration he must have seen, Kant was aware that there are parts of the world in which men are covered with a kind of spiral tattoo: “We could adorn a figure

with all kinds of spirals and light but regular lines, as the New Zealanders do with their tattooing, if only it were not the figure of a human being,” he writes. In this same section of the *Third Critique*, he says, “We could add much to a building, which would immediately please the eye if only it were not to be a church.”

These are imperatives of taste, and it is striking that Kant considers the tattoo as merely a form of ornamentation, like gilded statuary on a church, rather than a set of marks that may have nothing to do with beautification, but serve rather to connect the tattooed person with some larger scheme of the world. The tattoo may conduce to admiration of its bearer – but not for aesthetic reasons so much as for whatever it is in a person the tattoo signified – military prowess, say, or cosmic rank. Similarly with the brass neck coils affected by the Paduang women of Burma. And something of the same sort may be true of ornament in the German baroque church Kant evidently finds offensive to taste – as if the passions of northern European iconoclasm were merely expressions of aesthetic revulsion. So it is with reference to cognitive rather than aesthetic judgments that both ought to be assessed.

I would hesitate to say that all cases of so-called beautification can be deflected in this way, but the possibility suggests that a universal beauty may be entirely consistent with cultural differences, our mistake consisting in regarding certain things as aesthetic when they have some quite different and more cognitive function. The aesthetic diversity of the world’s art is consistent with beauty as such being everywhere the same, if one cared to defend that thesis.

If, on the other hand, tattooing in the South Seas really is beautiful “in the eye of the South Sea Islander,” Kant must feel himself entitled to the view that they

are wrong. They just don’t know what beauty is, which he would have defined in terms of what we may as well term the Protestant aesthetic.

Even Hegel, the first major philosopher actually to have gone out of his way to look at paintings and listen to music – and, as we shall see, an extraordinary art critic – had a difficult time with other traditions. “The Chinese,” he writes in the *Philosophy of History*, “have as a general characteristic, a remarkable skill in imitation, which is exercised not merely in daily life but in art. They have not yet succeeded in representing the beautiful as beautiful; for in their painting, perspective and shadow are wanting.” (Manet, who pushed shadows to the side, as we find them in photographs, inevitably flattened his figures, which explains in some measure the outcry against his work.) The implication is that the Chinese have either no idea of beauty or a wrong one. But Chinese culture had a very different idea of visual truth than Hegel had, and hence a different view of the aims of representation. No one could count their art as ugly, which is the operative thought in Fry’s dictum that things will be perceived as ugly until they are perceived as beautiful. It was Hegel who required aesthetic education, fixated as he was on the Renaissance paradigm of mimesis.

But Fry understood, as a modernist, that the ligature between beauty and mimetic representation had been irreversibly loosened in his time. He knew that one could not argue his critical audiences into agreeing that Cézanne or Picasso shows the world as we really see it. He had instead to argue that this is not relevant, and that the emphasis must be not on vision but on design – to use the terms of his famous title. *Then* we can see the beauty of African and Chinese art, having surrendered the mis-

leading mimetic criteria so compelling to Hegel.

Loosening the beauty-mimesis ligature made it possible for Fry to become a great formalist art critic, but because he continued to see the ligature between art and beauty as a necessary connection, so that of necessity art is always beautiful, it failed to occur to him, as a theorist, that whole artistic traditions have existed in which beauty was never the point at all.

Beauty was not the rainbow that awaited us as the reward of sustained looking. It was never the case that the only proper way to address art was that of aesthetic contemplation. To put it another way, it never occurred to Fry, any more than it had occurred to Ruskin, that the beauty that was incontestably present in, for example, the great cathedrals may have been a means rather than an end.

The point was not to stand in front of the church and gape at its ornamentation, but to enter the church, the beauty being the bait, as it so often is in entering into sexual relationships.

Fry's one contemporary who appears to have understood this was Marcel Duchamp. "Since Courbet, it's been believed that painting is addressed to the retina. That was everyone's error. The retinal shudder!" His argument, remarkably overlooked by aesthetic theory, is quite historical: "Before, painting had other functions, it could be philosophical, religious, moral. Our whole century is completely retinal, except for the Surrealists, who tried to go outside it somewhat."

In 1905, ruminating on the somewhat farcical contest between Whistler and Ruskin, Proust wrote (in a letter to Marie Nordlinger) that while Whistler had been right that there is a distinction

between art and morality, on another plane Ruskin was right that "all great art is morality." In 1903, as we have seen, Moore seriously argued that the consciousness of beauty was among the supreme moral goods. We are safe, I think, in speaking of an atmosphere at the beginning of the twentieth century in which Rimbaud's image of abusing beauty could still have been seen as an abuse of morality.

I can think of no more vivid a gesture of abusing beauty by abusing great art than Duchamp's 1919 work in which he drew a moustache on a postcard of Mona Lisa, and scribbled a mild obscenity beneath that paradigm of great art.

That work, like everything by Duchamp, is a field of fiercely competing interpretations, but I want to use it as a historical signpost of a deep change in attitude that calls for a historical explanation. I want to focus on an art-historical episode in the course of which, greatly to the benefit of the philosophical understanding of art, a logical gap was definitively opened between art and beauty.

It was a gap that remained invisible to the denizens of Bloomsbury, who remained, for all their modernist ideals, late Edwardians. It was invisible to them because they had the idea, expressed in Fry's dictum, that works of art are perceived as ugly until they are perceived as beautiful. It was a gap that remained invisible until the great conceptual efforts of the 1960s to define art. That gap is the contribution in my view of what I shall term *the intractable avant-garde*.

I want, in setting the scene for my historical explanation, briefly to return to Moore's philosophy – in particular to the connection between the two supreme goods he holds up for examination. Moore sees a clear connection between goodness and beauty: "It appears

probable that the beautiful should be *defined* as that of which the admiring contemplation is good in itself.” The two values, Moore claims, are so related to one another “that whatever is beautiful is also good.” He goes further: “To say that a thing is beautiful is to say, not indeed that it is itself good, but that it is a necessary element in something which is: to prove that something is truly beautiful is to prove that a whole, to which it bears a particular relation as a part, is truly good.” So Moore sees some near entailments between art and beauty, and between beauty and goodness. And beauty indeed was the principle on which Bloomsbury friendship was based: It consisted almost entirely of those who assigned to beauty the highest moral priority.

The Bloomsburys saw themselves as the true vessels of civilization. And they perhaps supposed it the mark of a civilization that it create individuals of the sort they exemplified. In this, I think, they were not so far from Kant, in light of his concluding proposition that beauty is the symbol of morality, even if connected, in his view, by way of a kind of analogy. There is in aesthetic judgment an entailed disinterestedness as well as a universality, which in Kant’s philosophy was *sine qua non* for moral conduct. The person who values aesthetic experience has a moral fineness in that she or he is *ennobled* through the disinterestedness. Remember, further, that Kant defined the Enlightenment as mankind’s coming of age – a cultural stage he would have believed the South Sea Islanders have not and perhaps for a long time will not have attained.

And now the question was: how is it that those nations defined by civilized high-mindedness should have made the most savage and protracted war that history up to that point had known?

It was with this question that the concept of beauty became abruptly politicized by avant-garde artists around 1915, which fell midway in the period of the ready-mades in Duchamp’s career.

The ‘abuse of beauty’ became a device for dissociating the artists from the society they held in contempt. Rimbaud became an artistic and moral hero – the poet everyone wanted to be.

“I believe in the genius of Rimbaud,” the young Andre Breton wrote Tristan Tzara, the author of the dada manifesto of 1918. It is dada to which I primarily refer in the project of disconnecting beauty from art as an expression of moral revulsion against a society for whom beauty was a cherished value and which cherished art itself because of beauty.

Here is a recollective account by Max Ernst:

To us, Dada was above all a moral reaction. Our rage aimed at total subversion. A horrible futile war had robbed us of five years of our existence. We had experienced the collapse into ridicule and shame of everything represented to us as just, true, and beautiful. My works of that period were not meant to attract, but to make people scream.

Ernst knew the war – he had been an artilleryman – and his art was aggressive, as his perception of the war-makers as hateful required it to be.

In some measure this was true of German dada in general. The First International Dada exhibition in Berlin had signs declaring that art was dead – “Der Kunst ist Tot” – adding “Long life to the maschinen Kunst Tatlins.” Its members were not out to vilify German values; they were bent on destroying them by forcing upon German consciousness an art it could not swallow. Its means were a kind of aggressive foolishness.

The original spirit of dada was a kind of exaggerated play in the shadow of the war, a way of demonstrating its contempt for the clashing patriotisms by infantile actions: the term itself was infantile for ‘rocking horse,’ and the Zurich dadaists registered their protests through buffoonery against what Hans Arp called “the puerile mania for authoritarianism which could use art itself for the stultification of mankind”:

While the thunder of guns sounded in the distance, we panted, we recited, we versified, we sang with all our soul. We searched for an elementary art that would, we thought, save mankind from the furious folly of these times. We aspired to a new order.

Dada art was vehemently ephemeral – posters, book jackets, calligrams, pamphlets, recitations – as we would expect from a movement made of poets as well as artists. These ephemera, in their very ephemerality, were what Tzara celebrated as “means of combat.”

Dada refuses to be found beautiful, even today, after the passage of time – and that is its great philosophical significance. Dada exemplifies the intractable avant-garde, since its works are misperceived if perceived as beautiful. That is not its point or ambition.

The narrative of aesthetic redemption assures us that sooner or later we will see all art as beautiful, however ugly it appeared at first. *Try to see this as beautiful!* becomes a sort of imperative for those who look at art that does not appear beautiful at first at all.

Someone told me that she found beauty in the maggots infesting the severed and seemingly putrescent head of a cow, set in a vitrine by the Young British Artist Damien Hirst. It gives me a certain wicked pleasure to imagine Hirst’s frustration if hers were the received view.

He intended that his work be found disgusting, which was the one aesthetically unredeemable quality acknowledged by Kant in the *Critique of Aesthetic Judgment*. Disgust was noticed by Kant as a mode of ugliness resistant to the kind of pleasure that even the most displeasing things – “the Furies, diseases, the devastations of war” – are capable of causing when represented as beautiful by works of art. “That which excites *disgust* [*Ekel*],” Kant writes, “cannot be represented in accordance with nature without destroying all aesthetic satisfaction.” Since the purpose of art is taken to be the production of pleasure, only the most perverse of artists would undertake to represent the disgusting, which cannot “in accordance with nature” produce pleasure in normal viewers.

There are, to be sure, those who derive a perverted pleasure in experiencing what the normal viewer finds disgusting: who have, one might say, ‘special tastes.’ Artists interested in representing the disgusting would not have this special audience in view. Their aim is precisely to cause through their art sensations that, in Kant’s phrase, “we strive against with all our might.”

The psychobiology of disgust is as yet not well understood, but the early writers on it followed Darwin in thinking of it as a product of evolution concerned “basically with the rejection of food.” Evidence for the centrality of food “includes the facial expression, which focuses on oral expulsion and closing of the nares, and the physiological concomitants of nausea and gagging.” Recent research has widened the scope of “disgust elicitors,” somewhat weakening the connection with survival – and it is with items in this augmented schedule that disgust has become an artistic opportunity for those eager to hold beauty at bay. Kant would have no recourse but to regard this as the perversion of art. It

would be of no value to the artists in question if a taste for the disgusting were to be normalized. It is essential to their aims that the disgusting remain disgusting, not that audiences learn to take pleasure in it, or find it somehow beautiful.

I have seen a sculpture from Nuremberg from the late Gothic era of a figure known as “The Prince of the World,” which looks comely and strong from the front but is displayed in a state of wormy decay from behind; the body is shown the way it would look decomposing in the grave. Such sights explain why we actually bury the dead. There can be no question of what is the intended function of showing bodily decay with the skill of a Nuremberg stone carver – it is not to give the viewer pleasure: it is, rather, to disgust the viewer, and in so doing, to act as a *vanitas*, reminding us through presentation that the flesh is corrupt, and its pleasures a distraction from our higher aspirations – namely to achieve everlasting blessedness and avoid eternal punishment. To show the human body as disgusting is certainly to violate good taste, but Christian artists were prepared to pay this price for what Christianity regards as our highest moral purpose.

Kant did of course have a concept of the sublime, which I suppose has to transcend morality, because of the close parallels he insisted upon between moral and aesthetic judgments, without so much as asking whether and in what degree the production of beauty itself serves or can serve some higher moral ends. It is quite as if beauty were its own end, justifying the practice of art through its existence alone.

Kant never asks what the purpose of the disgusting might be in a work of art, or why the dereliction of beauty might be a moral means. In a precritical text,

Kant does make plain that the disgusting is the antonym of the beautiful. So the disgusting is in any case not conceptually connected with the sublime. The antonym of the sublime, he deliciously observes, is the silly, which suggests that the effect of dada was less the abuse of beauty than the rejection of the sublime.

But just possibly the disgusting, as logically connected with beauty, can also have the connection with morality that beauty does.

In the early 1990s, curators recognized a genre of contemporary art they designated ‘abject art.’ “The abject,” writes the art historian Joseph Koerner, “is a novelty neither in the history of art nor in the attempts to write that history.” Koerner cites, among other sources, a characteristically profound insight of Hegel: “The novelty of Christian and Romantic art consisted of taking the abject as its privileged object. Specifically, the tortured and crucified Christ, that ugliest of creatures in whom divine beauty became, through human evil, basest abjection.”

Rudolph Wittkower begins his great text on art and architecture in Italy after the Council of Trent by recording the decision of that council to display the wounds and agonies of the martyred, in order, through this display of affect, to elicit the sympathy of viewers and through that to strengthen threatened faith. “Even Christ must be shown ‘afflicted, bleeding, spat upon, with his skin torn, wounded, deformed, pale and unsightly’ if the subject calls for it.” The tendency in the Renaissance to beautify the crucified Christ was in effect a move to classicize Christianity by returning the tortured body to a kind of athletic grace, denying the basic message of Christian teaching that salvation is attained through abject suffering.

The aestheticism of the eighteenth century was a corollary of the rationalism of natural religion. It was Kant's stunning achievement to situate aesthetics in the critical architectonic as a form of judgment two small steps away from pure reason.

In view of the vast human suffering that was one salient aspect of the twentieth century, it is astonishing how dispassionate, how rational, how distancing, how abstract so much of twentieth-century art really was. How innocent dada was! In its refusal to gratify the aesthetic sensibilities of those responsible for World War I, dada gave the world babbling in place of beauty, silliness instead of sublimity. If it injured beauty, it was through a kind of punitive clownishness.

What abject art, so pathetic in its incapacity finally to do much to deflect or diminish the degradations of the body that the politics of our times has used as its means, has done is to seize upon the emblems of degradation as a way of crying out in the name of humanity. "For many in contemporary culture," Hal Foster writes, "truth resides in the traumatic or abject subject, in the diseased or damaged body. Thus body is the evidentiary basis of important witnessings to truth, of necessary witnessings against power."

My aim is not to judge the success or failure of artistic abjection, but rather to emphasize that it is intended to resist the prediction that art is ugly until seen as beautiful. It is a misperception of art to see it as always and necessarily concerned with the creation and appreciation of beauty. With dada, a deep conceptual shift took place. This perhaps justifies the claim that I have often made that in the twentieth century, the artists were carrying forward the philosophy of art in a way that could not have been achieved by philosophers themselves, whose intuitions were colored by the

Edwardian views we find in Moore and Bloomsbury.

I regard the discovery that something can be good art without being beautiful one of the great conceptual clarifications of twentieth-century philosophy of art, though it was made exclusively by artists, and it would have been seen as commonplace before the Enlightenment gave beauty the primacy it has continued to enjoy. That clarification managed to push reference to beauty out of any proposed definition of art, even if the new situation dawned very slowly in artistic consciousness.

When a philosopher of art such as Nelson Goodman sets aesthetics aside in order to talk about representation and meaning, this is not done with the expectation that we will return to the concept of beauty with an enhanced understanding. It is done, rather, with the awareness that beauty belongs neither to the essence nor the definition of art.

3
On principles of Renaissance theory, paintings were windows on the world – pure, apparently transparent openings through which one saw the world as if from outside. So a picture drew its beauty from the world, ideally having none of its own to contribute to what one saw, as it were, through it. (This of course overlooks the contribution of the frame in shaping the way the world presents itself to the eye in a painting.)

The stereotypical painter crooks the index finger against the thumb, framing the world until it resolves into a picture – until it looks the way she wants her picture to look – like Lily Briscoe in *To the Lighthouse*, or, we imagine, any of the Bloomsbury painters scouting the south of France for what the traditional art schools designated *motifs*.

Kant was famously a stay-at-home, but he lived in an era of aesthetic tourism. The well-to-do went abroad to see the sights: the Alps, the Bay of Naples, as well, of course, as the Piazza San Marco, the Pantheon, the Leaning Tower, the Acropolis. A pictorial industry grew up to provide souvenirs – objective memories – of what one took in. This I take to be the background of Kant’s somewhat surprising remark, at §45 of the *Critique of Judgment*, that “Nature is beautiful because it looks like art,” when one would have expected the opposite assertion instead. Kant seems to be saying that the world is beautiful when it looks the way painters represent it. When one thinks an artist represented a scene because it was beautiful in the first place, one understands rightly the Renaissance idea that what one sees pictured on a canvas or a panel is a transparent view of a scene’s beauty.

This cannot, however, have been the whole story, not even for Kant, who recognized that art was capable of representing as beautiful “things which may be in nature ugly or displeasing. The Furies, diseases, the devastations of war, etc. may even be regarded as calamitous, be described as very beautiful, as they are represented in a picture.”

So the picture in Kant’s understanding must contribute to the beauty, since these motifs have none. It is here that Kant makes his parenthetical observation on disgust as the “one kind of ugliness which cannot be represented in accordance with nature without destroying all aesthetic satisfaction, and consequently *artificial beauty*.”

I emphasize ‘artificial beauty.’ It is what we would call ‘beautification’ – aesthetic sophism, making the worse appear better, which involves cosmetics, fashion, interior decoration, and the like, where we are not dealing with natural but with enhanced beauty. In the

eighteenth century, in France especially, a close parallel was drawn between painting pictures and painting faces, so that, in his portrait of *Madame Pompadour at her Vanity*, which shows the great lady with her rouge-brush before a mirror, Boucher is virtually saluting a fellow artist. With the made-up face, Kant’s follow-up thought would be exact – “we are conscious of it as art while yet it looks like nature.”

Beautification has tended to incur a certain puritanical condemnation: it traffics in causing the kind of false beliefs that constitute the cognitive basis for the great cosmetic fortunes of the modern world. The French term for ‘to make up’ is *farder*, or ‘to color,’ which explains in part why there was a traditional mistrust of colors – why Descartes went so far as to say we really did not need our eyes to know what the world was like, since the blind can feel the outlines and know the shapes of things. Ruskin appears to have had beautification – or artifice – in mind when, in support of the British Pre-Raphaelites, he condemns pretty much the entire history of painting from the time of Raphael down.

In the first of two letters to *The Times* in 1851, Ruskin wrote that his young protégés

desire to represent, irrespective of any conventional rules of picture making; and they have chosen their unfortunate though not inaccurate name because all artists did this before Raphael’s time, and after Raphael’s time did *not* do this, but sought to paint fair pictures rather than represent stern facts, of which the consequence has been that from Raphael’s time to this day historical art has been in acknowledged decadence.

It did not incidentally matter that the reality was only imagined – ‘made up’ by the artist in the other sense of the ex-

pression – so long as it was not falsified in the interests of beautification.

I cannot help but feel that the aura of falsification helps to explain some of the suspicions aroused when beauty plays a role in contemporary art. Consider again the case of Mapplethorpe. He tried to achieve the excitement of pornographic images in *artistic*, that is, beautiful photographs. Freud observed that “the genitals themselves, the sight of which is always exciting, are hardly ever regarded as beautiful.” Yet at their most successful, we can barely stand to look at some of Mapplethorpe’s pictures from which, because of the beauty with which he infused them, we cannot tear our eyes away. They paralyze the will, as in the case cited by Socrates of a man who “feasts his eyes” on the sight of corpses.

To take a less complex case, Sebastao Salgado’s photographs of suffering humanity are beautiful – and hence, his critics would say, falsified – because suffering of that order, being grim, ought not to be seen as beautiful. Salgado pretifies through photographic artifice what ought to be shown in its true colors. If there is to be art, it should not be beautiful, since the world does not deserve beauty. Artistic truth must accordingly be as sad as human life itself, and art leached of beauty serves in its own way as a mirror of what human beings have done. Art, subtracted of the stigma of beauty, serves as what the world has coming to it. Beautifiers are, so to speak, collaborationists.

Most of the world’s art is not beautiful at all, nor was the production of beauty part of its purpose. One of the most marvelous pieces of art criticism I know was written by Fry himself about Mantegna’s Simone Madonna in Berlin: “The wizened face, the creased and crumpled flesh of a new born babe . . . all

the penalty, the humiliation, almost the squalor attendant upon being ‘made flesh’ are marked.” As enfleshed, God must begin as helplessly as we all begin – hungry, wet, soiled, confused, colicky, crying, dribbling, babbling, drooling, and totally dependent. All that is implicit in Mantegna’s picture, and it is inconsistent with seeing the painting as beautiful. The message transcends beauty and ugliness. It is morally rather than visually true.

I want one further example, which comes from Hegel, a great art critic, writing about a masterpiece by the artist the Pre-Raphaelites were to despise: “It is a familiar and frequently repeated reproach against Raphael’s *Transfiguration* that it falls apart into two actions entirely devoid of any connection with one another,” Hegel writes.

And in fact this is true if this picture is considered externally: above on the hill we see the transfiguration, below is the scene with the child possessed of an unclean spirit. But if we look at the *spirit* of the composition, a supreme connection is not to be missed. For, on the one hand, Christ’s visible transfiguration is precisely his elevation above the earth, and his departure from his disciples, and this must be made visible too as a separation and a departure; on the other hand, the sublimity of Christ is here especially transfigured in an actual simple case, namely in the fact that the Disciples could not help the child without the help of the Lord. Thus here the double action is motivated throughout and the connection is displayed within and without in the fact that one disciple expressly points to Christ who has departed from them and thereby he hints at the true destiny of the Son of God to be at the same time on earth, so that the saying will be true: Where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them.

To say design is as weak as beauty would be an inappropriate response to this tremendous work. The design inheres in the meaning Raphael intends to convey, *l'effet* of the event he has undertaken to depict visually, when the meaning of the event itself – the transfiguration – is not entirely visual. Ruskin would be right about Raphael: ‘externally’ it lacks visual truth, but internally it conveys truth of a profounder kind.

One sees from this passage the remarkable difference between a thinker like Hegel, who was deeply engaged by great art, and Kant, who was not, and for whom experiencing art was of a piece with experiencing natural beauty, like that of flowers or sunsets or lovely women. And this is finally what is missing in Moore’s way of thinking about art as well. He thought of artistic beauty on the model of natural beauty, as we can see from his belief that something beautiful exists much more compellingly in reality than in pictures.

David Hume takes up the relationship between natural and artistic beauty almost as an aside, in order to point out an analogy between two views of moral truths, namely “whether they be derived from Reason or Sentiment.” Sentimentalists claim that “To virtue it belongs to be *amiable*, and vice *odious*.” The latter term evokes a distant echo to disgust, a moral revulsion that verges on physical recoil. By symmetry, the former evokes a kind of natural attraction: we are drawn to what we perceive as good for us in others. Hume allows that there is a kind of beauty of which the latter may be true: “Some species of beauty, especially the natural kinds, on their first appearance command our affection and approbation; and where they fail of this effect, it is impossible for any reasoning to redress their influence, or adapt them bet-

ter to our taste and sentiment.” It is in regard to this sort of beauty that one might say there is no disputing taste. But Hume, as a man of letters, had a vivid sense of the transformative power of critical reasoning:

In many orders of beauty, particularly those of the finer arts, it is requisite to employ much reasoning in order to feel the proper sentiment; and a false relish may frequently be corrected by argument and reflection. There are just grounds to conclude that moral beauty partakes much of this latter species, and demands the assistance of our intellectual faculties in order to give it a suitable influence on the human mind.

This kind of reasoning is, I think, illustrated in Fry on Mantegna, or Hegel on Raphael. And I believe it is Hegel, more than any other thinker, who draws the distinction most sharply. He is the first in particular to distinguish, perhaps too sharply, between aesthetics and the philosophy of art. Aesthetics, he observes, is “the science of sensation or feeling,” and concerns art “when works of art are treated with regard to the feelings they were supposed to produce, as, for instance, the feeling of pleasure, admiration, fear, pity, and so on.” This is a great advance over Kant, who more or less confines the relevant repertoire of effects to pleasure and pain, making an important exception for sublimity. Hegel insists artistic beauty is ‘higher’ than the beauty of nature, and he writes with a marvelous thunder that “The beauty of art is beauty *born of the spirit and born again*.” What I am eager to stress is that art is, for Hegel, an *intellectual* product, and that its beauty too must express the thought the art embodies.

All this said, Hegel cannot have thought of art as other than beautiful, and indeed he saw this as art’s limita-

tion, thinking as he does of beauty in terms of a sensation, or what Hume calls a 'sentiment.'

Hegel writes that "the beauty of art presents itself to *sense*, feeling, intuition, imagination; it has a different sphere than thought, and the apprehension of its activity and its products demands an organ other than scientific thinking." That is why art has come to an end, to invoke his celebrated thesis. We have risen above the sphere of sense in the respect that philosophy, or *Wissenschaft*, is an exercise of pure understanding and analysis. So "the conditions of our present time are not favorable to art." The end of art thus has nothing to do with the decline of art but rather with the ascent of reason.

There remains the question of whether there is an important difference between natural and artistic beauty, just so far as perceiving the object itself is concerned. Let's allow that in the appreciation of natural beauty, the object which is the vehicle of beauty – which has beauty among its properties – is not connected with a thought that explains its existence, whereas with a work of art the beautiful is explained by the thought that it is necessary to grasp in order to appreciate the beauty. Is the appreciation of beauty different between the two cases?

I want to present a pair of examples – one of natural, one of artistic beauty – in which we can see Hume's way of dealing with the distinction at work. I have selected the examples because they raise some striking psychological issues that bear on the moral grounds evoked in treating beauty as shallow and false to the reality of the world. They bear on what I take the prophet Isaiah to have meant in envisioning a world in which those who suffer are given beauty in

place of ashes. I intend the examples, in brief, to help remove the stigma from beauty, to restore to beauty some of what gave it the moral weight it had in Edwardian aesthetics.

The first, somewhat overdetermined example comes from Proust. In a section called "The Intermitancies of the Heart," in the fourth volume of *In Search of Lost Time*, the Narrator has returned to the seaside resort of Balbec. On his first stay, he was accompanied by his beloved grandmother, who has since died. The section of the book in which he describes his grandmother's death is curiously clinical and detached, which is somewhat inconsistent with what we would expect, given their earlier bond. We feel we have learned something through this about the character of Marcel, who seems a much colder person than we would have believed him to be. This impression proves to be false; the moment he returns to his room at the Grand Hotel, he is overwhelmed with a sense of loss and bereavement, and descends into an acute depression as his grandmother's irrevocable absence floods his consciousness completely.

Marcel now sits gazing at his grandmother's photograph, which tortures him. He realizes how self-centered he had been when he had been the object of his grandmother's totally dedicated love – how he had failed, for example, to notice how ill she had been on that first sojourn to Balbec. This mood lasts until he goes for a walk one day in the direction of a high road, along which he and his grandmother used to be driven in the carriage of Mme. de Villeparisis. The road was muddy, which made him think of his grandmother and how she used to return covered with mud when she went walking whatever the weather. The sun is out, and he sees a "dazzling spectacle" – a stand of apple trees in blossom:

The disposition of the apple trees, as far as the eye could reach, were in full bloom, unbelievably luxuriant, their feet in the mire beneath their ball-dresses, heedless of spoiling the most marvelous pink satin that was ever seen, which glittered in the sunlight; the distant horizon of the sea gave the trees the background of a Japanese print; if I raised my head to gaze at the sky through the flowers, which made its serene blue appear almost violent, they seemed to draw apart to reveal the immensity of their paradise. Beneath that azure a faint but cold breeze set the blushing bouquets. [It was] as though it had been an amateur of exotic art and colors that had artificially created this living beauty. But it moved one to tears because, to whatever lengths it went in its effects of refined artifice, one felt that it was natural, that these apple trees were there in the heart of the country.

The example is overdetermined because only someone like Marcel would have seen this glorious sight as he did. He is like his counterpart, Swann, in seeing everything through the metaphors of art. Someone who had never seen Hiroshige or an Ascension of the Virgin, or in whose life there were no ballgowns or pink satin, could hardly have experienced the apple trees quite as he did.

Still, it was a piece of natural beauty, which might have taken the breath away from anyone fortunate enough to have seen it. Marcel tells us that from this moment, his grief for his grandmother began to diminish; metaphorically, one might say, she had entered paradise. He was given beauty for ashes. The beauty, one might truly say, helped heal him.

The apple trees at Balbec might be on anyone's short list for Moore's world of beauty. A world with such sights in it would be better, Moore is confident in arguing, than a world of ashes. That would be as obvious as the fact that his

two hands exist, to invoke one of Moore's most famous arguments. You cannot argue anyone into accepting that if they are uncertain of it – for what could be more certain than that? If they doubt that, their doubt is irremediable.

This I think is Hume's point about natural beauty. You can't argue anyone into feeling it. Natural beauty was at the core of Marcel's experience – even if there was an aura of metaphors drawn from his experience of art, which enters into his descriptions.

My second example is of a relatively contemporary work, Maya Lin's Vietnam Veterans Memorial of 1982, which I select because it is widely regarded as possessing great beauty, both by those in the art world and by quite ordinary persons for whom it has become one of the most widely admired sights in Washington, D.C.

The Memorial is simplicity itself. It consists of two symmetrical triangular wings that bend away from one another at a mild angle – 125 degrees – from a shared vertical base to gently enfold those who approach it. It is a very reduced form of the Bernini colonnades enclosing St. Peter's Square in Rome, but performs a similar role. Maya Lin was an undergraduate at Yale when she presented the idea, and was told by her instructor that the angle between the two wings "Had to mean something." The two walls are of polished black granite, and inscribed with the names of every American soldier killed in the Vietnam War – about 58,000 in all – listed chronologically by date of death.

The commission of Lin's scheme for the memorial almost had the quality of a fairy tale: it took the twenty-one-year-old all of six weeks to complete the winning model, selected unanimously from 1,421 entries in blind review. This, after Lin's peers had criticized the work as

‘visual poetry’ – it is, after all, a kind of book – and had expressed their uncertainty of its architectural merit. Meanwhile, Lin was young, female, of Asian descent, and had lost no loved ones in the conflict: she failed all the tacit tests the designer of such a memorial was supposed to meet.

When the organizer of the competition, Jan Scruggs, first saw the work he was profoundly disillusioned. “A big bat. A weird-looking thing that could have been from Mars. Maybe a third grader had entered the competition. All the fund’s work had gone into making a huge bat for veterans. Maybe it symbolized a boomerang,” Scruggs thought. “It’s weird and I wish I knew what the hell it is.” It is amazing that it was not voted down. Everyone wondered how the general public would react, but one person told Scruggs that “You would be surprised how sophisticated the general public really is.” That of course turned out to be true.

The beauty of the work is almost instantly felt, and then perhaps best explained in terms of the emotional response of visitors, many of whom come to see the name of someone they loved and to do a rubbing of it to carry home. They see themselves reflected in the same wall that carries the name of the dead, as if there were a community of the living and the dead, though death itself is forever. Possibly there is an analogy to a natural phenomenon – such as the surface of a very still body of water in which the sky is reflected, as in Monet’s immense paintings of water lilies that make visible the way clouds and flowers seem to occupy the same space. Whatever the proper explanation of the felt beauty of the wall, it is understood with reference to the ‘thought.’ It is part of the meaning of the work. In Proust’s orchard, the thought is his. In the Viet-

nam Veterans Memorial, the thought belongs to the work and explains the beauty. In natural beauty, the beauty is external to the thought; in art the beauty is internal to the work.

The idea of internal beauty, of beauty as integral to the meaning of a work, originally came to me in thinking of Robert Motherwell’s *Elegy for the Spanish Republic*. People have sometimes read its black forms as icons for the penis and testicles of a bull, and, thus, the work as elegizing the loss of virility. But I see them as human and architectural elements in a landscape of devastation: shawled women and broken pillars, against early daylight, as with the Christ figure in Piero’s *Resurrection*. Motherwell achieved a representation that transcends the history it interprets, personal experience, and memory, as will Lin’s work in a relatively short period of time.

What impressed me was the way the very idea of elegy is connected with the idea of beauty – that its being an elegy meant it was intended to be beautiful, and that the beauty was intended to be healing, the way the music at a funeral is, or the flowers, or – this is not to my taste – even the beautification of the departed for the occasion of a ‘viewing.’ I mean in any case that Motherwell’s *Elegies* do not just happen to be beautiful. Their being beautiful is part of their meaning, and integral to their impact.

“My heart leaps up when I behold a rainbow in the sky” – Wordsworth’s sentiment expresses a species of beauty and aesthetic surprise we have all experienced. But my concern in the preceding paragraphs has been mainly to make plain the relationship between beauty and thought, and between the kinds of thoughts that go into the experience of external as against internal beauty – how

in the first instance the thoughts are personal and in the second objectively resident in the work.

My concern in this essay as a whole, on the other hand, has been to show the connection between beauty and art: beauty is connected with art when its presence is part of the meaning of the work.

The Taj Mahal is beautiful, but I am not certain I want to say that about the Cathedral of Cologne, or about *The Last Judgment* of Michelangelo or the *Demoielles d'Avignon* – and certainly not of the Simone Madonna, *Woman with a Hat*, Raphael's *Transfiguration*. The cases of beauty I have considered go some distance toward supporting Hegel's view that art and philosophy are differently

connected and in different ways with "the deepest interests of mankind and the most comprehensive truths of the spirit." Because these interests are connected with the way we are made, they might help us begin the detoxification of beauty in contemporary art and philosophy, always recognizing that both have shown that it is not part of the definition of art.

Beauty is one mode among many through which thoughts are presented in art to human sensibility – disgust, horror, sublimity, and sexuality are still others. These modes explain the relevance of art to human existence, and room for them all must be found in an adequate definition of art.

Alexander Nehamas

The art of being unselfish

Almost everyone knows that when he heard a witty remark of 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* Whistler had said.

"My dear fellow," the painter told Humphry Ward, the *Times's* art critic, 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."

I am interested in what happens to me when I say to myself that something is beautiful and not merely that I like it. It seems to be, but it is not the conclusion of an interpretation – that is why the judgment of taste, as Kant claimed (although he did not see what that implied), does not follow from any description of its object: no reasons for it can be given. 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? Or does such an expectation amount to an ugly kind of selfishness?

These questions are raised by the fact that if the judgment of taste expresses something more than a purely private preference, it seems to demand nothing less than universal agreement. Yet how can we expect *anyone* to accept a judg-

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ment 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,” 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, a vague echo in the third *Critical*, but clear and definite among 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, then everyone should accept it; if they do not, then there is something wrong with them. Since we all believe our judgments are true (whether or not they really are), we must feel, Mothersill claims, that everyone whose taste differs from ours is “slightly defective – as if something blocked his perception or impaired his sensibility.”¹

Can this be right? I would probably consider defective all those who refused to acknowledge that they are holding a copy of *Dædalus* in their hands as they are reading this sentence (unless, of course, they were making a philosophical point!). I might possibly, in certain circumstances, consider defective some

1 Mary Mothersill, *Beauty Restored* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), 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), 233.

of those who, unable to understand some more complex idea, were 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 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, say, my taste for television in general an error (the same would be true of my taste for lyric poetry).

C. S. Peirce held that a true belief is one that is fated to be believed by everyone who engages in scientific investigation. He envisioned an ideal world – a world he thought to be supremely beautiful – in which scientific inquiry had 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 disagreements have come to an end, 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?

I think that 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.

And 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.

Rejecting Kantianism does not mean accepting a puerile relativism, in which aesthetic judgments express purely private preferences, devoid of any logic at all. We need *some* shared ground for our aesthetic judgments to rest upon, for they are much more consequential than we commonly imagine.

After all, I do not go through my own life haphazardly, picking one person here, one novel there, one landscape further down and adding them, for no discernible reason, to my stock of what I have judged to be beautiful. I take my judgments too seriously to behave like *that*. For I realize that because, unlike

conclusions, my aesthetic judgments look forward and not to the past, they will determine, literally, my life's course – they will direct me to other people, other objects, other habits and ways of being.

My aesthetic judgments are of primary concern to me personally, but they are also essentially social. Even when I speak only for myself, I want others to understand the grounds for my judgment.

Susan Sontag once put it this way: although taste “has no system and no proofs,” she wrote, “there is something like a logic of taste: the consistent sensibility which underlies and gives rise to a certain taste.” We want others to acknowledge and appreciate the consistency of our sensibility, the logic of our character and *style*. And it is also central to character and style that they are part of what distinguishes us from the rest of the world, even from those who are closest to us. “*One thing is needful*,” 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!

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; it is rather those whose views I cannot connect in an interesting way with the rest of their aesthetic choices. Bad taste, most often, is haphazard: it is the absence of style.

Developing a style, as Nietzsche saw, is an accomplishment. As Baudelaire said of Manet, “He will never completely fill in the gaps in his temperament. But he has a *temperament* – that’s what’s important.”

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 someone whose style I admire differs from me on specific questions without thinking of that as a lapse, precisely because it fits with the rest of his taste.

And so I understand and respect Dave Hickey’s admiration for Norman Rockwell, whose paintings I continue to find trite and banal, because Hickey discerns in Rockwell’s work formal complexities put in the service of a widely accessible art (like Raphael’s, he would say) that celebrates Hickey’s own populist democratic values. I similarly respect Michael Fried’s rejection of minimalism, which I enjoy, because Fried’s reasons (minimalism lacks the seriousness, impersonality, and conviction that are the hallmarks of the modernist works to which he is devoted) are anything but haphazard. 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.” 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 are able to 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 the drama unfolding around her: the same faraway look combined with 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 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 a style that is dubious, social conformity entails its radical absence. Whether you

let Martha Stewart or Bernard Berenson determine your preferences for you, however happy your choices, your taste is no longer distinctively your own.

Style requires originality, and originality demands distinctiveness. It is with us as it is with the arts, and that is one of the reasons we should be careful about drawing 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.” I would go a little further: features we tend to associate only with the arts 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 a work of art depends on its ability to stand out from its surrounding context. Not that difference, which is a catchall idea, incapable of specifying anything and unable to be a goal in its own right, produces value on its own: value rather depends on specific features, which themselves differ in specific ways from others.

They are the kind of features that set Chardin apart from his contemporaries, the features Largillierre missed when, on visiting his studio, he told him, “You have some very fine paintings there. They must be by a good Flemish painter.” They are the features to which Michael Baxandall has given such careful attention in *Patterns of Intention* and *Shadows and Enlightenment*, and which 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.

That is why Chardin’s painting forces you, as Jed Perl has noticed, to *see slowly*.

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. And although 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.

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, and to find others who have also 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 so far 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 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.² This idea underlies our sense that the little patch of yellow wall in Vermeer's *View of Delft*, which 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. 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 vio-

2 In this, I follow Mothersill, who follows Sue Larson; see Mothersill, *Beauty Restored*, 343–345. 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), 230 (see also Goodman, *Languages of Art* [Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1968], 99–112), then none of the properties of *a* can be aesthetic. If, for example, *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. However, Delia Graff has recently argued that the relation is transitive, and, if she is right, this particular problem can be avoided. Graff, "Phenomenal Continua and the Sorites," *Mind* 110 (440): 2001. But the question is far from settled.

lence – 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, as Plato saw, 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.

In order to become aware of the aesthetic features of things, you don't need simply to focus on the right things, in the right way. What you need is the ability to examine things for yourself: interpretation must 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 on your own; until then, you will only be accepting mine.

To me, Manet's *Olympia* is one of the world's great paintings. Art historians, I suppose, would find my sentiment 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 have just written tells you nothing about the painting; but 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.

From reading T. J. Clark, 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 contemporaries, and about the significance of the disjointed way the reclining nude body of Victorine Meurent is painted. 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 Fantin, Whistler, and 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 contemporary critics received the work – an incomprehension I still feel when I look at the painting.

I also learnt that the second figure in the painting, whom Clark calls a "Negress" and Fried a "black maid," was probably based on a woman by the name of Laure, who was born in Paris, to parents unnamed, on April 19, 1839, and whom Manet had sketched at least once before. Laure is not simply 'black,' just as the recumbent figure of Victorine Meurent is not simply 'white.' Laure is rather 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, and thus herself a working-class woman as well, not simply a figure of "primitive or exotic sexuality" or "inert and formulaic, a mere painted sign for Woman in one of her states." *Olympia* is, then, also connected to the popular Orientalist paintings of the time, which displaced

actual desire and sensuality to an imaginary Orient. 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 the trope of the African woman – now also signaled as a figure located in time, space and class relations, that is in the history of the present, as another Parisian proletarian.³

All that, of course, induced me to turn to other paintings, and 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 one of these projects in turn sent me to still other works: Titian's *Venus of Urbino*, Goya's *Naked Maja*, Ingres's *Venus Anadyomene* and *Large Odalisque*, Velasquez's *Venus with a Mirror* (which, I found out, once hung not demurely on the wall 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.

In my search I also saw that Manet is playing havoc with Boucher's portrait of his wife. Madame Boucher is shown 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, gaz-

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

ing, somehow, at the beholder. Yet 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 is not a dare to the spectator.

Even the details of their attire are similar; the naked Olympia has apparently borrowed the bracelet and neck ribbon of the dressed Madame Boucher, while Manet has transformed the bow on Madame’s headdress into an orchid for Olympia. Olympia’s flower draws the eye to the left, where her hair, pulled back in front, frames her forehead in a stern curve recalling the shape of Madame Boucher’s neat cap.

Manet even 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 shadow of Olympia.

No matter how much I learn about *Olympia*, it continues to attract me. I am focused now on Olympia’s eyes. Michael Fried writes that Victorine Meurent confronts the viewer directly, 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. It directs me to something else altogether; perhaps blasphemously, the prostitute’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. It has directed me to paintings and literary works I would have paid no attention to or which 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, personally 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.

Culture, as Plato was the first to notice, works in subtle ways, gradually and imperceptibly. 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.” 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 more and 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 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." 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 be-

tween 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." Interpretation, she argued, "is the revenge of the intellect upon art," even "upon the world," based on "an overt contempt for appearances." "In place of a hermeneutics," it was her famous conclusion, "we need an erotics of art."

But hermeneutics and erotics, as Plato knew, do not exclude one another; 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.

If interpretation is interminable and if we can never know to what and to whom it will lead us, then how the search for beauty will affect our moral character must remain unpredictable. Many people believe that attention to the arts is important because it is morally beneficial. For Richard Rorty, Nabokov, and Orwell are valuable because they make us more aware, and less tolerant, of the ways in which we are cruel to one another. That is a view I wish I could

share, but I can find no reason for it.

Elaine Scarry also argues that beautiful things promote our sense of justice. I can't see it: not that they can't, but that they often don't. 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"). 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 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, 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, and 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.⁴

None of this is to say that watching television is bound to be morally benign.

4 Quoted in Guglielmo Cavallo and Roger Chartier, *A History of Reading in the West* (Amherst, Mass.: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999), 285.

Works of art – and some works of television are works of art – have often had significant moral and political effects. Some of the effects have been for good (one thinks of Dickens, perhaps of Goya), some for bad (here all are likely to think of *Triumph of the Will*; some will think of Wagner; others, perhaps, of the nude). The effects of most works of art are deeply debatable: what should we say of Virgil's championing of Augustus? Of Caravaggio's advertising for the Counter-Reformation? Of 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 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!"

Beautiful things are not produced only by great artists. Sometimes, they don't even have to be particular artifacts. They may be nothing but the aesthetical 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." I can see the revelation of that difference 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, originality, and 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. The great enemy of the beautiful is rather 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 individual-

ity and distinctiveness presuppose coherence and unity: without them, nothing can stand on its own as an object either of admiration or 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.

“A man is called selfish,” Oscar Wilde wrote in “The Soul of Man Under Socialism”:

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.⁵

There is a dimension of life of which Wilde’s observation 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 don’t believe that the primary aim of life is self-development, since I think life has no primary aim. And for that reason I also don’t think that there is an infinite variety of types. 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.

5 G. F. Maine, ed., *The Works of Oscar Wilde* (London: Collins, 1948), 1040.

Dave Hickey

Buying the world

1

Nothing is so conditional, let us say *circumscribed*, as our feeling for the beautiful. Anyone who tried to divorce it from man's pleasure in himself would find the ground give way beneath him.

– Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, 1889

I want to talk about the way contemporary Americans talk about the things they find beautiful, because they talk about them all the time, and when they do, they use the word 'beautiful' with consistency and precision in a very tradi-

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tional way that dates back to the Renaissance and beyond that to Latin Antiquity. In this vernacular usage, the word 'beautiful' bears no metaphysical burden. It signifies our anxious pleasure at something that transcends the merely appropriate and asserts the relative value of that thing over other things of its kind. In everyday talk, the word usually occurs as an exclamation occasioned by the speaker's involuntary positive response to an object or event in the external world, and, more often than not, these vocalizations are followed by conversation, by analysis and negotiation, agreement or dissent, coalition or faction. Herein lies the mystery.

The visceral, involuntary pleasures that occasion such exclamations are by definition personal, private, and self-fulfilling, so why make them public? Why utter the word 'beautiful' at all? And why respond when someone else does? For three reasons, I think. First, we speak the word and respond to it because we are good democrats who value transparency and consensus and occasionally long for them. Second, we speak the word and respond to it because we are citizens of a self-consciously historical society that values eccentric personal responses on the grounds that these responses, made transparent, may not be eccentric at all, may in fact presage a

new consensus. Third, we speak and respond because we can, because we live in a society in which the Pursuit of Happiness is an officially sanctioned endeavor.

Thus, for Americans, the experience of beauty is necessarily inextricable from its optimal social consequence: membership in a happy coalition. So talk follows naturally from our experience, and in this we are the direct descendants of those Renaissance artists, mercantile princes, and connoisseur churchmen who spoke of beauty the way we do.

These sixteenth-century Italians, in their idolatrous avarice and retrospective reverence for Pliny and Cicero, reinstated an antique artistic discourse maniacally obsessed with the *paragone* – with the argumentative comparison, competition, and ranking of things like-to-like. Aiming at the establishment of objective standards, these devotees of the ‘new learning’ considered and reconsidered, in taxonomic hierarchy, the relationship between one design and another, one painting and another, one artist and another, one genre and another, and one art and another.

The consequence of these speculations, however, was not the establishment of objective standards but a permanent and profoundly democratic revolution in the way we look at things. Official authority was subverted and its rhetoric disabled by the logic of the *paragone*. Under the auspices of this method, authorized instrumentalities of sacred devotion and political power were transformed into objects of delectation – freely elected to serve this function by private citizens through the exercise of comparison and connoisseurship. Works once presumed to express the authority of their origins were taken to represent the content of their admirers’ taste, and for the first time in history, the power to invest works of contemporary art with

meaning and value began to shift from the supply side to the consumer side.

From this point forward, the ongoing, unrequited argument about relative beauty became more and more inextricable from the habits and conventions of the mercantile republics in which it had flourished since the days of Rome – equally indebted to the conventions of representative democracy and to the dynamics of commerce. The whole business of ascertaining the relative value of comparable objects, after all, derives in its every aspect from the practical paganism of commercial life. There is no other precedent, and the site where such value is adjudicated is by definition a marketplace. In practice, this site is more of a meta-marketplace in which buying and selling are largely symbolic, something closer to a civil forum in which objects are elected by free-floating constituencies to represent shared pleasures and desires.

In this way, rather casually, the practical paganism of commercial life is reconfigured into a practice of engaged connoisseurship designed less to ascertain the value of objects than to externalize and socialize the values of their adjudicators in a multivalent world where face value, more often than not, is the only value there is. As Nietzsche would have it, these adjudications function as a public modality through which we socialize our pleasure in ourselves; and this, I would suggest, is why contemporary Americans talk about the things they find beautiful and talk about them all the time. We are citizens of a secular commercial democracy, relentlessly borne forth on the flux of historical change, routinely flung laterally by the exigencies of dreams and commerce, and bereft of those internalized commonalities of race, culture, region, and religion that purportedly define ‘peoples.’

As such, we are a social people charged with inventing and perpetually reinventing the conditions of our own sociability out of the fragile resource of our own private pleasures and secret desires. Lacking even the most basic prerequisites for relating to one another, we choose to *correlate*, to define our commonality with reference to an ever-changing panoply of external objects and occasions. We gather around these objects and occasions as about a hearth, as lines of force around a strange attractor; we organize ourselves in non-exclusive communities of desire, then stay or go according to the whims of sublimated romance and the weather of the times. As a modality of social organization this dynamic system may be construed as beguiling or appalling according to one's taste, but there is no denying its efficacy and appropriateness – or the complexity of its provenance, which is the subject of this essay.

2

WE hold these Truths to be self-evident, that all Men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness – That to secure these Rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just Powers from the consent of the Governed, that whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive to these Ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its Foundation on such Principles, and organizing its Powers on such Form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness.

– *The Declaration of Independence*,
July 4, 1776

Since we are talking about beauty here, I must insist at the outset that, even

though the second sentence of the Declaration of Independence is not a particularly beautiful sentence, the idea of American beauty could not exist without the cool impudence of its first seven words. In a single phrase, these words exempt the sentence's subsequent assertions of human equality and unalienable rights from the claims of traditional conduct, metaphysical certainty, and scientific proof. They do what the thirteen colonies were themselves doing. They declare their independence and divest themselves of external authority. They say, "WE hold these Truths to be self-evident," not "These things are true," or "These things have always been true," or "These propositions have been proved to be true," or "These truths, validated by scripture . . ." They don't even say, "These truths are self-evident." They say that the Second Continental Congress *holds* the subsequently enumerated Truths to be self-evident on its own authority, and, henceforth, within the purview of this authority, they shall have the status of law. Period.

The sentence's assertion of equality and unalienable rights derives absolutely from the authority of the 'WE' that begins it. This WE (the Second Continental Congress) derives *its* authority from the consent of the Governed, whose authority derives from the fiat of the opening clause, as well. Thus the circularity: The Second Continental Congress legally empowers the people to empower the Congress to empower the people. Upon this self-contained legal fiction, this *donnée*, the United States was founded on forms and principles designed to guarantee, with qualifications, its polity's equal right to Life, Liberty, and Happiness. Equality is posited without qualification, whether it exists or not. Life and Liberty are negatively conflated under the rubric of Safety. The right to Happiness (whether *it* exists or not) is restricted to

the pursuit of it.

To me, this final permission to pursue happiness has always been the most alluring. By distinguishing safety from happiness, it introduces an element of dynamic instability into public governance and invests the now neglected discipline of eudaemonics with legal consequence, subsuming the entire realm of commercial and institutional interest beneath it. In most writing about the republic's primal texts, this phrase is given rather short shrift. 'The pursuit of happiness' is simply presumed to be a Lockean euphemism that guarantees the pursuit of commerce and industry under the purview of contract law. It certainly is that, but the phrase is not dead language. It derives from a rhetoric in which commerce and industry are said to produce and disseminate 'goods,' (which is to say virtues incarnate), and Happiness, in the locution of the Second Continental Congress, is the Good toward which all these goods aspire.

Moreover, the panoply of goods produced and disseminated under this legally protected right to pursue happiness extends well beyond objects of use and consumption to intellectual and artistic properties, as well. And since we are all free to pursue our own happiness, the relative value of all these goods is necessarily determined outside the realm of governmental authority, scientific proof, and metaphysical certainty in the externalized, propositional discourses of the forum, the court, the piazza, and the marketplace. Herein lie the pagan roots of the republic, and, with these in mind, it is not particularly surprising that a society whose citizens propose and elect a hierarchy of incarnate creatures to represent them in the realm of governance would propose and elect a hierarchy of similarly incarnate goods to represent their transient and variegated longings.

It is hardly imaginable, in fact, that citizens of a society like this, for whom the pursuit of happiness is a primal mandate, would *not* produce grails to embody the nature of their quest for it – inconceivable that icons of happiness would *not* proliferate.

Every morning, when I was in sixth grade at Santa Monica Elementary, we stood beside our desks, stared at the flag and, under the baton of Ms. Veronica Chavez, sang "America the Beautiful." La Chavez sang the official line, "*Oh beautiful for spacious skies, for amber waves of grain . . .*" We sang our own counter-text, a paean to beauty in its presence, "*Oh beautiful for gracious thighs, for amber babes of Spain . . .*" It was a puerile encomium, to be sure, but I have not forgotten the inordinate pride we kids took in our collective poesis as we sang out, "*Veronica, Veronica, God shed his grapes on thee . . .*" We were less original than we thought, however. Since that time, I have yet to discover a contemporary of mine whose class bards did not invent their own dissenting lyric to be sung to this tune. Somehow (probably thanks to the Second Continental Congress), we all felt empowered to propose our own aesthetic, and we did. We all sang the song, but with our own lyrics, because we all expected our own brand of beauty as a privilege of citizenship, as an icon of happiness, and intended to pursue it.

Responding to our youthful expectations, the city of Santa Monica presented us with beautiful things at every turn and with many things that were not beautiful at all. At recess, milling around in the asphalt schoolyard, we continued to sing the same song with different lyrics. We beach dudes would extol the sublimity of mountainous, smoking surf; we would deplore the grungy indignity of city buses. Fledgling Bukowskis

among us would take exception to this anti-urban cant, as would the barrio kids for whom nothing not cars or music or Veronica qualified for serious contemplation. So the argument would bubble along – the song holding us together and the lyrics setting us apart. In this haphazard manner, the vernacular discourse of beauty flourished at Santa Monica Elementary, and not one of us would have quarreled with Baudelaire’s dictum in the *Salon of 1846* that “there are as many kinds of beauty as there are habitual ways of seeking happiness.”

Nor would any American today quarrel with Baudelaire. We all seek happiness as a matter of course and call it beauty. We brave crowds to gaze at paintings on the walls of museums. We gather on scenic overlooks just off the interstate. We sit in the stands as the jump shot swishes through the net or the skater smoothly lands. We sit in the audience as the solo or the aria concludes, and, occasionally, in our delight, we mutter this involuntary vocalization: “Beautiful!” – Or, sometimes, we just say, “Great!” – Or, if we reside in the borough of Queens, “Gorgeous!” Then we look around for confirmation or argument. Either will do to begin the conversation, which is always a discourse of value for which the only qualification is a shared experience of some correlative object or event.

Because of mass production, mass communication, and sheer mobility, a vast repertoire of such objects and events is available to us. We all see a lot in this country and see a lot of the same things, and, having these things in common, and little else, we talk about them obsessively. We may acquire knowledge and self-knowledge from such a conversation, but neither is required to begin it. We can talk about beauty with anyone and we do. We can talk about it anyplace

and anytime after the encounter, because we know it when we see it and we remember it well enough that its perceived absence informs our recognition of the banal and the grotesque – the existence of which few have the temerity to question.

John Ashbery once remarked that, after we discover that life cannot *possibly* be one long orgasm, the best we can expect is a pleasant surprise. I like to think of encounters with beauty in just this sense, as pleasant surprises. These are far from daily occurrences in any society, but they do happen. We encounter the embodiment of what we like and what we want in the external world and we are delighted. Something connecting our bodies to our minds vibrates like a tuning fork, and the sudden, unexpected harmony of body, mind, and world becomes the occasion for both consolation and anxiety.

In that moment, we are, for once, at home with ourselves in the incarnate world, yet no longer in tune with the mass of people who do not respond as we do. We now belong to the constituency of people who *do* respond – if such a constituency exists. Thus the urgency of our vocalization: “Beautiful!” Thus our willingness to accost strangers with our enthusiasm, to venture among them in search of co-conspirators. Thus, beautiful objects or events are defined by their ability to reorganize society by creating constituencies around them, and to represent for these constituencies both who they are and what they want – and in a free society the question of what a group of citizens wants is always political.

The resulting din of aesthetic contention is so ubiquitous that it’s easy to take for granted. It is equally easy to deplore the daily fret of living in a nation of exquisite connoisseurs where yuppies

standing before the pastry case at Starbucks spend more time deliberating on their choice of muffin than you do buying a car. Even so, it's hard to imagine a commercial democracy conducting its business without this ongoing murmur of choice, advocacy, discrimination, and dissent about everything from chainsaws to eyeliner, from Puccini to Jan van Eyck. This chatter is usually dismissed as a defect of consumerism, but it is always less about acquiring things or paying money for them than the ongoing mystery of pleasant surprises – of physical resonance with a world where our own responses matter and our own vote counts.

The experience of pleasant surprises, however, is not local to the social experience of commercial democracies. It is ubiquitous and infinitely variegated because we are all very different and the world is very wide. The discourse arising from these surprises, however, flourishes to best effect in highly mobile, loosely organized, and casually administrated commercial societies whose members feel privileged to respond and *must* respond, in fact, to conduct their daily business. Better-organized and more rigorously administrated societies, those less practically pagan and restlessly cosmopolitan, cope with pleasant surprises quite differently, simply because the reflexive experience of American beauty is always, potentially, an occasion for changing one's friends, one's fashions, one's furnishings, and one's livelihood – even for changing one's home in the hope of discovering a place of residence that 'feels like home.'

In societies where precipitous changes of this sort are not standard procedure – in tribes, villages, academies, and churches, in laboratories and governmental bureaucracies – the pleasant surprise takes on a darker aspect. In such

societies, one's eccentric taste is always more likely to be construed as a threat to the community – as a signifier of disloyalty – than as an icon of aspiration. (As any tribal elder will tell you, the Trojan War was the disastrous consequence of one young man's pleasant surprise, of his cosmopolitan connoisseurship, and don't you forget it.) Accepting the experience of beauty as a straightforward, culturally informed, politically validated, physical response to the external world directs discussions of beauty toward its social consequences rather than its absent causes, and in tribal environments the consequence of espousing a dissenting aesthetic (as each of us do) is always anxiety.

Beauty reigns, if it reigns at all, with the consent of the governed. Those who do not feel free to consent feel anxiety, especially in an obsessively permissive society like this one, in which most of our cloistered citizens are charged with the task of denying us one sort of permission or another. These clerics, bureaucrats, or academics are assigned the difficult task of adjudicating the 'real' value, uncovering the 'true' meaning, and enforcing the 'correct' interpretation of everything from tax returns to literary texts, from scripture to works of art. Out in the street, everyone from the cop on the corner to the drifter he's hassling is a brazen, chattering aesthete sporting impudent opinions in lieu of green carnation, and the minions of correct interpretation must be forgiven their annoyance at this tumult.

They are, after all, disinterested professionals, and the vernacular discourse of beauty is in no sense a professional or disinterested endeavor. It is a discourse of engaged beholders – quite literally a colloquy of amateurs – and need be nothing more. It pertains to our Safety and Happiness, to the dissonance be-

tween the two, and our wistful expectation of feeling simultaneously at home in our bodies, in the world, and in society. It is also a civil institution that is only imaginable in a society whose primal texts assert the priority of eudaemonics – a society where we are led to expect first-rate representation in the world from senators, congressmen, lawyers, paintings, landscapes, and pop tunes.

3

The first time I was in Rome, [in 1506] when I was young, the pope was told about the discovery of some very beautiful statues in a vineyard near S. Maria Maggiore. The pope ordered one of his officers to run and tell [my father] Giuliano da Sangallo to go and see them. He set off immediately. Since Michelangelo Bounarroti was always to be found at our house (my father having assigned him the commission for the pope's tomb) my father wanted him to come along too. I joined up with my father and off we went. I climbed down to where the statues were when immediately my father said, "That is the Laocoon, which Pliny mentions." Then they dug the hole wider so that they could pull the statue out. As soon as it was visible everyone started to draw, all the while discoursing on ancient things, chatting as well about the things in Florence.

– Francesco da Sangallo, in a letter, 1566

During the fifteen and sixteenth centuries in Italy, a loose confederation of artisans, church decorators, and visual educators created a body of pictures whose authority and immediacy completely eclipsed the agendas they were designed to promote. In recognition of this achievement, the canon of precedence that ranked visual objects in the period was redesigned. The special category of cultural and commercial value previous-

ly restricted to works of classical antiquity was tacitly extended to include the work of these contemporary masters. In 1605, this expanded category was confirmed in writing by the city of Florence, which passed an edict expressly forbidding the sale and export of any work on any subject by eighteen artists from all over Italy. The list included Leonardo, Michelangelo, Raphael, del Sarto, Correggio, Parmigianino, and most of the rest of the Italian canon – most of whom have remained canonical.

All of the artists whose work was singled out in the Florentine edict had executed permanent public works for churches and civic buildings throughout Italy. The objects at issue in the edict, however, were those viscerally persuasive, visually dazzling, readily portable paintings on canvas and panel whose most amazing attribute in their own time was the scale of their public vogue – their celebrity in a fame-crazy culture, their burgeoning marketability in a renaissance commercial society. It is equally true, of course, that the work was idealistically inspired by the rational, corporeal authority of classical sculpture – that it was rather casually informed by the pagan cosmopolitanism of Roman learning, and justified, as often as not, by the casuistry of fashionable Neoplatonism. It is also undeniable that, regardless of their secular accouterments, these paintings and the artists who made them remained fully complicit in the incarnate mysteries of primitive Catholicism and indebted to its ideologies.

The conflicted debt these paintings owed to contemporary fashion, primitive Catholicism, and classical paganism is most succinctly demonstrated by the agendas and controversies that swirled around their greatest technological innovation: the invention of oil glazing. This practice of applying transparent

layers of pigment suspended in oil one over the other created the ravishing surfaces whose luminosity became the trademark of this painting. Since it mimics the layering of skin, the invention itself probably derived from observation. The practical virtue of this layering, and doubtless part of its *raison d'être*, was first its stunning rhetorical acuity, and second its ability to approximate in painting the seductive corporeality and translucency of antique objects carved in marble.

The theological occasion for this invention was purportedly to make the doctrine of the Incarnate Word visible and palpable in portrayals of Christ (and particularly the Christ-child). This doctrine was the primary tenet of Western Catholicism, and since the glazed surfaces of this new painting allowed ambient illumination to pass through levels of transparent color and bounce back so the paint appeared to hold the light and glow, this seductive simultaneity of light and gross material was taken as a metaphor for Christ's simultaneous mortality and sanctity as the eternal word of God made living flesh. In everyday practice, however, oil glazing was never actually restricted to painting the body of Christ. The physical, theological metaphor of luminosity was immediately extended and transformed into a metaphor for the presence of grace – for the visible investment of a body with some aspect of sanctity. This justified the use of oil glazing to portray kings, patrons, princes, saints, and bystanders.

In very short order, entire paintings were bathed in atmospheric sourceless radiance – directionless and therefore timeless. (The seventeenth century would bring to painting the ruthless diagonal light that insists upon the unstable contingency of historical time.) The luminous ambience in sixteenth-century

paintings, however, was not properly a metaphor for timeless grace. It was more accurately an incarnation of it, since the visibility of grace in Renaissance theology was not a metaphor, but a fact. The theological presumption was that grace was perceptible, that it could in fact be seen. (This is why church deliberations about the attribution and assignment of sainthood remain obsessed with eyewitness accounts, with witnessed miracles, witnessed good works, witnessed aura, etc.)

So, if grace is signified by its visibility and confirmed by being *seen*, what is the status of objects whose physical luminosity *represents* the state of grace? A person invested with grace is a visible saint. An object invested with grace is a sacred icon. What, then, is a painting that incarnates with breathtaking authority the mimetic image of creatures who embody the luminosity of eternal grace? A mimetic picture, after all, is not a Byzantine ideogram that stands in for a word – or The Word. It is a persuasive representation that stands in for the *absence* of its physical subject. Thanks to oil glazing, however, such paintings seemed something *more* than mimetic pictures; they were in fact *incarnations* of mimetic pictures.

Let's say we have a painting of Christ. Is this a picture, an icon, or something else? If it is only a representation of the historical Jesus, then this picture stands in for the *absent* Christ and signifies his absence. Yet Christ, conceived in grace, is *never* absent. To presume that the picture might embody Christ's eternal presence, however, allows the inference that a man-made representation of Christ might incarnate his *presence*, and now we are playing rather fast and loose with the Second Commandment. The solution to this theological double entendre favored by the Roman church was to construe

these works as images of the *once and future* Christ whose life on earth was historical and will be again, whose spiritual presence is eternal and signified by incarnate luminosity. This idea that works of art might exist in a condition of simultaneous absence and presence, as representations and incarnations, has persisted throughout the history of Western art, secular and sacred, and reached its modern apotheosis in impressionism.

The critical issue in Catholic Italy, the *source* of this once and future visible enhancement, is not explained by this explanation. Beyond Christ, who was conceived in a state of grace, everyone and everything else in a state of grace must be invested from without. Tangible relics invest icons with grace according to the Catholic Church, and the Church itself invests human beings. Protestants and dissenting Catholics believed human beings could be invested with grace directly by God himself, without clerical mediation, and held all objects or images purportedly invested with sanctity to be nothing more than false idols, pagan simulacra of Christianity.

In retrospect, one can't help but suspect that these issues of incarnation and idolatry, of grace and its investiture, would have remained moot without the challenge of Renaissance painting, which confounded representation and incarnation and mimicked the luminosity of grace. These issues did arise, however, and the continuing impact of these theological niceties on secular painting is inescapable. Even today, the phrases 'craven idolatry' and 'commodity fetishism' may be substituted for one another with no loss of sense. The idea of grace as sanctity-visibly-confirmed translates so easily into the idea of beauty-that-need-only-be-seen-to-be-believed that it's hard to imagine the latter without the former. The intellectual construc-

tions of an object in a state of grace and that of a work of art in an autonomous state of quality, goodness, or beauty are virtually identical: both the artwork and the icon are presumed to embody, in the present moment, a condition of ahistorical, visible authority.

The question remains, however, for saints and paintings alike: *What is the source of this invested value?* Does the saint's state of grace derive from God directly or from the church? Does the painting's self-evident authority derive from the institution that sponsored its creation? From the artist who created it? From God who inspired the artist who created it? From the scriptural criticism and scholarship that interprets it? From the instructive value of the stories it portrays? Or could this painting possibly derive its authority from a constituency of beholders who have actually experienced its power, agreed upon its loveliness, and, in word and deed, publicly confirmed its value?

In the history of commentary on art, all of these sources of authority have been passionately defended except for the last one. Even though enthusiastic secular constituencies undeniably created the public vogue of Renaissance painting, and this public vogue created the beaux-arts tradition, most commentators hesitate to acknowledge this circumstance. Presumably the colloquy of enthusiasts talking around and about a work of art evokes the noisy chaos of a souk and calls up the image of feckless Israelites dancing with abandon around the golden calf. If it does, it should, since *neither* of these evocations is inaccurate or non-descriptive. Both exempla are implicit in the scene described by Francesco da Sangallo of the chattering crowd gathered around the pit from which the Laocoon has just been exhumed.

Everyone present at the excavation of

this wonderful object is drawing, talking, comparing, and appraising. The Laocoon, mythically risen from the earth, is at once a golden calf, an object of commerce, and the incarnation of an ancestral text. Giuliano da Sangallo, who recognizes the statue from a passage in Pliny, is an architect by profession. Michelangelo Bounarroti is both an artist and an architect. On this particular occasion they are both commercial agents of the pope, and it's hard to see how this circumstance might diminish our assessment of either man. Contributing to the rescue and preservation of the Laocoon is hardly an offence against culture, while ignoring the impact of commerce and consumption on the history of art does in fact qualify, since it simplifies the picture without improving it and leads us down the garden path toward the noxious habit of explaining the flowering of Renaissance painting in terms of 'insight,' 'inspiration,' and 'creativity.'

I am much more comfortable tracing the origins of this flowering to the late Middle Ages when the Catholic Church began outsourcing its decoration piecemeal. Over the next few centuries, the sacred orders traditionally entrusted with in-house decoration were gradually reassigned, and outsourcing became the norm. By the late mid-fifteenth century, the visual rhetoric of Western Catholicism could be said to reside firmly in the hands of private providers overseen by commissioning bishops and scholarly iconographers. At this point, the Church in Rome, as an image-provider, began to function as a public-private conglomerate surrounded by a satellite ring of competing subcontractors. (One thinks of Brunelleschi and Ghiberti's competition to portray the sacrifice of Isaac in the doors of the baptistery of Florence Cathedral in 1401, the outcome of which launched Ghiberti on a career of bronze

doors and drove Brunelleschi into architecture much to his chagrin and our own joy.)

Over the years, this outsourcing arrangement had a three-fold effect on art practice. First, unlike the artisans of sacred orders, these new subcontracting artists, artisans, and ateliers, vying for competitive advantage, strove for distinction, evolving trademark styles by investing their production with idiosyncratic strategies and mannerisms (on the principle that if you get your style on the ceiling you are more likely to get the commission for the nave). Second, the practice of stealing, borrowing, refining, and inventing that the struggle for distinction entailed began to erode the integrity of regional artistic idioms. Expatriate artists and artisans, brought to Rome by provincial popes to celebrate their papacies in local styles, did not go home. They stayed in Rome, absorbed local influences, and continued to compete for work in an increasingly cosmopolitan stylistic environment.

Finally, and most importantly, the Church's public administration of private art practice created, early on, a nascent art world populated by connoisseur churchmen well versed in artistic practice and conversant with its classical and contemporary texts. Since these clerics commissioned and oversaw the production of works of art whose ideological content was identical by fiat, they evaluated the work of artists one to the other according to its formal and rhetorical acuity. These gentlemen of the church were not, after all, going to artists to 'get the Word.' They were going to artists to get the Word made flesh, and there can be little doubt that without their imposition of ideological consistency, the Renaissance orgy of formal diversification, visual refinement, and technical invention would have been considerably less

exuberant. Even with it, the steep curve of escalating sophistication had its darker consequences. Throughout the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, under the pressure of competition and in response to the challenge of Reformation, painting assumed new grandeur. It also became more cold-bloodedly rhetorical, more calculatedly seductive, and much, much more persuasive.

This regime of escalating professional sophistication almost inevitably reconfigured the relationship between the purportedly religious artist and his audience. Looking back from the vantage point of the early seventeenth century, any knowledgeable citizen could have told you with some authority that the difference between the work of a contemporary like Caravaggio and the work of a fifteenth-century master like Fra Angelico is that Caravaggio wants to dazzle and control us, that the theatricality of his breathtaking illusions has one goal: to make us believe. Fra Angelico, on the other hand, just believes and believes that we believe. This is the source of his power, and, lacking that doubled faith, no subsequent painter has ever approximated Brother Angel's devotional eloquence. One instinctively and involuntarily believes both artists, in other words, but the conditions of that belief have changed. A fifteenth-century art-lover and connoisseur might look at a painting by Fra Angelico and become a Christian. A seventeenth-century Christian gazing at Caravaggio's *Entombment* might just as easily become an art-lover.

4

It is curious that princely galleries were so highly admired during the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, a period during which the hierarchal classifica-

tion of the arts was taken for granted and the orthodoxy of religious imagery was a matter of real consequence. No one seems to have complained that, by treating portraits on the same level as history paintings and by hanging altarpieces . . . next to scenes of the most enticing eroticism, collectors were defying the considered teaching of churchmen and philosophers in order to create a category of art for which only aesthetic quality needed to be taken into account. It is, paradoxically, not until the nineteenth century when the classification of art by subject matter was in theory becoming increasingly old fashioned that, in practice, a growing number of thinkers began to deplore the situation that had been brought about.

– Francis Haskell, *The Invisible Museum*

So far, I have tried to characterize the cultural vernacular out of which the beaux-arts tradition arose in the late Renaissance and to characterize as well the contemporary American vernacular into which it has dispersed. Anyone wondering what these boisterous vernaculars might have to do with the domain of fine art proper at the dawn of the twenty-first century should, in truth, already know: they have nothing to do with it. The contemporary street discourse derives directly from a revolutionary way of looking at things that was first validated in Renaissance Italy. This revolutionary mode of address made it possible for private citizens to appropriate and willfully misconstrue advertisements for the church and state as objective correlatives in rituals of social adjudication.

The loose coalition of artists, critics, churchmen, and Renaissance princes who led this revolution founded what we now call the beaux-arts tradition by willfully misinterpreting masterworks of sacred and philosophical art as icons of

private desire and personal enthusiasm. They created what Francis Haskell refers to as “a category of art for which only aesthetic quality need be taken into account” – which is not really a category of art at all but a categorical way of *looking* at art that privileges the quality of the object’s consequences over the authority of its causes. In practice, this revolution shifted the power to interpret and preserve works of art from their sponsoring institutions to their volunteer beholders. This enhanced the ability of images to *acquire* new meanings over time while compromising their ability to *sustain* cultural meanings and communicate official propaganda or impose official policy.

In this small way, the beaux-arts revolution sounded the death knell for the wars of iconography that ravaged Europe and the Middle East for a thousand years – from the days of the Early Church on up through the Reformation. In recent years, however, the consequences of this revolution have been virtually obliterated in the realm of official culture by a counter-revolution that has taken us back to the day before anyone found anything beautiful. This counter-revolution – called a ‘culture war’ and mounted simultaneously by the right and left wings of American culture – has pitted the authority of culture, ideology, and tradition against the pleasures of society, and both wings have won. The right wing has prevailed in the realm of public governance, the left in the realm of institutional and academic culture, and both wings have instituted a new regime of correct speech and correct interpretation.

In this moment of officious triumph, we lost the object. Our right to willfully misappropriate the elegant lies of ambitious power lost its sanction. The privilege of creating provisional icons of so-

ciability out of high-dollar, bravura dreck went into exile on main-street. For five hundred years this privilege of misinterpretation had been society’s hedge against rhetoric, its mode of subverting the blandishments of governmental, corporate, academic, and clerical authority. Now no more, except on the street, and it may seem a small thing but the privilege of standing with one’s companions before some juggernaut of ill-intentioned bombast selling the pleasures of war, penury, or tribal seclusion – of being able to stand there smiling happily in its presence and say, “Well, isn’t that *pretty!*” is no small thing. It is the essence of liberty and sophistication, the emblem of civilized sedition; and, today, the cultural sites that once preserved our right to be seditious and civilized in this way no longer do. Having won the culture war, the administrators of these once-and-future ‘museums’ now purport to give us ‘good advertising’ correctly interpreted to counteract the ‘bad’ advertising we encounter in the street.

Once again, it’s all advertising, and the explanatory texts that deface the walls of these institutions stand as cold evidence of a culture morbidly obsessed with the longevity of its own ideas and morbidly fearful of the perpetual re-allegorization that ensures works of art *their* longevity. These Nebuchadnezzar-style word-walls that one confronts like quavering Daniel may be read as ironic epitaphs for the beaux-arts amateurs who dreamed these halls of high culture, built them and filled them with works of art now in the custody of philistine colonizers, not one of whom imagines the flowering of the beaux-arts tradition to have been anything other than a viral efflorescence of elitist connoisseurship infected by self-regarding narcissism and nascent commodity fetishism. This, however, is only to say that the temperamental proclivi-

ties of administrative bureaucracies in the Christian West have survived without much alteration for five hundred years.

The considered teaching of churchmen and philosophers still holds incarnate beauty to be, at best, the unintended consequence of accident or design and, at worst, plain old craven idolatry. All this means, however, is that the beaux-arts tradition has reverted to the status it maintained for two hundred and fifty years, from the Florentine edict in 1605 until the 1850s when Édouard Manet established the first rigorously beaux-arts *practice* by speculating openly in the mercantile appetite for pleasant surprises. Until the moment of Manet's emergence, the beaux-arts tradition had no proper objects. It was a responsive, personal, evaluative way of looking. The act of looking was always followed by talking and sometimes followed by the investment of writing or capital in some visual occasion designed for other purposes, or used to other ends. During this period, the beaux-arts appetite for visceral consequences reconciled itself as a matter of course with the official presumption that the utility of art resided in its devotional, ideological, or educational content.

Even reconciled, however, enthusiasm for beautiful things was never considered sufficiently Christian or intellectual or publicly responsible to be a completely respectable social avocation. It remained a vaguely reprehensible hobby that survived under the mantle of its deniability – simply because there was no discernable evidence of its existence. The same works of art, seen differently, could represent the opposing interests of enthusiasts and educators. Connoisseurs, who were also, by happy chance, charged with imposing ideological correctness on paintings, could comfortably

commission high pornography in the guise of thoughtful classicism. These naughty bits could then survive in serene duplicity in well-appointed drawing rooms because the aristocrats funding the church and state were also the collectors buying the pictures. Public virtue and aesthetic value coexisted in the same commodities – aesthetic discernment and public authority coexisted in the same adjudicators – and all the funding came, finally, out of the same pocket.

In this sense, the beaux-arts tradition from 1605 until 1850 was an invisible empire – the very definition of what Michel Foucault calls an 'open secret.' It was a social endeavor of which everyone was aware and hardly anyone spoke. Its activities were limited to a small but far-flung circle of producers, consumers, commentators, and facilitators – the sort of people who gathered around the pit and watched the Laocoon being unearthed – and for these people the aesthetic way of looking was presumed to be a privilege of education, rank, and talent. Their adjudications were neither for public consumption nor scholastic disquisition. There were no reporters from "Entertainment Tonight" in 1542 to announce that Cardinal Farnese had just commissioned an odalisque from Titian with the caveat that it be sexier than the Duke of Urbino's. There were no follow-up stories reporting that the papal nuncio had written Farnese from Venice to reassure him that his odalisque-in-progress made the duke's "look like a frigid nun."

Today, the cardinal's odalisque is presumed on good evidence to survive in the basement recesses of the Vatican (the sexier the nude, one presumes, the deeper the recess), and the duke's odalisque now hangs in the Uffizi, in classical drag, under the pseudonym *Venus d'Urbino*. During its residency in the

duke's bedchamber, the work was simply catalogued as "a painting of a naked woman by Titian." This, however, does not mean that either the duke or the cardinal were unaware of what they had, or unresponsive to the quality of Titian's creations. They, and those who followed them, were demonstrably committed to the work surviving and worldly enough to understand that Western culture does not officially condone high pornography however elegant. Western culture approves of composure ("Ah, look at the composition"), and consensus ("Ah, the chromatic harmony!"), and antique learning ("Venus in her bedchamber, how exquisite!"). So if the price of preserving a painting of a naked woman by Titian was pretending to love virtue while actually finding virtue in something you love, that was considered a small enough price to pay.

This congenial state of hypocritical complicity about aesthetic matters sustained itself in happy invisibility until the early nineteenth century when the beaux-arts tradition, catastrophically, lost its 'beard.' The collapse of religious authority and the erosion of aristocratic values forced aesthetics out of the closet, and in the escalating orgy of historical self-consciousness occasioned by this collapse, the frivolous antiques that had been inexplicably preserved by beaux-arts enthusiasts were transformed into icons of the lost past and of the culture's (*Oh dear!*) lost values. This occasioned a quantum escalation of art's perceived cultural importance, and rather quickly, thanks to the inordinate amount of long-ing invested in it, the practice of art itself came to be perceived as the very emblem of human aspiration, self-realization, national pride, historical achievement, and cultural identity.

Even John Ruskin, who was deeply complicit in the propagation of art-as-

religion, recognized this for the idolatry it was – and the moment did not last. Instead, a whole array of purportedly scientific teleologies arose to fill the vacuum left by the collapse of traditional religion and aristocratic patrimony, and works of art (now seen as incarnate history) provided an evidentiary symptomology for all of them. Under the auspices of Herder and Hegel, Darwin, Marx, and Freud, new regimes of 'correct interpretation' were instituted, and, *plus ça change*, works of art were recruited to do for their new bosses the same job they once did for their old ones. Paintings that previously argued for the glorious primacy of church, state, and patrimony now served in circular arguments as both symptom and proof of natural selection, the historical necessity of the class struggle, and the validity of oedipal rage. In other contexts, the art of the past (now 'correctly' reinterpreted) was recruited to validate separatist myths of cultural identity and to reinvigorate regional and tribal traditions.

The putative adversary of all these manly narrative projects, its effete *bête noir*, was the colloquy of 'inauthentic' Anglo-French constituencies that constituted the surviving infrastructure of beaux-arts society. So it was probably fortunate for these cosmopolitans that, just at this moment, after centuries of collecting and connoisseurship, a rigorously beaux-arts *practice* was finally established by Manet. The invention of this 'modernist' art may be said to mark the end of the beaux-arts revolution's beginning. Unfortunately, it also marked the beginning of its end. With the invention of the bourgeois art market by Manet and the simultaneous establishment of new 'cultural' regimes of correct interpretation, the co-existence of institutional virtue and aesthetic discernment was irrevocably sundered.

From this point forward, Europeans

and Americans engaged in artistic endeavors were divided into two increasingly distinct constituencies. There was a professional class of administrators, historians, and theoreticians concerned with determining and enforcing the correct interpretation of art's original cultural intentions; and an unofficial class of collectors, dealers, critics, and artists concerned with exacerbating the social consequences of art's embodied presence. As the twentieth century progressed, the maestros of correct interpretation, whose original agenda was only to make art more culturally meaningful, became increasingly concerned with making art less aesthetically appealing and less surprising – lest it be misunderstood. At the same time, mandarin aesthetes became similarly engaged in suppressing representation and transforming art into an increasingly embodied, purely 'aesthetic' activity – lest it be misunderstood.

In the late twentieth century, this schism would finally open into an abyss. The conventions of beaux-arts practice would once again dissolve into the cultural wallpaper – this time with no residue of covert complicity in official quarters. As a consequence, the radical social function of the beaux-arts tradition survives in the vernacular discourse of value while its more romantic project of saving everything we ever loved is withering away under the administration of utopian bureaucrats whose only utopian attribute is their visceral contempt for both the relevant past and the physical present. So we should not forget this: for five hundred years, the beaux-arts tradition survived on the revolutionary premise that beautiful art, regardless of its cause or content, is much to be preferred over art that is not so *beaux* and thus should be preserved – and, further, that works of art, once found beautiful

and no longer considered to be, might easily become beautiful again and are thus equally deserving of rescue.

This beaux-arts vision of love's enduring virtue sustained itself while nations rose and fell, institutions flourished and lost their funding, fashions burst upon the scene and just as quickly faded. Under its auspices, beautiful things were not only preserved but also put to use. Objects and images that had long since outlived their cultural contexts, their practical and official utility, were snatched from oblivion, maintained, displayed, and vigorously reutilized through the agency of perpetual reinterpretation. New uses were found for old portraits of dead kings and commoners utterly forgotten. Formal virtues were attributed to brown landscapes. Nouveau story content constantly reinvigorated depictions of lost narratives. Visual arguments in aid of lost philosophies and ideologies now defunct were renovated and renewed as a matter of routine.

Today, all this is over. The past is presumed to be well lost – to be nothing more than a cautionary narrative against which the present must be inoculated. To this end, surviving works of art are summarily banished to the inaccessible dungeons of their original contexts with the inference that resituating the same work in the context of the present is somehow verboten. It isn't, unless the prohibition is against objects themselves, and this would seem to be the case, since even objective evidence of the present is quickly discarded, presumably to rescue the utopian future from the evil influence of this, its reprehensible past. The deficit of pleasure and complexity being incurred by this cultural demolition derby, however, would seem a rather high price to pay to rid us of the casual hypocrisy that preserved

the *Venus d'Urbino*. It is an absolutely outrageous price to pay to deny the undeniable fact that objects of human manufacture have consequences that proliferate far beyond their original causes and that these often beneficent consequences routinely subvert and even repudiate the intentions of their manufacturers.

5

The branch from which the blossom hangs is neither long nor short.

– Krishnamurti

Begin the ending here: Pleasant surprises are a fact. Their social, psychological, and somatic dimensions are radically contingent and infinitely complex, but beyond the opacity of these occasions there is no mystery. The vernacular discourse of relative beauty is a rationally explicable mode of perception that requires nothing more imaginative of its practitioners than a reversal of Western civilization's semiotic priorities by application of the *paragone* – by habitually looking like-to-like. As Oscar Wilde remarked, “a gentleman always judges by appearances,” and we begin our education in doing this with a base premise of American semiotics: that all simple signs have two primary domains of reference. First: all signs that we call signs have *designative* meanings. They refer to things that are *unlike* themselves – as words infer their referents, and pictures what they represent. Second: since all signs that we call signs are also things in the world, they have *embodied* meanings. They reference things that are *like* themselves – as a word, or a color, or a musical note is known with reference to other words, colors, or musical notes.

No one questions the existence of these two domains. Nor has anyone pro-

posed a formal way of sorting out their tangled skeins of reference. The quarrel, especially in the realm of art, is about the relative priority of these embodied and designative meanings – about what we know through which agency. Do we learn about the king compared to other kings through the agency of his portrait, or do we learn about the painting compared to other paintings through the agency of the king's likeness? Do we learn about the table compared to other tables through Picasso's portrayal of it, or do we learn about Picasso's painting compared to other paintings through the agency of the table he portrays?

There is little doubt that the king's portrait is *intended* to celebrate the king, and no doubt at all that Picasso's table is *intended* to celebrate his virtuosity. Free citizens, however, are unbound by authorial intention. They must choose between two readings that require quite distinct ways of looking at the world. In practice, of course, there is no absolute distinction. We are always choosing a reading somewhere between these two extremes and weighted toward one or the other, but, even so: A reading weighted toward designative meaning prioritizes the absent king and the imaginary table. A reading weighted toward embodied meaning prioritizes the paintings. Either is possible. The argument is about which is preferable and to whom.

Administrative cultures, preoccupied with delivering the message, keeping the record, teaching the lesson, and assuring our compliance, necessarily prioritize designative meanings. In order to survive, these cultures need to be relatively certain that we (their auditors) accept what they (our administrators) say that words mean and colors stand for. If we accept our administrators' reading of the world, their ability to control our behavior is considerably facilitated: we stop at

the sign and stop at the light as well. The urgency of their concern with teaching us what things mean derives from the fact that the world gets in the way of their authority. Administrative authority depends on designated reference, but like-to-like embodied meanings always have cognitive priority. Most contemporary theorists, in fact, argue that *only* embodied meanings have even marginal necessity.

When Jacques Derrida asserts that there is no meaning outside the text, he is not arguing for the priority of text, but for the primacy of the embodied relationship between one word and another. He is arguing that any field of designative reference we construct behind the patterned words that compose the text (and the patterned words that express their meanings, and the patterned words that express *their* meaning, ad infinitum) is radically contingent and literally imaginary. Embodied relationships, on the other hand, are perceptible without designative reference. Their patterns signify for us the *possibility* of designative meaning, and the actual designative meanings we attach to them are always in some degree up for grabs. A framed pattern of colors may be a picture but not necessarily. A bounded series of words may tell a story or make an argument, but it needn't. Embodied patterns supply our cue to seek out designative meanings, and however well we have been indoctrinated with these designative references, the relative beauty and authority of the embodied pattern *itself* is determined by us, if we are empowered to respond and pass judgement.

If we do feel empowered to pass judgement, to privilege beauty and dismiss the banal and the grotesque, the seriousness with which we take any designative messages is contingent upon our taste, upon our aesthetic response to the pat-

tern of embodied signs that bear their reference. In this way, the physical existence of embodied signs poses a perpetual threat to bureaucratic authority, and, if we exclude the Orwellian option of simply deracinating our languages, there are three administrative ways of dealing with the problem of taste and compliance. First, one may simply obliterate taste by disenfranchising the polity and denying them their right of preference. In commercial societies, unfortunately, this is an extremely destructive option.

Second, one may engender and promote a quasi-Protestant 'cult of content' in which the relative felicity of embodied and designative meaning is presumed to vary inversely. This is a popular option in contemporary academia, holding, as it does, that bad writing infers good meaning, that ugly painting infers beautiful content, and dissonant noise infers good music. The only legitimate defense of this cult is that, in the flow of things, bad does, on rare occasions, become good, ugly becomes beautiful, and dissonant becomes harmonious. This is not necessarily the case, however, and, in fact, it is never *necessarily* the case. In the fullness of time, ninety-nine percent of the bad, ugly, stupid, obtuse, and banal remains so, and remains so unmemorable that it sinks into oblivion. Even so, there is always enough of it around.

Finally, there remains the option of teaching taste – of training the bureaucracy in a felicitous mode of embodied expression and educating the polity to appreciate and respond to it. This creates 'appropriate' expression and the whole history of art in the West stands as gorgeous, proliferating testimony to the fact that nothing taught and nothing learned, nothing merely appropriate, can override the revolutionary efficacy of the pleasant surprise. A five-hundred-

year tradition of aesthetic discourse once rested upon this principle: that, in the moment of encounter, intricately constructed patterns of embodied reference always have the potential to completely reinvent the past, to reinvent even their own pasts and yield up the future in new, surprising, and totally unauthorized meanings.

This perpetual promise of radical destabilization creates, in any polity conversant in the discourse of relative beauty, a predisposition to oppose established authority at every turn, since the experience of beauty itself invariably overrides it. Confronted with inept administrative expression, we decry its ugliness. Confronted with appropriate administrative expression, we ignore its banality. And on those few occasions when we encounter genuinely beautiful and surprising administrative expression (while standing before a Raphael, perhaps), we feel free to ignore its designative message. We appropriate its embodied mastery to our own purposes and invest it with new social meaning. We expect such opportunities. If the world before our eyes does not adequately represent us, we claim our right to seek out new representatives.

So here, quickly, is the argument: First, I am assuming that human beings in the course of their daily lives will, on occasion, experience involuntary positive responses to configurations of embodied signs, whether these responses are socially permissible or not. Second, I have observed that, when these responses are permissible, we habitually identify the configurations of embodied signs that occasion them as beautiful in the hope of creating constituencies of agreement with our own evaluation. Third, I am arguing that the cognitive priority of such patterns of embodied signs makes beau-

ty a powerful category of value in societies where it exists. For this reason: If beauty does exist in a society as a category of value and if we are among the members of that society who can and do appraise the world before our eyes as a matter of habit, the cognitive priority of embodied signs more or less guarantees that the pleasant surprises we experience in the presence of beauty will function as a hedge against habit and rhetoric – will routinely preempt the blandishments of vested interest, tribal authority, transcendental religion, metaphysical ethics, and abstract philosophy.

Thus, the utility of beauty as a discourse resides in its ability to locate us as physical creatures in a live, ethical relationship with other human beings in the physical world. Natural and man-made objects reside at the heart of this discourse. Since the intentions and values that inform the origins and historical meanings of such objects bear no necessary relationship to any subsequent meanings they might acquire, these physical things provide us with a publicly available, socially accessible correlative, an interstices, or pause, if you will, upon which the past and future may pivot. The past may create an object and that object create the future if we read the physical world as ancient oracles read the entrails of goats and the flight of eagles – if we are sensitive to the past, alive to the present, and alert to the possibilities of the future.

The condition of existence I am describing, of course, is nothing more or less than ethical, cosmopolitan paganism. It is the gorgeous inheritance bestowed upon us by the pre-Christian societies of the Mediterranean whose idolatrous proclivities have never been effectively obliterated or even subordinated in the Christian West. Nor, I would sug-

gest, are they likely ever to be obliterated or subordinated. The pervasive vernacular of beauty is a part of that pagan inheritance. The whole rhetoric of commerce and all the modalities of practical science are a part of it as well, as are the foundational premises of this republic whose framers embraced the first tenet of Ciceronian republicanism which holds that the virtue of any politics is confirmed in the body of the citizen – in the corporeal safety and happiness of that single and collective body.

Defined in this context, the discourse of beauty is an empirical, social practice of valuing that arises out of our relationship with an external world largely bereft of transcendental norms. In practice, it sets us a difficult task. The categorical attributes through which we assign value are as numerous and protean as the Gods of Rome, and amazingly similar in their utility. They fall to hand

as we need them – novelty, familiarity, antiquity, autonomy, rarity, sanctity, beauty, levity, solemnity, eccentricity, complicity, and utility – and their value shifts from moment to moment. Moreover, since virtually everything we see, hear, or touch can be bought and can be sold, we must somehow determine the personal and social value of things we know the prices of. And prices are no help at all. Even if we bought *everything*, bought the whole world, all we could say with certainty is that the value of what we have purchased, for us at least, exceeds the price we paid. We would have to talk it over with our friends, with other people who have bought the whole world or want to, and these people would not be difficult to find. Wanting to buy the whole world is the first condition of cosmopolitan paganism. Beauty arises out of that desire.

Rochelle Gurstein

The Elgin Marbles, romanticism & the waning of 'ideal beauty'

On June 7, 1816, the House of Commons, after an unprecedented debate, voted to purchase a collection of ancient Greek marbles from Thomas Bruce, the seventh Earl of Elgin. A former ambassador to Turkey, Elgin had convinced the local authorities to allow artists in his employ not only to draw and take plaster casts from the Parthenon in Athens, but also to take sculpture and inscriptions whose removal would not 'detract' from the walls of the temple. In the end, however, Elgin went beyond his original mandate, amassing a vast store of treasures that included the choicest sculptural remains from the pediments, over half of the extant of the frieze slabs, fourteen of the best preserved metopes decorated with high-relief sculpture, as well as coins, architectural fragments, and vases. From the very start, Elgin had his personal detractors, Lord Byron being among the most famous to accuse him of vandalism. More surprisingly, from to-

day's perspective, the Marbles also had their aesthetic detractors, the connoisseur Richard Payne Knight being among the most influential to raise doubts about their antiquity. In order to settle these questions and to determine the monetary value of the collection, the House of Commons appointed a Select Committee that convened for two weeks in February.

In acquiring the Marbles for the British Museum, the House, in effect, was vindicating Elgin. And its decision was based on the recommendation of a group of esteemed artists, connoisseurs, and patrons that had been called upon by the Select Committee to determine "the Merit of the Marbles as works of Sculpture, and the importance of making them Public Property, for the purpose of promoting the study of the Fine Arts in Great Britain." This hearing was as unprecedented as the purchase itself, for promoting the appreciation of the fine arts had never before been considered the proper domain of government. Virtually all those who testified judged the Elgin Marbles "the finest models and the most exquisite monuments of antiquity." In a report recommending their purchase, the Committee argued that the Marbles were thus "highly fit and admirably adapted to form a school for study,

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to improve our national taste for the Fine Arts, and to diffuse a more perfect knowledge of them throughout this kingdom.” Here the Committee was drawing on the opinion of the great authority on antiquities, Ennio Quirino Visconti, who, in a letter to Elgin that had been widely circulated, ranked the Marbles “every bit as excellent as the famous statues of Italy,” and pointedly observed, “If the classical statues of Italy were an inspiration to the Michelangelos and Raphaels of the sixteenth century, will not the Elgin Marbles inaugurate a new era for the progress of sculpture of England?” As is obvious to anyone reading these words today, the purchase of the Elgin Marbles did not inaugurate a new artistic era that rivaled the Italian Renaissance. The future lay not with neoclassicism, but instead with French painting, which was emphatically modern. What is more, in an entirely unforeseen turn of events that would have stunned this first generation of rapt admirers, the purchase marked the end of a tradition – *their* tradition – which, beginning in the Renaissance and culminating in Joshua Reynolds’s *Discourses on Art* (1797), had made a cult of the ‘ideal beauty’ of ancient sculpture.

That the phrase ‘ideal beauty’ no longer resonates with the modern sensibility – to say nothing of the fact that art lovers have no notion of the ‘famous statues of Italy’ that were once so vivid in both the artistic and poetic imaginations that Visconti felt no need to name them – is a sign of how obscure the classical tradition has become. Sculptures such as the *Apollo Belvedere*, the *Laocoon*, the *Venus de’ Medici*, unearthed in Rome during the great building projects of the Renaissance and restored to their former perfection, had, for three centuries, been universally regarded as *the* exemplars of beauty, and thus had been studied and

imitated by artists, avidly pursued by collectors in plaster casts and marble and lead copies, rapturously described by writers, worshiped by enthusiastic travelers, and admired by the cultivated public who knew them through engravings. The long-standing passion for these particular sculptures reached a climax when Napoleon placed them at the head of his list of art treasures to be plundered from Italy; after a triumphal procession into Paris in July of 1798, the coveted statues were installed in the Musée Napoléon, now the Louvre, where they stood until they were returned to their rightful owners after the defeat of Napoleon at Waterloo.

An early sign that the classical tradition was in distress was the very line of questioning that took place at the Elgin Marbles hearing: “Does the *Apollo Belvedere* partake more of ideal beauty than the *Theseus* [one of the most prized of the pedimental sculptures]?”; “Is there not a distinction amongst artists, between a close imitation of nature and ideal beauty?” That the chairman could speak so assuredly of ‘ideal beauty,’ as if it were an easily measurable quantity rather than an extraordinary attribute of the rarest works of art, suggests that this kind of appreciation was becoming increasingly formulaic and hollow. The responses of the artists only strengthen this impression. The renowned sculptor John Flaxman affirmed that the Elgin Marbles were “the finest works” he had ever seen and that he had frequently drawn from them, but insisted that he could not “very correctly compare” the *Theseus* with the *Apollo Belvedere*: “In the first place, the *Apollo Belvedere* is a divinity of a higher order than the *Theseus*.” And then there was the physical condition of the Parthenon sculptures: “The *Theseus* is not only on the surface corroded

ed by the weather; but the head is in that impaired state that I can scarcely give an opinion upon it; and the limbs are mutilated." And so Flaxman concluded, "I should prefer the *Apollo Belvedere* certainly, though I believe it is only a copy." When pressed by the chairman about his seemingly idiosyncratic view – the other artists questioned by the committee considered the Parthenon fragments superior to even the most celebrated ancient sculptures – Flaxman responded that he admired the *Apollo* because it partook, and this was the crux of the matter, "more of ideal beauty than the *Theseus*."

If, in judging works of art, 'ideal beauty' was hardening into a fixed, knowable, and increasingly banal standard, the classical tradition embodied in the practice of painting was acquiring an equally static and academic feel. The poignancy of this moment in the history of sensibility is most strikingly conveyed by the life, work, and *Autobiography* of Benjamin Robert Haydon, a largely forgotten classical painter who lived to see 'ideal beauty' disappear from the aesthetic lexicon.

Early in his memoir, Haydon recalls his difficulties as a fledgling artist in finding the proper model for the hero of his first commissioned painting, *Assassination of Dentatus*. The manner in which Haydon imagined his task leaves little doubt that virtually all the life had by then already been sucked out of the classical tradition (the year was 1808): "I felt that the figure of Dentatus must be heroic and the finest specimen of the species I could invent. But how could I produce a figure that should be the finest of its species? . . . How was I to build an heroic form, life like, yet above life?"

The only path allowed to an artist schooled at the Royal Academy was to model his subject after the famed ancient sculptures. But Haydon soon dis-

covered the old exemplars inadequate to his vision: "I desired more of nature than I could find in any of the antique figures. I became wretched." And so he broke momentarily with his classical training and sought a model in nature directly, only to find that in the living model "the back var[ied] according to the action of the arms." This discovery flew in the face of the antique ideal, where such "variations were not so apparent," a discrepancy that "puzzled [him] to death." It was only thirty-five years later that Haydon could confess in a lecture that he "feared to put into the back of my Hero, what I saw in nature, because I did not see it in the antique; such, at that time, was our bigoted and blind admiration."

Yet, as fate would have it, just as Haydon was agonizing over the figure of his hero, his friend and fellow student, David Wilkie, took him to Park Lane, the gallery that housed the Elgin Marbles when they first arrived from Athens. The visit changed Haydon's life: "The first thing I fixed my eyes on was the wrist of a figure in one of the female groups, in which were visible . . . the radius and ulna. I was astonished, for I had never seen them hinted at in any female wrist in the antique." And when he turned to the *Theseus*, he saw that "the two sides of his back varied, one side stretched from the shoulder-blade being pulled forward, and the other side compressed from the shoulder-blade being pushed close to the spine as he rested on his elbow, with the belly flat because the bowels fell into the pelvis as he sat." And so it was with the horses' heads and the armpits and feet of the fighting figures in the metopes.

Haydon struggled to grasp what he was seeing: "I saw, in fact, the most heroic style of art combined with all the essential detail of actual life." He was convinced that the Marbles embodied

new principles that could easily be absorbed by the English people; what is more, they furnished him with precisely what he needed to go on with his painting. Intoxicated by this revelation, Haydon “inwardly thanked God that [he] was prepared to understand all this and felt the future”:

I foretold that they would prove themselves the finest thing on the earth, that they would overturn the false beau-ideal, where nature was nothing, and would establish the true beau-ideal, of which nature alone is the basis. . . . I felt as if a divine truth had blazed inwardly upon my mind and I knew that they would at last rouse the art of Europe from its slumber in the darkness.

Few people today would have difficulty recognizing in Haydon the outlines of a new social character – the romantic genius. What is much harder to discern is the shape of the world that was being left behind, for the appearance of the ‘romantic genius,’ distinguished from his forbears and mere mortals by his creative imagination, originality, and exquisite sensitivity, has typically been presented not only as a victory for the forces of progress, but also as a prototype of the avant-garde. This familiar story has, in effect, relegated the entire classical tradition to the ash-heap of history.

It has also blinded us to the central place that antiquity held in the imagination of cultivated people before the twentieth century. That the Italian sculptor Antonio Canova was known as ‘the modern Praxiteles,’ and his student John Flaxman as ‘the Pheidias of our times,’ was one sign of the presentness of the past for the nineteenth century. Another was Haydon’s desire to spread the news of the Marbles. After dragging his teacher Henry Fuseli from his home to Park Lane, it was only natural for the

two of them to return to Fuseli’s house, dine, and “pass the evening looking over Quintilian and Pliny,” especially since Fuseli was just as enthusiastic about the Marbles as Haydon, having “strode about [the gallery] saying, ‘De Greeks were godes! de Greeks were godes!’” This immersion in antiquity is also apparent in Haydon’s description of his state of mind after returning home from one of his fifteen-hour drawing marathons at Park Lane:

And so, spreading my drawings on the floor and putting a candle on the ground, I have drank my tea at one in the morning with ecstasy as its warmth trickled through my frame, and looked at my picture and dwelt on my drawings, and pondered on the change of empires and thought that I had been contemplating what Socrates and Plato saw.

It would have been no surprise to his contemporaries that Haydon was at the same time reading “Homer in English to stir up my fancy, that I might conceive my hero’s head with vigour and energy.”

Haydon’s love of antiquity, along with his fervid ambition to revive historical painting in the grand manner, however, does not sit easily with preconceived notions of romanticism. In truth, Haydon never abandoned his ardent, youthful commitments: “Sir Joshua – Drawing – Dissection – and High Art.” His loyalty to Reynolds was such that in 1843 he made a pilgrimage to the home of Reynolds’s eighty-nine-year-old niece, “this last relic left us of the Johnsonian-Burkeian period.” And so his prophecy that the Elgin Marbles would “overturn the false beau-ideal, where nature was nothing, and would establish the true beau-ideal, of which nature alone is the basis” should be understood neither as a repudiation of Reynolds’s classical doctrines, nor as any kind of visionary sanc-

tion of what we now call 'naturalism' or 'realism.'

The intellectual cornerstone of the Johnsonian-Burkeian period in British aesthetics is the idea of 'general nature,' and the authoritative text for artists was Reynolds's *Discourses on Art*. As founder and first president of the Royal Academy, Reynolds delivered these lectures from 1769 to 1790 at its annual award ceremonies. Repeatedly, he stressed that the imitation of general nature was the highest aim of art. It is difficult for us who have come after the romantics to grasp what was meant by this elusive phrase. But for enlightened thinkers of the time, it was a tangible, indeed, first principle: general nature was 'uniform, eternal, and immutable,' as was the faculty that understood it, 'reason'; the faculty that judged it, 'taste'; and the aesthetic form that embodied it, 'ideal beauty.' What was 'particular,' 'individual,' or 'uncommon,' was, in fact, 'deformed.' From this perspective, nature as it appears in "particular living objects" was not nature rightly understood. Rather, as Reynolds insisted, such instances were "accidental deviations from [nature's] accustomed practice."

This distinction between general and particular nature lay at the heart of Reynolds's idea of the practice of art: "The whole beauty and grandeur of the art consists in being able to get above all singular forms, local customs, particularities, and details of every kind." His choice of exemplars reflected the common judgment from the time of Vasari: "The ancient sculptors who, being indefatigable in the school of nature, have left models of that perfect form behind them." In painting, it was the 'divine' Raphael who excelled in beauty and the 'sublime' Michelangelo who excelled in energy. The imitation of general nature

thus ensured the work of art its beauty and grandeur, and also its immortality, for the more perfectly a painting or sculpture embodied what was invariable and timeless, the more certain it was to be appreciated by audiences both in the present and the future. It also meant that the artist was not a 'mechanic' who merely copied imperfect nature as he found it. By pursuing ideal beauty, the artist lifted his practice into the realm of the 'liberal' arts, an elevation Reynolds was most anxious to achieve.

Reynolds's all-important distinction between general and particular nature was also at the root of his notions of taste and beauty: "Those who have cultivated their taste can distinguish what is beautiful or deformed, or, in other words, what agrees with or deviates from the general idea of nature." The cultivation of taste was crucial to the artist, for it allowed him to "distinguish the accidental deficiencies, excrescences, and deformities of things from their general figures" and thus to "make out an abstract idea of their forms more perfect than any one original," which was the essence of ideal beauty.

This absolute priority of general over particular nature also determined the character required of the artist: "He must divest himself of all prejudices of his age or country; he must disregard all local and temporary ornaments, and look only on those general habits which are everywhere and always the same." But it reached even deeper. In keeping with the classical tradition, Reynolds repudiated the untutored self as wanting; it was only insofar as one shed his particularities and subjected himself to the impersonality of the practice of art that he fulfilled his proper end as artist: "A man who thinks he is guarding himself against prejudices by resisting the authority of others, leaves open every

avenue to singularity, vanity, self-conceit, obstinacy, and many other vices, all tending to warp the judgment, and prevent the natural operation of his faculties.”

British artists of the time would have held Reynolds’s distinction between general and particular nature sacrosanct. Many of the older generation had known Reynolds personally and admired him, and many of the younger, like Haydon, continued to revere his teachings. Thus, for anyone who had grown up on Reynolds’s account of ideal beauty, the Elgin Marbles came as a shock. That “the ancients *did* put veins on their gods,” as the sculptor Joseph Nollekens exclaimed when viewing the Elgin Marbles, demonstrated that Reynolds’s categorical distinctions simply did not exist during the golden age of Pheidias. The exact anatomical details of muscles, bones, and blood vessels; the suppleness of the marble flesh; the alternate action and repose of the muscles – these were precisely the kind of details that artists and art lovers were long accustomed to seeing as ‘deformities,’ ‘defects,’ ‘blemishes.’

Nothing in their experience had prepared them for what they saw in the Marbles. Few people today remember that before the nineteenth century, Greece, under the rule of the Ottoman Empire, had been virtually closed off to Western travelers. This meant that the only first-hand knowledge of antiquity came from the statues unearthed in Rome during the Renaissance – the *Apollo Belvedere* et al. – and then from those discovered during the excavations at Herculaneum and Pompeii in the eighteenth century. These statues from Italy, with their generalized anatomy, static poses, and smooth, fully restored, and finely polished marble surfaces, could

not have been more different in appearance from the unrestored, weather-beaten, ‘mutilated’ fragments of the Parthenon with their finely articulated veins and muscles in action. (Elgin, following established practice, wanted to have his sculptures ‘restored,’ but Antonio Canova, the most celebrated classical sculptor of the age, declined, explaining that it would be “a sacrilege . . . to touch them with a chisel.”)

Yet, as artist after artist testified at the hearings, the fidelity of the Elgin Marbles to nature in all its particularity had sacrificed neither the grandeur nor nobility of their form. The Select Committee Report tried to take account of this startling achievement, but in language that was so abstract and cumbersome as to be inadequate to the task: “It is surprising to observe in the best of these Marbles in how great a degree the close imitation of Nature is combined with grandeur of Style, while the exact details of the former in no degree detract from the effect and predominance of the latter.”

From today’s perspective – conditioned as it is by the history of vanguards with their always vehement assault on their predecessors – it is surprising how easily the challenge of the Marbles was assimilated, even though this challenge constituted what we would today call a paradigm shift. Even an established artist like Benjamin West, President of the Royal Academy of Art, knew he was seeing something utterly new. On first viewing the Marbles in 1808, he declared them “sublime specimens of the purest sculpture” in the same breath that he lamented his advanced years and “wished to be again twenty years of age . . . that he might labor to profit from them.” Nor was their newness lost on Canova, who traveled to London in 1815 with the express purpose of viewing the

Marbles: “Oh, that I were a young man and had to begin again, I should work on totally different principles from what I have done, and form, I hope, an entirely new school.”

As classically trained artists, those who were trying to readjust their sight to the ‘sublime’ forms of the Marbles knew of the necessity of careful observation, comparison, and contemplation of forms. West’s immediate response to their sublimity was to vow to “devote much time to study from them.” This meant devoting time to drawing from them, which he did at length, as did accomplished sculptors like Flaxman and Nollekens as well as students of the Royal Academy, if not with the feverish intensity of Haydon’s drawing marathons. In order to fully apprehend the ‘totally different principles’ contained in the Marbles, gentlemen of the Royal Academy also assembled at Park Lane to compare the *Theseus* and *Ilissus* to casts of the *Apollo Belvedere* and the *Belvedere Torso*. (That this was the most natural comparison was also apparent eight years later during the Parliamentary hearings when many of these same artists were asked to make comparisons of precisely this kind.)

But the Marbles’ union of nature with beauty so unsettled the academicians’ taste that they felt compelled to move beyond the usual models. In what is, from our present-day perspective, one of the oddest moments in this entire affair, artists and connoisseurs convened at Lord Elgin’s during the summer of 1808 to study, in good empirical fashion, famous boxers as they posed naked alongside the statues from the Parthenon. Sir Charles Bell, an expert on anatomy who had attended “an exhibition of two sparers,” explained in a letter, “The intention was that we might compare them with the remains of antiquity.” And

while there was much discussion concerning how closely the figures of the boxers resembled the statues and *vice versa*, there was no final consensus.

That such a discussion could take place at all suggests that *the* defining category of neoclassical thinking – the relation between general nature and ideal beauty – was showing signs of strain, even if the academicians were never prepared to fully repudiate Reynolds. With the visual evidence before them, however, they did begin to entertain the possibility that beauty might exist in the most noble forms of actual living beings, like the boxers, and also, then, in the perfect, actual living models of the sculptors in Pheidias’s time.

That was the lesson Haydon had drawn when he announced that the Elgin Marbles’ “faithfulness to nature was distinctly proved by comparison with the forms of the finest boxers of the day.” But Haydon, as always, was prepared to entertain ever more extreme conclusions: he had convinced himself that the only way the Greeks could achieve such fidelity to nature was by taking casts directly from life, a thought that occurred to him after he had taken a cast from a live model’s hand and compared it with a hand in a metope. In his diary, he recorded his discovery: “I have no doubt of the Ancient catching all the markings of instant exertion by dashing something on that took the impression, then casting it and making their own use of it.” This also became a favorite theory of the leading critic of the day (and friend of Haydon’s) William Hazlitt, who insisted, in article after article, that the Marbles were “casts taken from nature.” Where Haydon used this theory to further his art – as when in preparation for painting a portrait of his revered friend William Wordsworth he took a

cast from the poet's face – Hazlitt used it to assail Reynolds's doctrine of ideal beauty.

In an article responding to the Select Committee report, Hazlitt minced no words: “The Elgin Marbles are the best answer to Sir Joshua Reynolds's *Discourses*.” In what would become a habitual association of ideas for him, Hazlitt then stated, “Art is the imitation of nature; and the Elgin Marbles are in their essence and their perfection casts from nature,” only to make the immediate qualification, “from fine nature, it is true, but from real, living, moving nature.” (In a later essay, he went so far as to claim, as casts, “they contain the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.”) And because they came directly from nature and thus exhibited all the “exact details” to be found in nature – “veins, wrinkles in the skin, indications of the muscles under the skin” – Hazlitt believed they proved Reynolds's theory of ideal art wrong: “The Elgin Marbles give a flat contradiction to this gratuitous separation of grandeur of design and exactness of detail as incompatible in works of art, and we conceive that, with their whole ponderous weight to crush it, it will be difficult to set this theory on its legs again.” What could be more delicious for an enemy of Reynolds than to use the authentic remains of the golden age of Athens against him, since ancient sculpture had been the very touchstone of his system.

In another discussion of the Elgin Marbles that appeared within a review of a biography of Reynolds (Hazlitt could not discuss the one without mentioning the other), we see just how fluid the aesthetics of the moment were. In a series of subtle moves, Hazlitt recast this monument of the classical world into an exemplar of the romantic sensibility. His

distinction between ‘high’ art – the art of the Old Masters – and ‘true’ art – the new art he hoped to advance – was crucial: “The knowledge of what is contained in nature is the only foundation of legitimate art; and the perception of beauty and power, in whatever objects or in whatever degree they subsist, is the test of genius.” Here we see Hazlitt's aesthetic at work: ‘power,’ a term of lesser import than ‘beauty’ in the classical vocabulary, was now coupled with beauty as an equal companion; and the perception of both was now held to be the test of genius rather than, as in Reynolds's system, the office of taste. And just as power would soon outstrip beauty in romantic aesthetics, so taste would soon be overshadowed by genius.

But perhaps nothing was more destructive of Reynolds's theory of ideal art than Hazlitt's insistence in the very next sentence that “the principle is the same in painting an archangel's or a butterfly's wing,” for this assertion went straight to the heart of the classical hierarchy of genres, which required that an archangel's wing be painted in a style consonant with the archangel's divinity, to which a wing of a mere butterfly could never attain. Instead of repudiating the classical hierarchy outright, Hazlitt effectively redefined it: “High art does not consist in high or epic subjects, but in the manner of treating those subjects,” and he clinched his argument by appealing to the Marbles: “The Elgin Marbles have proved by ocular demonstration, that the utmost freedom and grandeur of style is compatible with the minutest details.”

That Hazlitt inserted ‘freedom’ into the discussion – an idea virtually absent from classical thinking because of its association with such faults as idiosyncrasy and eccentricity – reflected the growing romantic feeling that the classi-

cal ideal of the one beauty, the one standard, the one style, was constraining. Contra Reynolds, Hazlitt insisted that variety was “not an everlasting source of pettiness and deformity, which must be got rid of at all events, before taste can set its seal upon the work.” Classical aesthetics had become so intolerable to Hazlitt that he resorted to caricature on this point: “Are we only to repeat the same average idea of perfection, that is, our own want of observation and imagination, for ever, and to melt down the inequalities and excrescences of individual nature in the monotony of abstraction?”

Haydon, too, was chafing under classical strictures. But unlike Hazlitt, he never renounced Reynolds, nor his own passionate devotion to ‘High Art,’ which consisted in one art alone – historical painting in the grand manner. It was Raphael’s unparalleled achievements in that most elevated genre that weighed most heavily on him. (Haydon self-consciously modeled himself after Raphael – sleeping under his portrait, wearing his hair in the same style.) In a diary entry of November 7, 1815, Haydon wrote, “Passed a miserable and bitter morning in comparing myself to Raffaele. At my age [twenty-nine] he had completed a room of the Vatican.” Here he was referring to his progress on a massive historical painting, *Christ’s Entry into Jerusalem*, which he had begun the year before. That the painting measured six feet high and fifteen feet across would require a frame that weighed six hundred pounds, and took him six years to complete begins to suggest the magnitude of Haydon’s ambition.

In December of 1815, Haydon wrote to Wordsworth about his efforts at giving the proper character to particular female figures in the crowd of his painting (in

some figures he immortalized his literary friends Wordsworth, Hazlitt, and Keats). Just as he had found the *Belvedere Torso* wanting as a model for his hero Dentatus, Haydon was now discovering inadequacies in Raphael:

Raphael’s women have all the general lovely qualities that render women most angelic creatures . . . but he appears to me not to have distinguished them as Nature has done from each other, and not to have given them those distinctive marks in external feature that denote an internal variety of feeling.

Haydon insisted that precisely this variety ought to “be added to the Art.” It is something of a revelation to read Wordsworth’s gentle rebuke of Haydon, since his own poetry was so deeply engaged with the “internal variety of feeling.” But when it came to the “more than heroic” subject of Haydon’s painting, Wordsworth counseled his friend to follow Raphael, “for he has erred upon the safer side.” Still, he assured Haydon he was sympathetic with his “efforts to introduce more of the diversities of actual humanity into the management of sublime and pathetic subjects.” Above all else, it was this desire for ‘diversities,’ for variety, in the name of fidelity to feeling, that sealed the fate of ideal beauty, for nothing has proved more onerous to the modern, let alone postmodern, sensibility than the idea that there is one single standard in art.

And with the appearance of this new and characteristically romantic vision of art, the demise of the genres that exemplified ideal beauty – which the purchase of the Elgin Marbles had been expected to revivify – was not far behind. Canova, who died in 1821, had little chance to try his hand at sculpture based on the ‘totally different principles’ that he had

gleaned from the Marbles. Bertal Thorvaldsen, whose virtuosity was such that he restored the only other authentic ancient Greek art known at the time, the Aegina Marbles, outlived Canova by more than twenty years. Patronized by popes and kings, Thorvaldsen's fame would rival Canova's, and his sculpture was distinguished by its flowing motion, the very quality missing from Canova's graceful but frozen figures. Yet, with the exception of Hiram Powers, an American living in Florence, no sculptor in the classical style would come after them.

It is in the diary of another American abroad, Nathaniel Hawthorne, that we get a glimpse of the new and disdainful attitude that would bring appreciation of classical sculpture to its present state. In August of 1856, Hawthorne records that he has seen two sculptures in London – a Venus by Canova and Hiram Powers's *Greek Slave*. While he admires the Venus, he can see “little beauty or merit” in Powers's figure. At first, he sounds like the typical American philistine: “It seems to me time to leave off sculpturing men and women naked.” But it immediately becomes clear that more than provincialism is at work; Hawthorne, one of America's most cultivated novelists, could find nothing evocative in the classical types they represented: “They mean nothing, and might as well bear one name as another.” Classical sculpture had become so closely associated with ideal beauty that Hawthorne relegated it, in the second half of the sentence, to “the same category as the ideal portraits in Books of Beauty.” Whereas Hawthorne was in rapture when he saw the *Venus de' Medici* in Florence, he had only contempt for modern art that emulated the ancients: “The art does not naturally belong to this age; and the exercise of it, I think, had better be confined to the manufacture of marble fireplaces.”

The new principles exemplified by the Elgin Marbles thus failed to bring about the much anticipated renaissance in sculpture. And when it came to painting, they proved equally useless. Even Haydon, who had dedicated himself more than any other artist to the Elgin Marbles, could do no more than paint large-scale, highly mannered canvases that appear as aesthetically homeless and awkward today as the last classical sculptures. But even if Haydon's talent had matched his vision for a glorious public art that would rival the Stanze of the Vatican, with himself as the new Raphael leading the way, there still would have remained the problem of an audience; during Haydon's lifetime, the British displayed little appreciation for anything but portraiture and paintings of domestic and familiar life. The Academy did not favor historical painting and patrons rarely bought it, which left artists like Haydon, who knew what greatness looked like and strived ever more desperately to achieve it, without an audience, and this meant without a living.

This can be seen in one of Haydon's rare moments of triumph, the exhibition of *Christ's Entry into Jerusalem* in 1820. All the world of “fashion, beauty, and rank,” of “genius and royalty,” as Haydon put it, attended the private opening at the Egyptian Hall. (Early on in his career, in characteristic manner, Haydon had alienated powerful members of the Royal Academy and thus had to personally shoulder the expense of his exhibitions.) *The Times* declared the picture “a noble specimen of the highest class of art,” an opinion shared not only by the popular press and connoisseurs alike, but by no less an authority on beauty than Sarah Siddons, the most celebrated actress of the day.

Notwithstanding its universal acclaim, the painting failed to sell. Throughout the month it was on display, nearly thir-

ty-one thousand people thronged to see it and from the receipts for entrance and catalogs, Haydon cleared, after expenses, close to £1300. But, because he had taken no commissions during his six years of work on *Christ's Entry*, he was in debt, and so his many creditors claimed everything.

From this time on, Haydon's life of high aspiration would be wracked by "excruciating agony for want of money," leading to seven arrests and four imprisonments for financial insolvency. The first of these "agonies of disgrace" occurred during his exhibition of *The Raising of Lazarus* in 1823, at which time that painting and *Christ's Entry into Jerusalem* were seized, along with other property, and auctioned to pay his creditors. (Friends and patrons managed to purchase and return some of his belongings to him.) That *Christ's Entry* was sold to Americans and left England for Philadelphia in 1831 was a harbinger not only of Haydon's personal prospects, but also of the prospects of his beloved 'High Art.'

Whereas historical painting could still attract crowds in 1820, just twenty years later it had already entered the final phase of its decline. One ominous sign was the precipitous fall of Benjamin West's reputation. At the time of his death in 1829, paintings such as *Death on the Pale Horse* and *Christ Rejected* sold for £2000 and £3000 respectively; a decade later, West's *Annunciation*, which originally sold for £800, went for a mere £10.

Another devastating blow came in 1846, when Haydon exhibited two enormous pictures, *Nero at the Burning of Rome* and *The Banishment of Aristedes*. Again, in dire pecuniary distress, Haydon reserved a room at the Egyptian Hall, the site of his original triumph. But this time, in the same building, P. T. Barnum, the master showman of America,

had engaged the larger exhibition room to stage a new kind of mass entertainment, against which painting, historical or otherwise, simply could not compete – the display of the thirty-one-inch dwarf General Tom Thumb. Haydon, himself a master of self-promotion – he had always written catalogs and advertisements for his exhibitions in the most extravagant language – retaliated in an utterly desperate public notice:

High Art – the Egyptian Hall, exquisite feeling of the English people for High Art – General Tom Thumb last week received 12,000 people, who paid him £600; B. R. Haydon, who has devoted 42 years to elevate their taste was honoured by the visits of 133 1/2, producing £15 13s. 6d., being a reward for painting two of his finest works....

Haydon's exhibition was a fiasco. It did not advance the cause of historical painting and only pushed him further into debt. In his diary entry of May 19, he rallied as best he could: "Cleared out my exhibition.... Next to a victory is a skilful retreat; and I marched out before General Tom Thumb, a beaten but not a conquered exhibitor." But there can be no doubt that Haydon, at sixty years old, was a broken man. A little more than a month later, after four decades of strivings, conflicts, poverty, humiliations, disappointments, unanswered appeals to ministers, to patrons, to the public – not to mention his own ill health, failing eyesight, and death of five children – Haydon took his life.

For those who were most sympathetic with Haydon's artistic aspirations, his life story was a cautionary tale. In an evaluation of his work that appeared in the conclusion of the *Autobiography* in 1853, the painter G. F. Watts criticized Haydon for not mastering the first lesson

of the classical artist: “In Haydon’s work, there is not sufficient forgetfulness of self to disarm criticism of personality.” For Watts, Haydon’s egoism was his undoing; his pictures were “autobiographical notes of the most interesting kind,” but, at the same, “their want of beauty repels, and their want of modesty exasperates.” That Watts could see only the effects of the undisciplined self in Haydon’s historical paintings, the genre least suited to self-expression, unwittingly reveals the core of Haydon’s tragedy: he had devoted his life to a genre that was ill-suited to his temperament.

Watts, who was as incapable as Haydon of moving beyond the categories of classical thinking, never drew such a conclusion. Nor did he ever speculate as to whether Haydon’s morbid consciousness might have been better served had he followed the path of his contemporary, the landscape painter J. M. W. Turner, and tried to lose himself in the sublimity of nature. Still, Watts was not indifferent to Haydon’s struggles and acknowledged that “the want of calm” in his pictures and in his life “contained much to command admiration and sympathy,” even as he could not help but conclude that Haydon’s turbulent character deprived both his art and his life of the “true dignity before which the mind bows, so to speak, involuntarily.”

For classically inclined observers, then, Haydon’s fate was tied to a failure of character. But for his friend Elizabeth Barrett there was a terrible inevitability about it. In a letter to her fiancé Robert Browning, she cast his life in the romantic mold:

Poor Haydon! Think what an agony life was to him, so constituted! – his own genius a clinging curse! the fire and clay in him seething and quenching one another!

... with the whole world against him struggling for the thing that was his life ... breaking the hearts of the creatures dearest to him, in the conflict for which there was no victory, though he could not choose but fight it. Tell me if Laocoon’s anguish was not an infant’s sleep, compared to this?

There is, however, a certain irony in this beautiful lamentation: Haydon, as we know, was no romantic genius; he was instead one of the last believers in the lost cause of classicism, with its unbroken link to the fading glories of the Renaissance and of antiquity.

Which brings us to what is perhaps the most poignant of the many unexpected outcomes of the purchase of the Elgin Marbles. In 1846, when Barrett contemplated Haydon’s tragedy, it was still natural for her to evoke one of the old favorite antique sculptures, the *Laocoon*. Unearthed in Rome in 1506, it was instantly recognized as the famous group referred to by Pliny as “of all paintings and sculptures, the most worthy of admiration,” and it quickly became an exemplar of beauty and touchstone of taste.

But, with the revelations of the genuine relics from fifth-century Athens, reinforced by an increasingly archaeological approach toward antiquity during the nineteenth century, it turned out that the *Laocoon*, like all the most beloved sculptures of old, was something quite different from what had previously been supposed. Archaeological evidence placed it instead as a late Hellenistic group made during the mid-first century A.D. As for the *Apollo Belvedere*, the *Belvedere Torso*, the *Venus de’ Medici* – the statues that art lovers thought would last forever – they turned out to be Roman copies of missing Greek originals. For a classical artist like Flaxman, this discovery meant nothing. As we saw in his tes-

timony at the Elgin Marbles hearings, even though he knew the *Apollo* was a copy, he still preferred it to the *Theseus*, for “it partook of more ideal beauty.” But by the close of the nineteenth century, the cult of authenticity, coupled with the cult of the romantic genius, would make Flaxman’s choice difficult to fathom. And once ‘ideal beauty’ was no longer an intelligible aesthetic quality, the four-hundred-year love affair with the antiquity of old would also come to an end.

Kathy Peiss

*Educating the eye of the beholder –
American cosmetics abroad*

When the Taliban were forced from power in Afghanistan, American news media delighted in reporting the sure signs of freedom in Kabul: popular music could be heard again, videotapes reappeared, men shaved, and, not least, beauty parlors reopened. Deliverance from theocratic oppression went hand in hand, it seemed, with the cultivation of female beauty. The *New York Times* photographed makeup supplies hidden for five years and showed Afghan men holding up posters of film stars and models.

Such news coverage has not been unique in recent years. Similar accounts of women's newfound right to beautify appeared in the 1980s and 1990s when the Chinese government instituted economic reforms, communist rule ended in Eastern Europe, and the Soviet Union

dissolved. Identified in socialist ideology as a corrupt bourgeois practice oppressive to women, cosmetics-use then marked a turn away from totalitarianism to Western-style individualism and autonomy. Comparable stories measured the apparent progress and success of developing nations in the global economy by highlighting the promotion and consumption of American beauty products in South American rain forests and elsewhere.

Americans have exported now ubiquitous images of glamorized, sexualized female beauty – images of the healthy and exposed body, made-up face, direct and inviting expression – for over seven decades. In that time, the commercial problem of selling beauty became entangled with a set of ideological positions that supported the larger political and economic goals of the United States in the world. Freedom, democracy, and modernity were signified by an image of artificially enhanced female beauty, youth, and glamour – an image identified not simply as *Western* but more specifically as *American*. As a commodity for export, this odd coupling – of the broadest ideals of American politics with notions of female beauty and cultural practices typically dismissed as trivial – deserves a closer examination.

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Long before the American beauty industry emerged on the global scene, images of beauty tied to national identities circulated as a kind of currency in the West. Early modern global trade in herbs, chemicals, dyes, and prepared cosmetics sometimes used place names or symbols to convey a sense of the exotic or an aura of exclusivity. Even more important, throughout the period of European nation-building, exploration, and colonization, female beauty types provided a symbolic shorthand with which to articulate perceived social and cultural characteristics of different 'races' and nations. Coded onto female faces and bodies were the Frenchness of fashionability, the Englishness of hygiene, and the sensuousness of Orientals and Mediterraneans. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, these beauty types, imported and readily employed in the marketing of beauty products in the United States, eased American women's reluctance to use cosmetics by linking them to a worldwide tradition of cosmetic arts.

The beauty images that Americans imported would not be the same ones they exported. By the start of the twentieth century, a domestic beauty industry had begun to take shape. The emergent American look – visible in Gibson Girls and the New Woman – conveyed an image that was natural, youthful, healthy, and wholesome. It was also associated with a modern outlook, represented by freer sexual expression, a social life outside the home and family, and individualism. These images were successfully adapted by manufacturers, druggists, and beauty salons to promote the sale of skincare products.

The emergence of Hollywood further legitimized an image of American beauty that included makeup and 'natural artifice' in the years during and after World War I. Makeup, lighting, camera

work, and the choice of actors came together to create an aura of glamour that went beyond symmetry of form and regular features. At the same time, Hollywood replaced elite distance and the exclusivity of beauty with the knowing look and accessibility of Everywoman. The relationship of these images of female modernity to American identity was neither certain nor untroubled: extreme flappers were often condemned as a national disgrace – even as winners of a new commercial venture, the Miss America Pageant, came to represent both civic and beauty ideals. These images circulated internationally through the distribution of motion pictures and magazines, and, in some places, through the efforts of local businesses and government.

In Japan, for example, the Meiji government encouraged Western dress, hairstyles, and cosmetics-use as part of its project of modernization after 1868. Women of the higher classes continued to present a traditional image of Japanese womanhood, using lead-based white powder that covered the skin, but such traditional practices as shaving eyebrows and blackening teeth declined. By the 1910s and 1920s, Western-style powders, including transparent white and skintoned powders, became more commonly used to create the everyday face of respectable middle-class women; the traditional white face, like the kimono, became more a ceremonial style. In the late 1920s, the 'moga,' or 'modern girl,' took elements of style from American flappers as they created their own personae of assertive, public, working women.

American cosmetics firms had little to do with these developments directly, but some Japanese businessmen were attuned to their methods. Arinobu Fukuhara founded the firm Shiseido in 1872, modeled on the American pharmacy; his son Shinzo – educated at Columbia Uni-

versity, employed two years in a Broadway drugstore, and devoted to modern art – took over the business in 1915 and made it one of the leading cosmetics firms in Japan. He integrated American methods of retailing and marketing with French and Japanese design in advertising and packaging. Japanese women welcomed Shiseido's melding of Japanese looks and Western modernity – but in the first half of the twentieth century, few of them purchased American-made products, or embraced the unmediated image of American beauty such products promoted.¹

It was not until the 1930s that American firms began to cultivate foreign markets for their beauty products. Relying on methods that had worked in the United States, they conducted market research, established foreign subsidiaries and agreements with local agents, and drew up advertising campaigns. Pond's followed up its success in the United States selling inexpensive face cream with an expansion into Canada, Europe, and Latin America, and investigated sales opportunities in India and Japan. Max Factor, 'makeup artist to the Hollywood stars,' created an international division less than three years after the brand's national launch in 1927; ten years later, Max Factor's exports (primarily to Europe and Latin America) accounted for 28 percent of its total sales.²

1 See Lynn Gumpert, ed., *Face to Face: Shiseido and the Manufacture of Beauty, 1900 – 2000* (New York: Grey Art Gallery, New York University, 2000).

2 Pond's international trade is documented in the J. Walter Thompson Advertising Collection, Hartman Center for Advertising History, Duke University Library, Durham, North Carolina [JWT]; Max Factor Papers are held in the Procter & Gamble Company Archives, Cincinnati, Ohio.

In the late 1920s and early 1930s, Pond's commissioned the advertising firm J. Walter Thompson to gather consumer data in a number of countries. Although the reports varied in quality, some of them offered a detailed ethnographic description of grooming habits in a variety of different social, economic, and political contexts. The reports identified a number of daunting problems the firm would have to face in its efforts to sell cold cream abroad.

In 1932, for example, the Berlin office sent back discouraging words about Pond's odds in Germany, citing the economic effect of the worldwide depression and the country's cultural climate. It discussed the current German emphasis on bodily health and strength, the growing stress on naturalness and simplicity, and the rise of nationalism, all of which made "the whole business of 'fixing up,'" as one German woman put it, morally and politically suspect. Not only were Pond's American origins a problem, but also its international ad campaign, featuring testimonials from American and European socialites, was doomed to fail in a nation on the brink of Nazi rule.³

An even more fundamental problem American firms faced in selling abroad was the unsuitability of their notion of the 'mass market.' In the United States, catering to that market meant addressing a large enough mass of middle-class consumers to produce volume sales. But in non-Western countries, only a tiny fraction of the population was able to afford cosmetics.

In Bombay, market researchers for Pond's made clear "we are not speaking of Indian women as a whole," but only "Indian women of the better class" who

3 J. Walter Thompson Company, "Pond's in Germany, 1932," Reel 224, Research Reports, Microfilm Collection, JWT.

“use certain cosmetics such as face cream.” Dividing India’s population into classes based not only on wealth, but also race, national origin, and proximity to Western modernity, they identified ‘whites’ – British, American, and German residents – and Anglo-Indians, the mixed-color children of Indians and Europeans, as the major market for Western cosmetics. Both groups emulated the beauty-conscious English upper class. Among native-born Indians, market researchers identified only upper-rank Parsee women as a potential market. “Their standards of beauty are slightly different, for instance, they have thick black hair usually heavy with oil,” the report observed, but their interactions with white women – at the Billington Club, for example – taught them to take pride in their appearance, dress well, and look after their complexions, all positive signs for the sale of Western-style cosmetics: “The more westernized they are the more European they become in their standards of beauty.”⁴

The narrow consumer base for American products did not deter such companies as Pond’s from using mass-market techniques to promote Western habits of beautifying. As they had in the United States, they placed advertising in women’s magazines and produced displays for pharmacies and other retailers. In India, Pond’s ads appeared in English language newspapers, and generally followed the format and language of the company’s advertising in Great Britain, although with more exegesis than would have been necessary for British or American consumers. One 1934 advertisement for Pond’s face cream featured the usual image of a beautiful English socialite, but included an explanatory inset: “The

4 J. Walter Thompson Company, “Report on India, Burma & Ceylon” (Bombay, June 1931), Reel 225, JWT.

Apple Tells the Story.” Pictures of a smooth and glossy apple at its peak, soft and spongy past its prime, then wrinkled and discolored, were intended to clarify the ad’s confusing headline, “Amazing – but it’s true – you have TWO SKINS,” referring to the dermis and epidermis. These English-language print ads reached but a tiny fraction of the Indian population. Low literacy rates, the diversity of language groups, and a government ban on commercial radio programming constrained American advertisers. Skeptical of the value of advertising in vernacular newspapers, they tried running commercial shorts in movie theaters and sent demonstration vans into the countryside. These vans attracted crowds of people – but few of them could afford to buy imported beauty products.

Before World War II, most American firms were caught in a paradox: unable to develop a mass consumer base abroad, they exploited a tiny market of elite women – frequently tied to colonial rule – who were keen to cultivate an image of international sophistication. But it was *French* cosmetics – Coty, Houbigant, and the like – that were most associated with such fashion knowledge and style. There was limited demand for American beauty aids, and marketing efforts did little to change deeply engrained patterns of consumption.

In the years after World War II, these early, uncertain efforts to export American cosmetics gave way to a full-fledged market expansion. American firms established subsidiaries, contracted with local import firms, licensed products, and built factories in Europe, Latin America, the Middle East, and Asia. They faced challenges common to other industries in international trade: constituting the relationship between U.S.

headquarters and foreign subsidiaries and agents, establishing global brands, and finding sales appeals appropriate to consumers from different cultures. Solving these business problems had implications for the projection of American beauty ideals around the world.

It was during World War II that American cosmetics firms for the first time self-consciously promoted their products as distinctively *American*. On the homefront, cosmetics were marketed as morale boosters. Women were invited to regard their lipstick as a 'red badge of courage,' and the U.S. government backed off efforts to ration beauty aids for the war's duration. Cosmetics firms linked their products to American foreign policy as well, in, for example, Pond's "Beauty Over the Americas" advertising campaign in the early 1940s, inspired by Franklin Roosevelt's Good Neighbor Policy. In these ads, women from "all the 19 sister republics of this young, vigorous and vibrant hemisphere" found common cause in the ritual of skin care, following the "same gracious pattern of fastidious womanhood" from Alaska to Cape Horn. Max Factor made the nationalist appeal explicit, arguing that the 'democratization of cosmetics' was an American project. Just as American actresses had sold war bonds, made patriotic films, and served as USO hostesses, they now became the face of freedom and democracy, a universal ideal whose success was indexed by the expanding market of women worldwide "beautifying themselves according to the 'American plan.'"⁵

After the war ended, cosmetics firms moved quickly to capitalize on America's new clout as a world economic pow-

er. A rising generation of businessmen hoped that national differences would be readily overcome through the application of increasingly sophisticated American marketing techniques. Similar appeals would sell "beauty from Bangor to Bangkok." "Certainly there are differences in customs, habits, and languages," observed one advertiser, "but the important thing is that the consumers of the world are also *alike* in many basic ways. . . . People everywhere react to the same basic emotions, drives, motivations."⁶ The Madison Avenue gurus assumed that strategies that had worked in the United States – for example, the use of Hollywood stars in advertising – would be similarly effective abroad, even in non-Western countries.

The assumption that American beauty ideals had an appeal that was potentially universal was widely shared by U.S. cosmetic firms and their foreign agents. Upon entering the export trade in the 1950s, for example, Avon insisted that its home office direct product planning and sell its American lines abroad with little consideration of local selling conditions or market opportunities. Observed one executive, "We usually chose the products with the best sales history in the U.S."⁷ A consistent brand identity seemed to require centralized direction from American headquarters.

Differences among the world's peoples were reduced to a matter of consumer preferences. Climatic and physical variations that caused particular skin

6 William M. Peniche, "Beauty from Bangor to Bangkok: A Brief Review of Chesebrough-Pond's World-Wide Advertising," (TS, 1961), Sidney R. Bernstein Papers, JWT.

7 Avon Products, Inc. International Division, Merchandising Conference, "Proposal for New Product, Packaging and Development System," March 1968, box 69, Avon Products, Inc. Collection, Hagley Museum and Library, Delaware.

5 Chesebrough-Pond's Advertising, Howard Henderson Papers, JWT; Max Factor, Jr., "American Women should be proud of that native heritage," press release, ca. 1940 – 1945.

problems and cultural propensities for specific colors and fragrances sometimes required the reformulation of products. Usually American firms simply tinkered with the packaging of products, color palettes, choice of models, and size of ads to address local conditions. When Max Factor created distributorships in many countries after World War II, it continued to use Hollywood stars in its advertising, relying on their familiarity and emulation around the globe. This advertising simultaneously invoked the America of Hollywood, yet subtly referenced distinct national identities, through the names or looks of the stars: Claudette Colbert was featured in France, Maria Montez appeared in Latin American ads, Lucille Ball archly posed in a 'dragon lady' look for Chinese newspapers, while Lana Turner wore a head covering in Egyptian advertising. Such acknowledgements of national differences appear also in a series of television commercials Pond's filmed in 1961, which offered a single message of beauty intercut with brief footage of different products and packaging for different countries.

The conflation in such ad campaigns of American beauty ideals with universal desires – on the assumption that national and cultural differences were, at most, skin deep – caused frequent difficulties in Asia, Latin America, and elsewhere. Cautionary tales of cross-cultural misunderstanding began to circulate throughout the cosmetics industry. One marketing consultant quoted “a gentleman from India” who stated, “It would never do to glamourise . . . a product by utilising a lady in a shimmering white saree with a western style of hair dress in any of the Southern cities [of India]. A cutting of her crowning glory and the donning of white cloth are the insignia of widowhood, a deeper calamity than which

there can be none for the Indian woman.” He insisted, “When talking about advertising in foreign countries we should in general forget about American contents, presentation and media of advertising messages.”⁸

Some firms realized that home-office control undermined efforts to understand local conditions. After a short period of centralized command, Avon reversed itself and granted foreign subsidiaries more independence, believing this was the best approach to market development “until Avon is calling on every door in the Free World.” Thus each branch would act as “guardian of the Parent Company’s image,” but would have greater control over market research, product introductions, package design, and marketing appeals. In this way, the American cosmetics industry began to move toward a concept of global branding in the 1960s. As an executive described it, “an international brand is more of a way of working than a product description”: it maintains corporate identity by addressing supposedly universal consumer needs even while it responds to local conditions.⁹

Over time, the demands of global branding have deepened the interest of American cosmetic firms in promoting a variety of specific national and ethnic images of beauty. Whatever the dominant image of American movie actresses,

8 John Barnhill, “Some Environmental Aspects Affecting Advertising Abroad” (1960), 4, International Department, Samuel W. Meeks Papers, JWT.

9 H. D. Naideau, Keynote Address, Avon International Division, General Manager’s Conference, Rye, New York, June 1963, 7–8, box 69, Avon Papers; “Establishing a Unilever-Thompson International Co-ordinating Operation for Lux Toilet Soap” (TS, 1965), box 24, Edward G. Wilson Papers, JWT.

television stars, and models at different times, even more important has been the ease with which U.S. corporations have mixed images of national types of beauty and femininity, choosing to accentuate certain representations of difference and to slight others. Thus American manufacturers increasingly used an extensive but incoherent iconography of the world's people to sell their products, adjusting them for specific national and local markets.

To introduce its "Elusive" brand of fragrance in Japan and Mexico in the 1970s, Avon depicted a blonde American model wearing harem clothes and elaborate jewelry to create a vaguely Persian look of luxury and mystery. In Avon's Japanese catalogue, the only Japanese models were children, some in traditional dress and others in Western-style suits and jumpers. In Mexico, however, Avon's advertising was tailored for the perceived Mexican consumer, with dramatic scenarios, images of sensuality and passion, and a close focus on dark hair and full lips.

Even more important than the mix of national types and looks in selling American cosmetics abroad has been the use of local agents and beauty experts who reconciled American-style beauty images with the concerns, appearances, and aspirations of their countrywomen. Product demonstrations and woman-to-woman advising had spurred the growth of the U.S. beauty industry after 1900; teaching women how to use cosmetics, ritualizing the use of makeup, and bringing beauty aids into the public eye were as crucial to American beauty culture as the circulation of beauty images in advertising and mass media.

American firms used similar techniques abroad. Max Factor did not rely solely on the powerful image of Hollywood stars to sell its products, but orga-

nized 'Art Schools of Make-up,' where hands-on demonstrations drew women into the department stores and pharmacies of Havana, Medellin, Bangkok, and other cities. A company photograph album from the mid-1940s records the images of impeccably groomed local women applying foundation and lipstick, as women crowd the store counters. These saleswomen did not have the pale skin or Western features of American movie actresses, but signaled their identification with Hollywood stars through unmistakable signs – plucked and arched eyebrows, discernable eye makeup, and well-shaped, dark lips. Their sense of themselves as performers putting on a show is palpable. Mediating between a faraway U.S. corporation and local women, the 'Art School' demonstrators suggested that if the Western beauty ideal was itself unattainable, the aura of American glamour could be created with the help of imported cosmetics.

Similarly, Avon has become one of the most successful international cosmetics firms through the use of native sales agents who address local customs and concerns even as they project fantasies of American beauty. In the United States, Avon used door-to-door sales to expand from a primarily rural clientele in the late nineteenth century into cities and then suburbs after World War II. It experienced two waves of international expansion – the first from the late 1950s through the early 1970s, establishing wholly-owned subsidiaries in Latin America, Europe, and Australia, and the second after 1990, when it entered post-communist Eastern European countries and Russia, as well as developing markets in South America and Asia.

The International Avon Lady, as she developed in the 1950s, had much in common with the American ideal: a woman who was energetic, self-moti-

vated, of good reputation, and well groomed. But she also needed to understand the lives of the women to whom she sold and to speak to them in their own idiom. "Many complex factors, such as language, habit, traditions, standard of living, cultural background, industrial development, peculiar sensitivities and Nationalism make each marketing area peculiar unto itself," American executives at Avon acknowledged. As the U.S. headquarters came to recognize, people in each locality saw themselves as unique and different, and demanded a sales encounter that spoke to those differences; just as important, local sales agents believed that they were uniquely positioned to address those differences. At the same time, this apparent responsiveness to consumers' desires – ratified in the company's self-promotion and enacted by local Avon agents – was linked to American-style beauty, economic goals, and even freedom. Even as the Cuban Revolution took place, Avon's Havana in-house magazine *Panorama* imported an American dream image to feature on its cover – an Avon Lady knocking on a door, against a backdrop of identical suburban tract homes. "Towards a better future," the magazine proclaimed, as it pictured the hostess sets, lawn chairs, and dinettes Avon representatives could earn as sales premiums.¹⁰

For women in many countries, American-style beauty culture has become tied very directly to economic opportunity and modernization, even as it presents a feminine ideal that is often difficult to emulate. In Guangdong Province, which has been an engine of the market revolution in China, women sell Avon to mid-

10 H. D. Naideau, Keynote Address, 3; *Panorama Avon*, no. 2 (1959), also no. 16 (1960), box 82, Avon Papers.

dle-class consumers for whom American-made products signify urbanity and sophistication. In Amazon mining camps and river towns, Brazilian women sell Avon as an alternative to traditional women's work, often taking foodstuffs, gold dust, or bartered services as payment instead of money; such women welcome the freedom from patriarchal authority and the sense of self-respect that selling offers. In Thailand, young women who sell Avon and Amway beauty products are perceived as a vanguard of modernity whose independent income repositions them in relation to family and kin. Working for a multinational corporation also connects women to the world outside their local communities, not only through the images they see but also in their opportunities to travel and meet other businesswomen.¹¹

At the same time, the global marketing of American beauty culture has more troubling implications. For example, American firms have aggressively marketed skin lighteners to African and Asian women, implying that the use of these products will Westernize the body and enhance class mobility, by making a woman more attractive to higher-status men. As historian Timothy Burke writes, these products were banned in post-colonial Zimbabwe and in South Africa because of their associations with white power and the denial of black African collective identity. Ironically enough, African women themselves have struck up an informal transatlantic trade in

11 Nicholas Kristof, "Let a Thousand Lipsticks Bloom," *New York Times*, 3 May 1992, section 9, 2; James Brooke, "Who Braves Piranha Waters? Your Avon Lady!" *New York Times*, 7 July 1995, A4; Ron Harris, "Avon is Calling and It's a Jungle Out There," *Los Angeles Times*, 28 August 1994, A1; Ara Wilson, "The Empire of Direct Sales and the Making of Thai Entrepreneurs," *Critique of Anthropology* 19 (1999): 401–422.

these and other cosmetics, facilitated by immigrant women and tourists to the United States; they especially prize the brands formulated for black American consumers, products not readily available in the European or local markets.¹²

Interviews with women from Cameroon by historian Yvette Monga suggest that selling and using American beauty products not only represents economic opportunity, but signifies a larger vision of black affluence, cosmopolitanism, and hope for the future. Although African women express reservations about U.S. race relations and poverty, she writes, “to plug in to [American] culture and the dream is at once to escape from the menace of geopolitical marginalisation that hovers over Africa and the invisibility syndrome that afflicts its in-

habitants.”¹³

In short, American beauty products betoken cultural dominance – and symbolize opportunity and freedom. In different locales, imported cosmetics differently mark class identities, especially among the emergent urban middle classes of Asia and Africa. They express a woman’s growing distance from patriarchal families and local traditions, even as they inspire conformity to Western ideals of beauty. As it did in the United States, the American cosmetics industry has capitalized on and fostered these contradictions throughout the world. By linking aesthetic ideals and beauty rituals to the ‘American way,’ it has made cold creams and lipstick and skin lighteners into improbable emblems of women’s modernization and independence.

12 Timothy Burke, *Lifebuoy Men, Lux Women: Commodification, Consumption, and Cleanliness in Modern Zimbabwe* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996).

13 Yvette Djachechi Monga, “Dollars and Lipstick: The United States through the Eyes of African Women,” *Africa* 70 (2000): 192–208.

Poem by Carl Phillips

The Use of Force

Framed by window, the branches
swim in place, they
seem to. No

wonder struggling gets
so often, at first, mistaken
for wild abandon: a very

likeness.
Difference matters,
as in: in you, a permanence

you have known, that
I shall never. As in:
the two of us regarding

equally but differently
the sea,
the sea, in

equal but different parts.
Distinction matters. Distraction
loves us. Attention

must be paid, else we are
happier, yes, but what we were
lies ended – Did I really

think that, ever?
Do I?
A history of forgetting

is not the same as
a habit of it, though
history is not

unconcerned with pattern,
and pattern is to habit
as a kind of twin whose hair,

parted leftside instead of right,
prevents an otherwise
confusion. As between, say,

the man who in crime finds
a taste he gradually, slow, more
and more comes

in to; and the man who, like
any criminal
worth admiring, admires

precision, the angle beyond which
the victim's neck, bent
back, perforce

must break. *Hold still*, you said. I
did.
The proof is vision.

Carl Phillips, professor of English and African and Afro-American Studies at Washington University in St. Louis, is the author of six books of poetry, most recently "Rock Harbor" (2002) and "The Tether" (2001), winner of the Kingsley Tufts Poetry Award.

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Fiction by Leon Rooke

The Winds of Change, the Winds of Hope, the Winds of Disaster

The Winds of Change boarded the Western Comet in Beceuse St. Jour; the Winds of Hope came aboard the next day in a small Ontario resort town sitting by a body of water so still and blue people often forget its existence. Where the Winds of Disaster joined the train is unrecorded although a quick scan of newspapers dated May 18 has led many to believe these winds took to the train at Neepawa Junction on or about that date. In Neepawa Junction thousands had taken sick from drinking tainted water and many died.

What is known is that the Winds of Change settled wherever space was to be found, that is to say, throughout the 14 cars constituting the Western Comet at that point in its journey. In the small Ontario town with the still blue lake, Point Pigeon, for reasons best explained

by railroad officials, 19 more cars were added to the train, and it was in the first-class compartments of these 19 that the Winds of Hope secured themselves, immediately falling into a deep sleep, and unable, therefore, to shed any light on the timetable under which their cousins, the Winds of Disaster, operated.

It is understood that in Chiogga Flats, 700 miles west, again for reasons best left to railroad czars to explain, an additional engine and another 66 cars were attached to the Western Comet, 34 of these 66 conveying 510 new automobiles of the Nissan Motor Company, the balance of these cars empty but the siding latticed in such manner that one could be forgiven for thinking them to be cattle cars. Among the 99 cars now constituting the Western Comet as it made its journey westward were 17 chemical tanker cars containing as yet unidentified compounds of a highly volatile nature. Where and when the tankers became a part of the convoy, or their intended destination, has not been established.

The Winds of Disaster, naturally enough preferring to keep their own company, largely confined themselves to the cattle cars. They preferred the unadorned, outdoorsy character of these structures, the acrid smell, the bitter whip of undefined, indiscriminate winds about their shoulders, the wicked unre-

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lenting noise of metal grinding upon metal. The night view through which they passed thrilled them with its phantasmic abundance, no less than did daytime sight of a land so locked under hellish freeze that scarcely anything moved, the sky an uncaring blue so frosty and brittle in appearance it clearly seemed an oval made of the most imperfect glass.

A student couple from Orebro, Sweden, aboard the Western Comet since Montreal, was first to experience the Winds of Change. It simultaneously entered their flesh the third day of their journey, on the outskirts of a nondescript prairie city that some on the train said reminded them of a cribbed baby. The Winds of Change, in any event, rode with this couple along the slow rails curving about the city, intense in the breasts of this couple as a brigade of dancers, until the long train at last broke free of city life.

“What was that?” asked the young man, and the young woman seated beside him, clutching his hand, suddenly overcome with the desire for something achingly cold to satisfy her thirst, replied in a high singing voice, “The Winds of Change, my love, the Winds of Change!”

The young man, until that moment believing his body had sat apart from him in a wet, barren cave the entire length of his life, beheld at once that he was now cast anew into a world of wonders. Whereas the girl, who previously had slept on pillows of stone, her mother’s jewels in pawn to the profiteers of sunny Orebro, her life restricted to the shallows, now felt as easy in the world as a feather afloat on air.

The second party to succumb to the Winds of Change was a woman named Ana Coombs. Ana Coombs lived in an outlying district of the town, an area

known as The Forks Reclamation Project, through which at one time had run a span of rail tracks wide as Rainy River Lake, wide as Lac St. Jean of the Cross, wider than those, these tracks and the attendant buildings composing the now rotted terminal summoning in its heyday an array of trains from every conceivable direction on the continent. In recent times 68 of these 70 tracks had been removed, the land ceded by government edict to The Forks Reclamation Project, a development still after lengthy decades mired in its First Phase, with parkland, roads, electricity, waste disposal, and other amenities yet to come, but on the drawing boards, let us say; in the meanwhile some 6,000 beleaguered souls, among them Ana Coombs, called it home.

Ana Coombs was at the kitchen sink washing in mild soap and lukewarm water heated on a wood stove three pairs of white cotton stockings. She raised her eyes to stare out the window at the swaying train. She saw a young man with blond hair and a thoughtful face. He seemed to be looking at her with an expression of sheer delight. It was then that Ana Coombs felt the Winds of Change shift through her like a tangle of birds in sudden plunge from the sky.

“Excuse me,” she said, “I believe I must sit down.”

The man seated at the table in Ana Coombs’s kitchen said, “I don’t know why O’Toole feels responsible for every thought your sister has.”

“I would like more coffee,” he added, “but so far you have not invited me to help myself.”

Ana Coombs’s face was flushed, her heart was racing, and she did not immediately reply.

The man walked around the table to the coffee pan atop the wood stove and

refilled his cup, which was a cup made to resemble a grinning monkey, a slot in the curved tail for easy handling.

"O'Toole's a sap," the man said. "If he holds himself responsible for every thought entering your sister's mind, then his will be a long, sad story."

"That's right," Ana Coombs said. "O'Toole isn't responsible for how she fixes her hair. He isn't responsible for the lipstick shade she wears. Maybe for her shoes. I am not sure about the shoes."

Ana Coombs or the man, or both together should they have chosen to do so, could have turned their heads and had a good look at Ana Coombs's sister, Mary Alicia Coombs, asleep beside O'Toole on the high double bed in the nearby room. Until a year ago the bed and the room, in fact the entire house, had been the refuge of old Mrs. Coombs. Mrs. Coombs, the sisters' grandmother, once they had finished high school, had packed off the girls into the care of the world.

Now they were back.

The cup of the grinning monkey had belonged to old Mrs. Coombs.

A coffee table in the adjoining room, constructed of blackest gaboon and so hard it had endured 99 years without receiving a single scratch, sat on a faded oval carpet in front of a lumpy Empire sofa, the sofa covered with a worn fabric depicting ancient sailing vessels, and it was here that Ana Coombs took herself.

"What's bugging you?" the man asked Ana Coombs.

She gave attention to her short, thick legs stretched out on the coffee table, refusing to look at him.

"It would seem," he said, "that someone has ruffled Ana Coombs's feathers."

Ana Coombs laughed, delighted with the vision of herself as a 48-year-old woman covered over with chicken feathers, rising with a rooster's crow each and every dawn, laying the odd egg, pecking

at gravel, scratching here and there in the mecca of the Reclamation yards with her brood of utterly uninteresting chicks.

"I have felt the Winds of Change," Ana Coombs said. "I believe it would make me happy if this minute you went in there and waked your friend O'Toole and you and he left this house, never to be seen again."

The man said nothing for what seemed to both of them a very long while. Then he said, "Yeah, well, maybe your sister might have a word or two to say about that."

Ana Coombs said, "Why don't you go and ask her?"

So the man did.

Ana Coombs smiled as she heard her sister emerge from sleep and say to the man, in a voice astonishing in its petulance, "That was grandmother's cup. You are not allowed to use that cup."

A woman named Dora Bell, also living in The Forks Reclamation Project, was the third party to experience the Winds of Change. She had run fresh water into a goldfish bowl, the bowl itself in the form of a large fish. Dora Bell was returning the bowl to its usual table by the front window when the Winds of Change reached inside her, lodging like a cluster of grapes inside her chest. She momentarily confused the Winds of Change with the bouts of indigestion which normally troubled her each morning, and thus for some seconds remained on her knees watching the fish poke about in their new clean water and speaking to these golden fish in the softly bantering manner that Dora Bell believed to be perfectly normal. Then her sight shifted above the bowl to take in that view presenting itself outside her window. The train. A woman exceedingly blond in her composition was looking

straight into her soul. Her mouth, Dora Bell saw, was wide open. She seemed to be frantically waving something, perhaps a yellow handkerchief. Then a young man's excited face appeared beside the woman's, and his mouth too was wide open. In that instant Dora Bell saw as if in a dream her front door blowing open, the fish rising and swimming paths of sunlight towards some kind of natural home in a distant sea. A split-second later it came to Dora Bell that she had been struck by the Winds of Change.

The first mission she gave herself was to wash out the empty fish bowl and leave it on the drainboard to dry. As her second mission, she spent some minutes writing down the precise details of the door blowing open, the flight of goldfish through the sky, the open mouths of the two Nordic beauties aboard the Western Comet, the drumming in her heart when finally she closed the door. She made no mention of the Winds of Change. When she was done writing she neatly folded the paper and carefully placed it inside a porcelain jar which sat in plain sight on an elaborately stitched Cuban lace doily on her mother's old maple dressing table. Here were contained all her dreams, these dreams now and forever corrupted, altered, and yellowed by aromas peculiar to the jar, the jar being once presented to her by her mother long ago, at that time filled with a scented ointment sworn to stave off any and all unwanted pregnancies, the jar emptied of this ointment since long ago because Dora Bell in those days had been aware of her mother's thrifty nature and thus had doubled her mother's every prescribed dosage.

"There," she said in a voice she thought of as her mother's, "now go away and play and please do not soil your dress."

When done with these and other

pressing chores, Dora Bell hastily packed a small yellow bag that still carried store tags attesting to the bag's virginity, saw that all doors and windows were locked, with some agitation arranged a favorite hat on her head at the hall mirror, a Toledo hat triple-feathered above the ear and boasting in full-sized facsimile a luscious Gadaffi peach. She got into her Nissan Fury, and drove a weedy lane east out of the Forks Reclamation Project for the first time in so many years that she scarcely could find the way. She had to rely entirely on her instincts, which thankfully the Winds of Change had refined into a condition altogether unusual for Dora Bell.

A boy of twelve was one of the few other parties in the area succumbing that day to the Winds. For him it was neither the Winds of Change nor the Winds of Hope, but the Winds of Disaster.

Each day for the past year, usually around sunset, the boy had been visiting the sick old man who was reputedly his grandfather. The old man lived alone in a derelict house close to the railroad tracks, a house not yet within the embrace of The Forks Reclamation Project and one which the old man's wife and children, no less than his grandchildren, had long insisted he sell. He had refused through these many years, and through as many his wife and children, no less than his grandchildren, would have nothing to do with him. Repeatedly the boy had been forbidden to call upon the old man – he had been admonished, whipped, even shut away in one of the Project's abandoned sheds where broken bicycles, old kites, and bag upon bag of hardened concrete were stored. To avoid this punishment a year ago the boy had begun lying, had taken to reviling the old man with his every breath, whereas in

fact over the past year he had secretly visited the old man every day.

In warm weather the old man placed a stool outside his front door and sat on the stool throughout the day. In earlier times this or that party from the Old Forks, long before it became a reclamation project, would roll up one or another log from the log pile at the side of the house, and join him. Nowadays, all of these old friends were dead, and his sole companion was the boy.

During the year the old man had held the boy's attention through stories of the plagues of Egypt. He told him of the plague of the first born, of darkness, of hail and birds, lice, frogs, flies, the plague of blood, the plague of murrain – one plague for each day. Today the old man had told him of the plague of the 365th day, otherwise known as the plague of finality or the plague of the final plague, the plague of the last suffering.

"There are no more plagues to tell you about," the old man said, "so you can go home. You can tell my wife and daughters and grandchildren a plague be upon them."

The boy was distressed. It disappointed him enormously that there were so few genuine plagues, a mere 365, and he had told the old man in no uncertain terms that he was mistaken.

"I am never mistaken," the old man said, "as to the plagues of Egypt."

"Then there are other plagues, plagues not confined to Egypt," the boy said.

"Tell me of those."

"The plagues of Egypt are the plagues of all places," said the old man, "the plagues for all eternity."

"That's foolish," said the boy.

"There are 365 plagues, no more, no less."

"You are mistaken," said the boy.

"I am never mistaken."

Now the boy was walking home along the railroad tracks, sorrowful that he had no means of filling his tomorrows and irritated by the sum of life's affairs as reckoned by his teacher. He was convinced in his mind that plagues were innumerable, and sick in heart at this year he had wasted in secret visits to this old man whose 365 plagues barely touched upon so many of those very plagues afflicting his own existence practically from the moment he first emerged from his mother's womb. His parents were right, the old man was vile, a stubborn senile old fool who long ago should have surrendered his broken-down house to the great powers charged with the responsibility of making The Forks Reclamation Project a reality enriching to all who might be so lucky to call it home.

The old man's final words to the boy had been as follows: "If you are so keen on believing there is one scrap of respectable plague beyond the 365 I have enumerated, then you must go away and invent the new one yourself. But when you do, don't come and tell me about it – first and foremost because I will be dead, and, second, because it will not be a plague in which I or any other person of any integrity would have the faintest interest."

So the boy was a ready host for the Winds of Disaster that morning when he stepped off the tracks to allow the Western Comet unobstructed passage.

He saw no Swedes' radiant faces looking to share their joy from behind a grimy train window.

He saw instead a tumult of winds whirling inside the 32 cattle cars of the Western Comet, obviously the Winds of Disaster, he rapidly concluded, since their enraged faces, their deformed limbs, the lethal manner in which they fought for dominion over each other and over each inch of space was exactly as

the old man had described them in his recital of the 99th plague of the 365 plagues of Egypt, the plague of the Winds of Disaster.

“They gore and maim each other,” the old man had said, “until they work themselves into a state of utter fury, and it is then that they enclose themselves as one howling entity and sweep through Egypt or wherever they may be, crippling or killing all living things within their path and only abating in this mischief when their limbs betray them and their mouths have grown hoarse.”

The boy saw this malevolent fury building in each of the 32 cars passing so slowly before his eyes, he saw the loosening lattice work through which the Winds of Disaster were ever streaking, the black swirling Winds of Disaster shrieking above each of these cars black as the water of Lake Neepawa, black as the black waters of the Forks’ own black waters of River Aryan, blacker than these, and when moments later the 17 shiny tanker cars shuttled by with screaming wheels it came to him in a flash that the Winds of Disaster were not mindlessly whirling, but assembling.

The Winds of Hope had in the meanwhile ridden the Western Comet since Point Pigeon in agreeable comfort, content in mind and body and in no mood to meddle. The long train-creep through the frozen tundra had scarcely triggered a twitch in their eyelids; the extended layover in city after city and in rustic wilderness where their transport sat idly breathing within the shadow of tall trees weighed down by ice had not tempted them to bestir themselves, and their entry into the prairie lands had only raised to new heights of noble contemplation their sense of justified fatigue. The Winds of Hope had in truth enjoyed a sound and restful sleep through much

of what most of their kind beheld as yet another tedious, all but purposeless journey, one done for show, done merely, one might almost contend, to establish yet again their benign ageless presence within an undeserving environment. A few from time to time briefly snatched themselves awake, some arousing themselves sufficiently to note the fragile work done by the Winds of Change in this or that wretched little house or crumbling tower constituting, for instance, The Forks Reclamation Project. Such was of little concern to them, however, for they were inclined to view all such acts as frivolities of their weaker sisters, acts not at all in accord with those high-minded, dignified standards of behavior that the Winds of Hope had long ago mandated for themselves.

True, the odd member of their group, slumbering beside you one minute, might be gone the next, but these were by and large untrained and undisciplined junior delegates or duffers of the old school, gone completely round the bend.

The work of one such renegade from these ranks might be remarked upon: Samuel X. Sleane, 17, the X that self-divined portion of name he had crudely carved upon his own arm, was set to stab a needle into the vein above that point where the X had been cut, when a gust of wind shook the abandoned Project trailer in which Samuel lived. The wind burst through each of the trailer’s three smoky windows, gusted the door from its hinges, captured in a whirling pool each object from door, window, and wall, three times catapulted Samuel X. Sleane against the ceiling, slamming his body three times against the floor, sucked the needle from Samuel X. Sleane’s bloodied hand, blew the hair straight out from his skull, snatched all

clothing from his body except one sock, whistled through his every orifice . . . as in the meanwhile and for the whole of Samuel X. Sleane's own tumbling the needle spun in fixed circumference through the crowded air, finally, it seemed to find its true course and drive itself with absolute accuracy into the most hated treasure Samuel X. Sleane possessed: the miniature, much weathered portrait he carried in his wallet, a one-inch by two-inch grainy black-and-white machine photograph of his father and mother snapped one grim drunken day in St. Paul before Samuel X. Sleane was born or possibly even thought about, this pair being the party Samuel X. Sleane, in rare, coherent moments, rightfully blamed for his painful sojourn on earth.

When Samuel X. Sleane came to his senses he was flat against earth, naked in tall bulrushes by a blue lake, under a cloudless sky, in a place he did recognize.

The Winds of Hope, he thought. Holy damn.

The rippling of the Western Comet began just beyond the Forks Reclamation Project when a black funnel of wind engulfed the 44th car. The 15 products of the Nissan Motor Company on that 44th car shook and shivered, the 8 wheels transporting these Nissan inventions lifted as one from the rails, cars to the front and rear responded accordingly, these cars upending and touching wheels high in the air, like a macabre ballet, one might say, the very rails weightless as sticks, whipping hither and yon. Within seconds the 17 chemical cars sailed through the air, exploding moments later in rivulets of fire heard as far away as Wisperthal, Sarama, and Wennemucca. In the end, the Western Comet's full complement of 99 cars came to final rest within a score of fiery fields,

colored fumes surging upwards in duplication of giant rainbows, liquids uniting high into the air, into the very clouds, where explosions took place by the minute, a dense congregate of particles raining down upon the whole of the Forks Reclamation Project, through the whole of the district and beyond, as far afield as Wisperthal, Sarama, and Wennemucca.

Dora Bell stopped her Nissan Fury in the middle of an unkempt path. For some minutes her eyes fixed on a naked boy standing knee-deep in the water of a lake so still and blue it seemed hardly to exist in the real world. She had seen any number of naked boys and men in her time, and she appraised the form of this one with the same deliberation given those others. That he looked to her stringy and wind-blown, scatter-brained, even more than a little deranged, did not concern her. He had the dark, somber, smoking eyes her mother had warned her about. She was beyond such idiocy now – or thought she might be – and here was a boy who needed a mother.

"Come on," she shouted, and the boy came.

"Get in," she said, and the boy did.

In Orebro, Sweden, later that day, there would be cause for celebration. Singed hair, a broken toe, the telegram would say. Otherwise fine. Send money.

When spears of light shot above the sisters' house and the very heavens spun, the sisters did as their grandmother had always told them they should. Go below, she had said.

So here they were, crawling on a cool packed-dirt floor through a pitch-dark route that went on so long and deep they had never found the courage as children to follow it to its end.

“Old Mum always said there was an underground city down here,” Ana Coombs said. “Keep going.”

The sister said: “I can’t believe that worm actually took our monkey cup.”

Ana Coombs said: “I’d like to have been here when she died. She’d have faced death with open eyes, calling it bastard names.”

The old man at his shack by the tracks, holding aloft a black umbrella, looking at the sky while composing his own raft of bastard names for what it was he saw, recalled a plague unmentioned among the 365 Plagues of Egypt, the Plague of all plagues, the Plague of the Unmentionable. To escape this plague, infants of his ghetto during the time he was born were swaddled in blankets, tied and knotted by rag, rope, and mystery. Under veil of night, these cocooned babies one by one ascended by balloons into the heavens, the foremost hope of those below that the winds be favorable.

Cass R. Sunstein

*on a danger
of deliberative
democracy*

Imagine the following situations:

- Affirmative action is under attack in the state of Texas. A number of professors and students at a branch of the University of Texas are inclined to be supportive of affirmative action; they meet to exchange views and to plan further action, if necessary. What are these professors and students likely to think, and do, after they talk?

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- After a highly publicized shooting at a local high school, a group of people in the community, most of them tentatively in favor of greater gun control, comes together to discuss the possibility of imposing new gun control measures. What, if anything, will happen to individual views as a result of this discussion?
- A jury is deciding on an appropriate punitive damage award in a case of misconduct by a large company; the behavior resulted in a serious injury to a small child. Before deliberating as a group, jurors have individually considered the appropriate award, leading to an average of \$1.5 million and a median of \$1 million. As a statistical generalization, how will the jury's ultimate award tend to compare to these figures?

The likely behavior of individuals in these situations reveals a striking but much neglected phenomenon: that of *group polarization*. This phenomenon raises serious questions about the potential dangers of deliberation, even in some democratic settings.

In brief, the phenomenon of group polarization means that the members of a deliberating group predictably move toward a more extreme point in the direction of their pre-deliberation views.

Thus, the Texas group that meets to debate affirmative action is likely to become more firmly committed to that practice.

The community group concerned about the shooting at a local high school is likely to conclude its meeting enthusiastically in favor of gun control.

And, as a new study by David Schkade, Daniel Kahneman, and myself has shown, the jury will probably award punitive damages in excess of the median, perhaps higher than the mean as

well, and very possibly as high as or higher than the highest award selected in advance of deliberation by any individual juror.

Several factors increase the likelihood and extent of group polarization. For example, groups consisting of individuals with extremist tendencies are more likely to shift, and likely to shift more – a point that bears on the wellsprings of hatred, violence, and terrorism. The same is true for groups with some kind of salient shared identity – like Republicans, Democrats, and lawyers, but unlike jurors and experimental subjects.

It follows that when like-minded people meet regularly, without sustained exposure to competing views, extreme movements are all the more probable. Here, for example, are some empirical examples of group polarization, based on research in over a dozen nations:

- After discussion, a group of moderately profeminist American women becomes more strongly profeminist.
- After discussion, a group of French citizens becomes more critical of the United States and its intentions with respect to economic aid.
- After discussion, a group of whites predisposed to show racial prejudice offers more negative responses to the question whether white racism is responsible for conditions faced by African Americans in American cities.
- After discussion, a group of whites predisposed not to show racial prejudice offers more positive responses to the same question.

We may confidently predict, then, that those moderately critical of an ongoing war effort will, after discussion, sharply oppose the war; that those who believe that global warming is a serious problem are likely, after discussion, to hold that belief with considerable confidence;

that people tending to believe in the inferiority of a certain racial group will become more entrenched in this belief as a result of discussion; that those tending to condemn the United States will, as a result of discussion, end up condemning the United States with even more intensity.

Why does group polarization occur? There are three main explanations. The first is based on *persuasive arguments*. The simple idea here is that people respond to the arguments made by other people – and that the ‘argument pool,’ in a group with some initial disposition in one direction, will inevitably be skewed toward that disposition. Thus a group whose members tend to think that Israel is the real aggressor in the Mideast conflict will tend to hear many arguments to that effect, and relatively few opposing views. A group whose members tend to oppose affirmative action will hear a large number of arguments in favor of abolishing affirmative action and comparatively fewer arguments for retaining it. If people are listening, they will have a stronger conviction, in the same direction from which they began, as a result of deliberation.

The second mechanism has to do with *social influence*. The central idea here is that people have a certain conception of themselves and a corresponding sense of how they would like to be perceived by others. If you think of yourself as the sort of person who favors gun control more than most people do, you might shift your position once you find yourself in a group that is very strongly in favor of gun control. If you stay where you were, you may seem less favorably disposed toward gun control than most group members, and, possibly finding your distance from the others disconcerting, you might shift more towards the group. Or if you believe that you

have a comparatively favorable attitude toward current policies of the Bush administration, discussion with a group whose members are at least as favorable as you might well push you in the direction of greater enthusiasm for it. Considerable evidence supports the view that social influences produce changes of this kind.

The third explanation begins by noting that people with extreme views tend to have more confidence that they are right, and that as people gain confidence they become more extreme in their beliefs. If other people seem to share your view, you are likely to become more confident that you are right. Hence it is predicted that if people learn that others agree with them, they are likely to move in a more extreme direction. In a variety of experimental contexts, reported by Robert Baron et al. in a 1996 article on "Social Corroboration and Opinion Extremity," people's views have been shown to become more extreme simply because they have been informed of the shared views of others.

In the context of punitive damage awards by juries, an especially striking phenomenon has been uncovered, one with quite general implications. Those arguing for higher awards seem to have an automatic 'rhetorical advantage' over those arguing for lower awards. The effect is so dramatic that the dollar awards of any particular jury are likely to be systematically higher than the amount chosen by the median juror before deliberation – resulting in jury awards as high as or higher than that of the *highest* individual juror in 27 percent of cases!

It is easy to imagine other contexts in which one or another side has an automatic rhetorical advantage. Consider, as possible examples, those arguing for higher penalties for those convicted of drug offenses, or those seeking to reduce

tax rates. When a rhetorical advantage is involved, group deliberation will produce significant shifts in individual judgments.

Group polarization is inevitably at work in feuds, ethnic and international strife, and war. One of the characteristic features of feuds is that members of feuding groups tend to talk only to one another, fueling and amplifying their outrage and solidifying their impression of the relevant events. It is not too much of a leap to suggest that these effects are sometimes present within ethnic and religious groups and nations, even if there is a high degree of national heterogeneity. In America, sharp divergences between whites and African Americans, on particular salient events or more generally, can be explained by reference to group polarization. The same is true for sharp divergences of viewpoints within and across nations. Group polarization occurs every day within Israel and among the Palestinian Authority; it occurs within the United States and among those inclined to support, or at least not to condemn, terrorist acts. A large part of the perennial question 'Why do they hate us?' lies not in ancient grievances or individual consciences but in the social influences emphasized here.

Of course the media play a large role, simply by virtue of the arguments they repeat. It follows that if certain people are listening to stations that promote only one point of view, or reading only one set of opinions, extreme movements are possible. As I have argued in my book *Republic.com*, the phenomenon of group polarization explains why a fragmented communications market may create problems. The psychologist Patricia Wallace explains in her *The Psychology of the Internet* that a "plausible hypothesis is that the Internet-like setting is most likely to create a strong tendency

toward group polarization when the members of the group feel some sense of group identity.” If certain people are deliberating with many like-minded others, views will not merely be reinforced, but instead shifted to more extreme points. This cannot be said to be bad by itself – perhaps the increased extremism is good – but it is certainly troublesome if diverse social groups are led, through predictable mechanisms, toward increasingly opposing and ever more extreme views.

How does all this bear on the theory of democracy?

We might approach that question by noting that the framers of the American Constitution attempted to create a deliberative democracy, that is, a system that combines accountability with a measure of reflection and reason-giving. From the standpoint of political deliberation, the central problem is that widespread error and social fragmentation are likely to result when like-minded people insulated from others move in extreme directions simply because of limited argument pools and parochial influences. Compare a system of one-party domination, which stifles dissent in part because it refuses to establish space for the emergence of divergent positions; in this way, it intensifies polarization within the party while also disabling external criticism. What Irvin Janis some years ago called ‘groupthink’ can be understood as drawing attention to the ways in which democratic institutions can be subject to some of the same problems.

How can this be prevented? One possibility is to maintain a system of considerable diversity and checks and balances, in which different deliberating groups, subject to their own internal pressures, might reach different conclusions and ultimately correct one another’s errors. In a remarkable book by an insider about

America’s victory in World War II (*Administrative Reflections from World War II*, by Luther Gulick), it is urged that democratic systems have a built-in advantage during war over their nondemocratic adversaries, simply because in democratic systems possible courses of action are discussed by diverse people in advance, and errors are publicized as they occur, making them more likely to be corrected.

It follows that an obvious response to the dangers of group polarization is to ensure that members of deliberating groups, whether small or large, will not isolate themselves from competing views. This point has implications for freedom of association, bureaucratic structure, and the architecture of the Internet. Indeed, the framers of the Constitution understood the system of bicameralism as a check on the risk that passions, in the form of group polarization, would lead to ill-considered decisions from one or another house. It is important to ensure that deliberation occurs within a large and heterogeneous public sphere, and to guard against a situation in which like-minded people are walling themselves off from alternative perspectives.

But there is a difficulty with this response: a certain measure of isolation will, in some cases, be crucial to the development of ideas and approaches that would not otherwise emerge and that deserve a social hearing. Members of low-status groups are often quiet within heterogeneous bodies, and thus deliberation in such bodies tends to be dominated by high-status members. A good democracy makes space for enclaves in which otherwise silent people are willing to speak and likely to be heard.

Here, then, is a dilemma: any shift – in technology, norms, or legal practice – that increases the number of deliberat-

ing enclaves will increase the diversity of society's aggregate 'argument pool' while also increasing the danger of extremism and instability, ultimately even violence.

No algorithm is available to solve the resulting conundrums.

But a simple lesson involves institutional design. To the extent that limited argument pools and social influences are likely to produce unfortunate effects, correctives can be introduced simply by exposing group members, at one point or another, to arguments to which they are not antecedently inclined. The value of deliberation, as a social phenomenon, depends very much on social context – on the nature of the process and the nature of the participants.

Here institutions are crucial. It is desirable to create spaces for deliberating groups without insulating group members from those who have opposing views, and without insulating those outside the group from the views of those within it.

Arthur Kantrowitz

*on fear,
uncertainty &
scientific progress*

In war, technological advances play a significant role. In World War II, that role was much larger than ever before, as scientists shared a great deal of the credit for the Allied victory. During and after that war, science had sufficient prestige to create a science-policy establishment in Washington powerful enough to increase federal dollars for research from

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the millions to the billions. That support has created a second scientific revolution, opening horizons beyond previous human experience. We have also seen the beginnings of a potent second industrial revolution based on the new science.

One reaction to humanity's new powers is the rise of pessimism, epitomized by Vaclav Havel's famous assertion that ahead lies "the abyss." Such pessimism amounts to a great revolt against reason, science, and the core values of the Enlightenment. It has fostered in academia the rise of so-called other ways of knowing. In Congress, it has led to the establishment of an institute devoted to alternative medicine at the National Institutes of Health. And perhaps most threatening, it has contributed to the rise of fundamentalist religion.

Another reaction to our new scientific powers is what I will call the Malthusian Pretension – that is, the pretension to the ability to predict mankind's limitations.

Both Darwin and Wallace acknowledged their debt to the Reverend Thomas Malthus's *First Essay on Population* (1798); his writings on the restriction of population growth by food supply contributed to their understanding of evolution. He was correct for almost all species, but dead wrong for the particular population – Englishmen in the Industrial Revolution – for which he made his dire predictions. We can learn something by understanding his mistake.

Malthus opposed the Poor Laws in the belief that they would allow the population to multiply until it exceeded the possible food supply, thus causing millions to starve in decades to come. But Malthus did not foresee the unprecedented growth of England's industrial and agricultural resources, which made

it possible to acquire enough food to accommodate all Englishmen. Nor did he foresee that the birth rate would drop with increasing wealth and education. Reverend Malthus regarded as blasphemous, and so tried to refute, the Enlightenment's idea of the perfectibility of man, but he could not anticipate humanity's responses to all the new challenges, especially as growing technology multiplied the options available.

Thanks, in part, to the influence of the pessimists and the new Malthusians, reaction to the second scientific revolution has been accompanied by a paradoxical fearfulness – a willingness to believe the worst about the dangers of radiation, about cancer epidemics from the widespread use of DDT, about the possibility of mass starvation due to the population explosion, about the exhaustion of natural resources, etc.

Although the most catastrophic predictions of the pessimists have not materialized – and the health, education, and nutrition of mankind have continued to improve in the first half-century of the second scientific revolution – the voices of doom remain all too prominent in our popular culture, and the end of this fear-driven era is not yet in sight.

Neither scientists nor the educated public is immune to these seductively pessimistic ideologies. In the prevailing version of the story of the fall from the Garden of Eden, furthermore, nature is sacred and the works of man defile nature. So in this atmosphere it has not been hard for organizations such as the Union of Concerned Scientists (UCS) to gather many distinguished scientists to sign manifestos warning of "grave threats" that "imperil the future of humanity and the global environment."

But many environmental threats, such as global warming, are still only conjecture. Thus comparable numbers of dis-

tinguished scientists rejected the UCS's 'warning' by signing a petition of their own, the "Heidelberg Appeal," from which I quote: "We want to make our full contribution to the preservation of our common heritage, the Earth. We are however worried, at the dawn of the twenty-first century, at the emergence of an irrational ideology which is opposed to scientific and industrial progress and impedes economic and social development."

Astonishingly enough, at least twenty American Nobel Prize winners signed *both* the UCS's warning and the Heidelberg Appeal.

The new prominence of fear has profoundly altered the way Western society looks at the future. Faith in progress, the Enlightenment's great legacy to humanity, enabled the unprecedented liberation of large portions of humanity from lives that were, in the words of Thomas Hobbes, "nasty, brutish, and short." But Western society has begun a retreat from the idea of progress to a new notion of 'sustainable development.' Under this fear-driven doctrine, innovators will bear the added burden of proving sustainability, and central planners will have the stifling authority to decide whether proposed advances are sustainable.

In providing the scientific basis for the formulation of policy, predictions are usually required; the ability to forecast new technologies would indeed be particularly useful. But predictions are confounded by technological surprises, whose essence was nicely captured by Adlai Stevenson Sr. in 1964 at the dedication of the Xerox Laboratory for Basic Research. Commenting on the efforts of a distinguished committee assembled by President Roosevelt in 1937 to predict technological advances of the next quarter-century, Stevenson said, "I find

myself on a par with the greatest scientific minds of the time – for I, too, failed to foresee nuclear energy, antibiotics, radar, the electronic computer, and rocketry." Stevenson's quip is the best answer to today's fear-mongers and neo-Malthusians who pretend to scientific knowledge they do not possess.

Nevertheless, predictions of catastrophe usually claim scientific foundations; so often we are told that 'mainstream scientists' warn of imminent disaster. Later, when the fear quietly fades away, some of the credibility of science fades away with it.

There is an important asymmetry between hope, which leads to actions that test its basis, and fear, which may inhibit testing its basis. As we know only too well, many of our hopes do not survive their tests. Meanwhile, fears accumulate untested. The inventory of untested fears has always made humanity disastrously vulnerable to thought control. When science was *independent* of politics, its greatest triumph was the reduction of that vulnerability. But today science is *dependent* on politicians to fund research.

Can dependent scientists carry on the proud tradition of dispelling fear that inspired the optimism of the idea of progress? Or will the science-policy establishment interpret science's uncertainties to serve politicians seeking power by reinforcing exaggerated fears?

Science advances through controversy. Any really new idea challenges mainstream scientific authorities. Such challenges divide the community, frequently until direct comparison with nature decides the issue. Therefore, in seeking knowledge from advancing science, we must expect controversy. Nevertheless, simply slowing down technological progress until its scientific basis is no longer controversial is not the most prudent approach. Those who insist on cer-

tainty before action abdicate leadership and must soon accept the leadership of those who act in the presence of some uncertainty.

The chief point I want to make is that establishing the scientific facts needed for public policy should not depend only on the distinction and prestige of any elite. Designating information as scientific must mean that it has survived significant open attempts at falsification. Dependence on any elite to resolve matters of scientific controversy is not part of the scientific method. At a 1976 colloquium on this subject, Margaret Mead put it this way: “We need a new institution. There isn’t any doubt about that. The institutions we have are totally unsatisfactory. In many cases they are not only unsatisfactory, they involve a prostitution of science and a prostitution of the decision making process.”

Progress in science requires open controversy – which means acknowledging that scientists are made of the same ‘crooked timber’ as the rest of humanity. Frankness demands that any scientist claiming an advance in knowledge must set bounds on that claim by pointing out remaining uncertainties and areas of ignorance. Failure to set bounds diminishes the credibility of the claimed advance.

When proponents of opposing views abide by what I call the frankness rule, the limitations of current knowledge are evident. Expert adversaries, who have the right to receive public answers to their most penetrating questions, police the scientific method. This powerful norm should be enforced whenever policy decisions depend on the limitations of current knowledge.

Finding the facts needed for public policy should adapt this basic strength of a vigorous scientific meeting to provide a snapshot of what is known – and especially what is not known – at the time

that information is needed. Recognizing that all science is tentative, this snapshot can only be seen as one frame of a moving picture.

During the Ford administration, I chaired a presidential task force charged with adapting scientific meeting practice to the needs of public policymakers. The procedure our task force suggested attracted some attention in the press, which called it a ‘Science Court.’ The president of the National Academy of Sciences (NAS) initially agreed to conduct the first experimental procedure and it was endorsed by the Committee of Scientific Society Presidents.

However, there was quiet but powerful opposition to experimenting with totally open procedures. The best description of the opposition appeared in the journal *Nature* (263 [7 October 1976]: 455), which reported that “the whisperings around Washington in that small circle called the science policy community (not to be confused with the working scientists) is to give Kantrowitz his day and let the whole idea collapse under its own unworkable pretensions.” (A bibliography on the Science Court can be found at <http://www.flpc.edu/risk/vol 4/spring/bibliography.htm>.)

It gradually became clear to me that a completely open procedure for assessing what science does and doesn’t know threatened the power of the Washington science-policy establishment.

The power of that establishment was seen again more recently, in 1997, when the NAS easily obtained a congressional exemption from the openness requirements of the Federal Advisory Committee Act. The District of Columbia Appeals Court handed down a judgment that the NAS was subject to the act, which requires public access to meetings and materials used by a government advisory panel. The NAS appealed that

judgment to the Supreme Court, but certiorari was denied. When that happened, it appealed to its friends in Congress, who responded immediately by passing a bill that permits the NAS to continue to make critical committee decisions behind closed doors.

Despite setbacks to the principles of open inquiry, I still cherish the hope that the day will come when we finally learn that only open procedures justify the public trust in science that is needed for the second scientific revolution to fulfill its great promise.

Howard Hiatt

*on policy
initiatives for
children*

When I was a child, a tonsillectomy was a rite of passage. Forty years ago, when I was in charge of the oncology unit at Boston's Beth Israel Hospital, a radical mastectomy was routinely recommended to patients with breast cancer. Only after the statistical sciences became an integral part of clinical investigation did we learn that children with intact tonsils had no more sore throats than those who had had them removed, and that women with breast cancer did as well or better after much simpler procedures than a radical mastectomy.

The statistical sciences have been crucial in the development of what is now called evidence-based medicine. In 1991, after I convened a group of colleagues to launch at the American Academy of Arts and Sciences what became known as the

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Initiatives for Children, I quickly discovered that research into the effectiveness of medical procedures was leagues ahead of most other policy areas affecting children (and adults as well). Who had heard of evidence-based education? Of evidence-based welfare policies? Of evidence-based sanctions applied to juvenile substance abusers?

Our group knew that we would have to live within constraints. But we were unanimous in insisting that whatever programs we undertook would be subjected to rigorous statistical evaluation. And that, in turn, meant that we should do all that we could to persuade Fred Mosteller, Harvard's distinguished professor emeritus of statistics, to join us. He did, and the most active of our initiatives has been, and remains, Mosteller's Center for Evaluation. In the decade since its creation, the Center has used a quantitative research technique known as meta-analysis, which synthesizes experimental data from multiple sources in order to evaluate the effectiveness of social policies aimed at children. Much of its research has been focused on education.

It was clear from the start that there was little or no reliable information about what difference different pedagogical policies actually made. Did it really matter, for example, if there were seventeen rather than twenty-five students in an average first-grade classroom?

In 1996, Mosteller and his colleagues published a paper on this topic, "Sustained Inquiry in Education: Lessons from Skill Grouping and Class Size." In the paper, Mosteller and his colleagues contrasted the inconclusive results on skill grouping with those based on the STAR experiment (Tennessee's state-wide study of class size).

State schools could participate in this experiment so long as they could supply

enough students, teachers, and classrooms. For the students, they needed three classes at the same K-4 grade level: a class of twenty-five and one teacher; a class of twenty-five and a teacher and a teacher's aide; and a class of seventeen and a teacher. The purpose of the experiment was to test the hypothesis that children attending a school in these early grades needed to learn their job as students, and that learning this job would be easier in a smaller class.

The outcome was measured by effect size, that is, the number of standard deviations children in the reduced-size classes improved on standardized tests related to the curriculum. Their gain was 0.34 standard deviations, while the corresponding value for students who remained in regular-sized classes was -0.15 standard deviations.

Impressed by these results, Tennessee legislators decided to test the effects of creating reduced-size classrooms in the seventeen school districts with the lowest per capita incomes in the state. Students in the seventeen districts gradually improved their performance on standardized tests. The top rank is 1 and the bottom rank is 138; by the fourth year of the program, the second graders' average ranks had improved to rank 78 in reading and rank 56 in mathematics.

Building on the interest stimulated by this paper, the Center hosted a major conference on the evaluation of educational research at the Academy in May of 1999. It brought together academics, practitioners of different evaluation techniques, specialists in education, and government and foundation people who help pay for educational policies, research, and programs. Much of the discussion focused on the concern of many that education research does not give adequate attention to randomized field trials – often considered the gold stan-

dard in research involving human subjects and widely used in medical research. Some participants wondered whether such a method is feasible in education research, given the ethical, political, and practical issues that often arise. The conference led to a series of essays recently published in a volume called *Evidence Matters*, edited by Frederick Mosteller and Robert Boruch (Brookings Institution Press, 2002).

The Initiatives for Children also launched a variety of other research programs, including one on intergenerational literacy tutoring, designed by Jerome Kagan of Harvard's department of psychology. Kagan believes that the ability to read by third grade is the single best predictor of success or failure in adult life; he also knew that there was a perennial shortage of tutors for children in the early years of schooling. We therefore designed the Intergenerational Literacy Tutoring Project to assess the effectiveness of a program using senior citizens as tutors for first graders at high risk of reading failure. This approach had been tried before, but had never been adequately evaluated.

Kagan's project began as a pilot study in the Cambridge public schools and, after two years, was introduced in 1997 as a full-fledged research study in the Boston public schools, in partnership with Boston Partners in Education (BPE), the Boston school volunteer coordinating agency. Kagan's students administered to entering first graders a battery of tests that measured such skills as letter identification, word recognition, elision, speed in naming letters, numbers and pictures of common objects, and elementary reading. The lowest-scoring children were randomly divided into two groups – one tutored by trained senior volunteers three times a week, the other a matched control group

that did not receive this tutoring. Professor Kagan carefully planned the tutor training, and the tutors were closely supervised and supported over the course of the year by BPE.

At the end of the year the children were tested again. The gains in reading ability of the tutored children exceeded the gains of the control group children, which was not surprising, but the evaluations indicated which methods and conditions made the tutoring more or less effective.

Two findings were particularly interesting. The first was that gains in reading ability in the tutored group over the control group were greater among boys than girls. Since low-scoring boys are the group most likely not to read by the third grade, this is strategically important information. The second potentially very significant finding was that low scores in tests for reading readiness were not necessarily correlated with low scores in tests of basic cognitive ability. The implication is that preschool exposure to words, letters, and books makes the difference in reading readiness. This is important information for thinking about early education programs.

One final example designed to determine what can be done with evidence-based research in this area is The Active Girls Initiative, still in a very early stage, begun in response to the high infant mortality rate in the poorest neighborhoods of Boston. The rate has declined in the 1990s, but only because of advances in neonatal technology, which permit the survival of very low birth weight infants who would not previously have been viable. Unfortunately, the largest single cause of infant mortality – low birth weight – has remained unaffected by these advances. Low birth weight babies are believed to be in large part the result of poor maternal health,

and it is now clear that prenatal health-care programs come too late to make a difference.

Opportunities for physical activity are severely limited for girls in Boston's poorer neighborhoods. In an effort to address this problem, Dr. Paul Wise and I mounted a project to evaluate the effects of a combination of physical activity and health education on these girls. The Active Girls team, which targets girls aged nine to thirteen, is led by Ellen Payzant and me, and includes representatives from an unusually wide range of institutions, including the Boston Public Schools, the Boston and Massachusetts Health Departments, community-based organizations, the Harvard Medical School, the Boston University School of Public Health, and the Harvard Department of Statistics, under the supervision of Donald Rubin. A principal partner in our research effort has been the Girl Scouts, which has staffed the pilot groups and provided office space and a

fiscal home. Colleagues at the Brigham and Women's Hospital and Children's Hospital are conducting the clinical research. We are specifically interested in evaluating the impact of a physical activity program combined with a health education program on short- and long-term health outcomes for inner city girls, as compared with the health outcomes for two other groups of inner city girls – those participating solely in the health education program and those participating in no program at all.

In 2001, after ten years of helping to create new programs and research instruments to better the lives of children, the Initiatives for Children ceased to operate under the auspices of the Academy. But our group, by putting children on the Academy's agenda, has perhaps helped to focus wider attention on them. And many of the programs we launched with the Academy's support are continuing.

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Inside back cover: A centaur and human in combat (south metope XXVII), from an outer frieze originally located on the south side of the roof of the Parthenon. Controversy still surrounds the 'Elgin Marbles,' with the Greek government pressing for their return. "They have become this great icon of western art because they were removed," argues Ian Jenkins, assistant keeper in the department of Greek and Roman antiquities at the British Museum. "Once you have made a museum object by displaying them at eye level, you cannot then see them other than as a result of that process." See Rochelle Gurstein on *The Elgin Marbles, romanticism & the waning of 'ideal beauty,'* pages 88 – 100. Credit: Photographic Service of the British Museum.



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