Only a Promise of Happiness
The Place of Beauty in a World of Art

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Plato or Schopenhauer?

All beautiful things, the Greek philosopher Plotinus wrote in the third century A.D., produce "awe and a shock of delight, passionate longing, love and a shudder of rapture." All beautiful things: natural objects and works of art, bodies and souls, ways of life, knowledge, virtue, and much else besides. Our time, by contrast, has confined such feelings to everyday life. It has drawn a heavy curtain between them and the true pleasures of art, which ordinary people, as Ortega y Gasset charged in 1925, are incapable of experiencing: "To the majority of people aesthetic pleasure means a state of mind which is essentially indistinguishable from their ordinary behavior. As they have never practiced any other attitude but the practical one in which a man's feelings are aroused and he is emotionally involved, a work that does not invite sentimental intervention leaves them without a cue"; ordinary people wallow in emotions not only different "from true artistic pleasure, but . . . incompatible with aesthetic enjoyment proper."
Philosophy, too, has abandoned Plotinus's broad vision. Suspicious of passion, it limited itself to a kind of beauty to which desire seemed inappropriate—the beauty in great art and the wonders of nature, concentrated in museums and national parks. And so the beauty that mattered to philosophy, to criticism, and often to the arts themselves, if it mattered at all, was separated from the beauty that mattered to the rest of the world, to whom it seemed irrelevant and empty: the higher and more refined its pleasures, the less like pleasures they seemed.

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

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

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

Plato and the ancients were not afraid of the risky language of passion because they thought that beauty, even the beauty of lowly objects, can gradually inspire a longing for goodness and truth. In the *Symposium*, Plato describes a long process that leads from the love of a single individual to a life governed by the love of all the beauty of the world, which is for him the life of philosophy itself. Passion in pursuing that life, its wisdom and virtue, and everything that leads to them, is just what the ancients encouraged and valued, and the pleasures they promised in return were vivid and intense.
The fiery reaction to beauty Plato and Plotinus describe was still comprehensible to lovers of beauty and art like John Ruskin, Walter Pater, and Oscar Wilde in the nineteenth century, but beauty had long ago ceased to go hand in hand with wisdom and goodness; it had eventually come to be, as it is to most of the world today, largely irrelevant and often opposed to them. Even Ruskin, the most moralizing of modern aestheticians, had to acknowledge the breach between beauty and morality, and his advice to painters reveals the conflict he faced: “Does a man die at your feet—your business is not to help him, but to note the colour of his lips. . . . Not a specially religious or spiritual business this, it might appear.”

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

The aesthetic made it possible to isolate the beautiful from all the sensual, practical, and ethical issues that were the center of Plato’s concern. The concept itself is part of the legacy of Immanuel Kant, who established the modern field of Aesthetics in the late eighteenth century. In an enigmatic formulation whose influence nevertheless permeates our attitude toward the arts and, as we shall see, countless aspects of everyday life, Kant disavowed the ancients. Beauty, he claimed, is manifested only through a contemplation of nature or art that produces “a satisfaction without any interest.” The pleasure (“satisfaction”) we find in beautiful things is completely independent of their relations to the rest of the world—of their uses and effects. We have no interest in possessing them or in their consequences for ourselves or others. It is a pleasure bereft of desire.
The beautiful is according to Kant different from both the "agreeable" and the good. The agreeable is anything that we like and enjoy in the most everyday sense of the word—strawberry ice cream, the smell of jasmine, silk, a large house or a good meal and perhaps canary wine (Kant’s own example) to go with it. The pleasure such things give spurs the desire to possess them; we want them to continue to be, along with other things like them, available to us. That is, Kant says, to have a serious interest “in their existence.” It is an attitude we also have toward good things—things that are either useful or morally valuable. Useful things are those that lead to an agreeable end—an ice-cream maker, for instance, if I like ice cream—and I have an interest in their existence, since I desire to possess the ends to which they are the means. Morally valuable things, finally, are valuable in themselves, things we want to be the case for their own sake—which is also to have an interest in their existence. But no such interest enters when we are concerned with the beauty of something: “If the question,” Kant writes, “is whether something is beautiful, one does not want to know whether there is anything that is or that could be at stake, for us or for someone else, in the existence of the thing, but rather how we judge it in mere contemplation.” Is such a thing pleasant to have? Is it good for us to have it? Is it good that it exists? Does it exist in the first place or is it a figment of my imagination? None of that matters. A palace can be beautiful despite being ostentatious, useless, and the product of oppression. If I want to own a painting because I find it beautiful or praise a novel because of its moral point of view, my judgement is undermined:

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

Aesthetic pleasure is a pleasure we take in things just as they stand before us, without regard to their effects on our sensual, practical,
or moral concerns. Moreover, beauty is not a feature of things themselves; the judgment of taste—"This is beautiful"—does not so much describe its object as it reports the feeling of pleasure we are experiencing. The judgment of taste, he writes, is made only on the basis of "the feeling of pleasure and displeasure, by means of which nothing at all in the object is designated, but in which the subject feels itself as it is affected by the representation."

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

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

Schopenhauer values art because he thinks of beauty as a liberation from the disturbing travails and the distracting details of ordinary life. He believes that art reveals to us the real nature of things, the
“persistent form” of their species. By focusing on the universal features that things have in common, we are removed from the vicissitudes of the specific and particular; we leave active participation behind and enter the realm of pure contemplation, where pain is absent: “Happiness and unhappiness have vanished; we are no longer the individual; that is forgotten; we are only the pure subject of knowledge. We are only that one eye of the world which looks out from all knowing creatures.”

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

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

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

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

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

For Plato and the long tradition that came after him beauty is the object of love, the quarry of erōs. But beauty can be deceptive, and love has its dark side: who knows what beauty will bring eventually to light? who knows what we find beautiful and why we love as we do? Plato and his followers tried to answer such questions and escape the dangers they indicate by means of a vast philosophical picture, eventually appropriated by a current within Christian thought, according to which beauty, when it is properly pursued, provides a path to moral perfection and is aligned with goodness and virtue. But the sense that a higher authority—reason or God—secured that alignment was gradually lost and the picture gradually faded, only the dangers of beauty remaining in the traces it left behind. The desires beauty sparks and the
pleasures it promises began to seem dubious. Beauty itself was often taken to be the seductive face of evil, a delightful appearance masking the horrid skull beneath the skin. And even if it was not always the face of evil, once its connection with goodness was severed, beauty was still always a face (fig. 1), capable of promising one thing and delivering another: a mere surface and for that reason alone morally questionable. It became a feature and, if there can be virtues in appearance, a virtue of appearance and no longer a subject worthy of philosophy. Although the word continued to be used, beauty itself was replaced by the aesthetic, which, completely isolated as it is from all relationships with the rest of the world, promises nothing that is not already present in it, is incapable of deception, and provokes no desire.

Everyone knows, of course, that works of art actually can elicit the most extraordinary reactions. Pliny tells us that Praxiteles' statue of the Cnidian Aphrodite caused such lust in one man that the stains that marked the consummation of his passion were still visible in the marble hundreds of years later. Titian's Venus of Urbino (fig. 2) is "the foulest, the vilest, the obscenest picture the world possesses," Mark Twain
complains: “It isn’t that she is naked and stretched out on a bed—no, it is the attitude of one of her arms and hand. If I ventured to describe that attitude there would be a fine howl—but there the Venus lies for anybody to gloat over that wants to—and there she has a right to lie, for she is a work of art, and art has its privileges.” But although there are innumerable such cases, it has always seemed easier to believe that desire is less ardent when it comes to paintings or books than when real bodies are involved. For that reason, although the erotic elements that have always been part of our love for the arts have not always disqualified the works that provoke them, it is now the conventional wisdom that they are always irrelevant to aesthetic appreciation.

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

Writing early in the twentieth century, Clive Bell extended Schopenhauer’s radical version of Kant’s idea of disinterestedness even further when he declared that representation is altogether immaterial to art: “To appreciate a work of art we need bring with us nothing from life, no
knowledge of its ideas and affairs, no familiarity with its emotions... we need bring with us nothing but a sense of form and colour and a knowledge of three-dimensional space.” Bell was not moved by Schopenhauer’s metaphysical anxieties. His purpose was to defend and justify what his British contemporaries considered as deformations of nature in the painting of Cézanne, Matisse, and Gauguin, and he urged them not to pay attention to what these works were about but to respond to their formal characteristics—what he called “significant form”—instead. But since representational content—bodies, objects, recognizable situations more generally—is where the desires prompted by works of art are focused, his rejection of representation resulted in an even stronger barrier between the aesthetic and the beautiful. Bell was quite explicit about it. Significant form is the only cause of that “peculiar emotion provoked by works of art” that is characteristic of a correct aesthetic response. “Beautiful,” by contrast, “is more often than not synonymous with ‘desirable,’” and for that reason “the word does not necessarily connote any aesthetic reaction whatever.” And since most people “are apt to apply the epithet ‘beautiful’ to objects that do not provoke that peculiar [aesthetic] emotion produced by works of art... it would be misleading to call by the same name the quality that does.”

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

However inadequate Bell’s formalism is as a general theory of art, his way of handling beauty was not a single critic’s isolated gesture. It was made in tandem with Roger Fry’s extraordinarily influential, less polemical and more sophisticated, privileging of “design” over
content, and it was repeated, for example, by the philosopher R. G. Collingwood, who, precisely because he agreed with Plato that beauty is the object of love, insisted that “the words ‘beauty’, ‘beautiful’, as actually used, have no aesthetic implication. . . . The word ‘beauty’, wherever and however it is used, connotes that in things in virtue of which we love them, admire them, or desire them . . . aesthetic theory is not the theory of beauty but of art.”

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

A Feature of Appearance?

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

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