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## An Essay on Beauty and Judgment

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Beauty is the most discredited philosophical notion—so discredited that I could not even find an entry for it in the index of the many books in the philosophy of art I consulted in order to find it discredited. Even if I believe that beauty is more than the charm of a lovely face, the seductive grace of a Mapplethorpe photograph, the symmetry of the sonata form, the tight construction of a sonnet, even if it is, in the most general terms, aesthetic value, I am not spared. For it is the judgment of aesthetic value itself—the judgment of taste—that is embarrassing. It is embarrassing ideologically, if to be able to judge aesthetically you must be educated and learned and if, as Pierre Bourdieu claims, “it is because they are linked either to a bourgeois origin or to the quasi-bourgeois mode of existence presupposed by prolonged schooling, or (most often) to both of these combined, that educational qualifications come to be seen as a guarantee of the capacity to adopt the aesthetic disposition.” And it is embarrassing morally, if, as Martha Nussbaum asserts, the aesthetic and the moral coincide, if “the activities of imagination and emotion that the involved reader performs during the time of reading are not just instrumental to moral conduct, they are also examples of moral conduct, in the sense that they are examples of the

type of emotional and imaginative activity that good ethical conduct involves” and if, when a work of art is marred by what she calls “ethical deficiencies,” “we may... decide to read [it] for historical interest or for rhetorical and grammatical interest.” The aesthetic judgment collapses into an instrument of political oppression or into an implement of moral edification. In either case, beauty disappears. It is either the seductive mask of evil or the attractive face of goodness.

But is beauty anything on its own? Is aesthetic judgment at all legitimate? Do we express anything more than a purely personal opinion when we judge that something is beautiful or aesthetically valuable? That was the question Kant posed for himself in his *Critique of Judgment*, the work to which all modern philosophy of art is a response. Kant may have had too simple a picture of aesthetic value in mind—a pleasing unity, as Richard Rorty has written, adopted by the New Critics and contrasted to the romantic version of Harold Bloom, for whom “the degree of aesthetic value is the degree to which something is done that was never done before, the extent to which human imagination has been expanded.” But even if these two versions of aesthetic value are distinct (and, in the end, I believe they are not), they are both suspect for the same reason.

Here is a very rough picture of aesthetic judgment. I am exposed to a work of art; it can be as short and simple as a three-minute rock song, a two-stanza lyric poem, or a thirty-minute episode of *Seinfeld*, or as long and complex as Goya’s *Los Caprichos*, Dennis Potter’s *The Singing Detective*, Wagner’s *Ring*, or Proust’s *Remembrance of Things Past*. I may wallow in the work, allow it to sweep over me, or study and analyze it carefully over a long time. At some point, in some cases, the features of the work, which can range from the simplest elements of beat, meter, or color to the most

complex combinations of structures, depictions of character, or views of the world, produce in me a feeling which, for lack of a better name, I call pleasure. That pleasure is the basis on which I say that the work is funny, moving, elegant, sweeping, passionate, unprecedented – in a word (or two) beautiful or aesthetically valuable.

The trouble is that it has proved impossible to establish the principles that govern the production of aesthetic pleasure. We have never found any features that explain why things that possess them create aesthetic delight. That is not simply because we disagree about beauty with one another, that you despise what I like while I find your tastes disgusting. I cannot even find such reasons for myself. Reasons are general. If a feature explains why something attracts me in one case, it should do so in all. Yet whenever I appeal to something to explain why I like something, I know that the same feature may hurt a different work: the obsessive observation of social detail which gives such power to *Remembrance of Things Past* is just boring in the diaries of the Goncourt brothers; the long-lasting sexual tension between Niles and Daphne in *Frasier* is the subject of some of the series' best scenes over a number of seasons, while the sexual tension between Billy and Ally was deadly after two episodes of *Ally McBeal*. But if social detail or sexual tension explains why I like Proust or *Frasier*, how can it also explain why I hate the Goncourts and *Ally McBeal*? There is not in all the world's criticism a single descriptive statement concerning which I am willing to say in advance, "If it is true, I shall like that work so much the better." If I know that something is yellow, ductile, malleable, and soluble in aqua regia, then I know that it is gold. But though I know that it is gold, as Socrates proved to Hippias in Plato's dialogue, I still have no idea whether or not it is beautiful. Kant expressed this problem by saying that aesthetic judgment does not depend on concepts.

Still, he insisted, it is a genuine judgment nonetheless. It is more than an expression of purely personal feeling, more than simply saying that I like a work of art. The aesthetic judgment is a normative claim; it says that the work should be liked. Although my reaction is based on a feeling, it is not beyond reason. I expect agreement. I am often upset when others, especially people who matter to me, withhold it. Kant writes that although "there can be no rule by which anyone should be compelled to acknowledge that something is beautiful," aesthetic judgments still speak with a "universal voice...and lay claim to the agreement of everyone." But how can I convince you that something is beautiful if there is no reason for my reaction? How can I even expect your agreement if I have no idea how you, and the rest of the world, actually feel? Kant therefore concluded that we have a right to make aesthetic judgments only if we can answer the question, "How is a judgment possible which, merely from one's own feeling of pleasure in an object, independent of its concept, estimates a priori, that is, without having to wait upon the agreement of others, that this pleasure is connected with the representation of the object in every other subject?" How can I know that my feeling is right and that everyone should share it? The *Critique of Judgment* was Kant's effort to answer that question.

It was a magnificent effort, but flawed; and its failure has haunted modern aesthetics as well as contemporary education. If we cannot justify aesthetic judgments, then we must either stop making them or show, as Bourdieu and Nussbaum try to do, that they are really about something else. I want to defend aesthetic judgments, but I also believe that Kant was bound to fail, for two reasons. One is that he was right to say that no features can ever explain why an object is beautiful. The other is that he was wrong to say that the judgment of taste demands everyone's agreement. That may seem like retreating to the starkest subjectivism, turning aesthetic

judgment into a purely idiosyncratic reaction I have no right to impose on anyone else. I hope to convince you that it is not.

Cicero's *de Oratore*, the founding text of humanism, discusses the question whether reading the works of the Greeks (the equivalent of a humanistic education in Rome) makes one a better citizen. Cicero had his doubts, and so have I. But the work shows that a fundamental assumption of Roman education still governs our own. Roman children reading Greek texts went through four stages: *lectio*, elementary reading, dividing words, inserting punctuation, and memorizing; *emendatio*, deciding the authenticity of the parts of the text, making corrections, and exercising their critical skills; *enarratio*, during which critical activity extended to commentary on words, lines, and longer passages; and finally *judicium*, when they determined the text's aesthetic and literary value. Those who avoid evaluation and limit criticism to interpretation do so because they do not see, with Kant, how interpretation can justify a judgment of value. And though everyone agrees that interpretation and evaluation cannot be clearly distinguished, I know almost no one who would reject the commonplace that "an evaluation can only be argued for by means of a detailed description and interpretation of a work." The final end of criticism is agreement in *judicium*, in the aesthetic judgment of value. Criticism is complete when critic and audience, teacher and student, reach a communion of vision, a unity of feeling, a shared assessment of value.

The moment we put the point this way we see that it cannot be right. A shared assessment of value has never stopped criticism. On the contrary, if you and I agree that *The Magic Mountain* is a great novel, we will go on discussing it in greater and greater detail, often disagreeing precisely about what is great about it. And if agreement on value is not the end of criticism, we can also see why Kant was right that the judgment of taste is not governed by

concepts. That was not because the concept of the beautiful or the nature of the judgment is peculiar, but because, I want to suggest to you, the judgment of taste is simply not a conclusion we draw from interacting with, describing, or interpreting works of art.

I want to turn our common picture around. The judgment of beauty is not the result of a mysterious inference on the basis of features of a work which we already know. It is a guess, a suspicion, a dim awareness that there is more in the work than it would be valuable to learn. To find something beautiful is to believe that making it a larger part of our life is worthwhile, that our life will be better if we spend part of it with that work. But a guess is just that: unlike a conclusion, it obeys no principles; it is not governed by concepts. It goes beyond all the evidence, which cannot therefore justify it, and points to the future. Beauty, just as Stendhal said, is a promise of happiness. We love, as Plato saw, what we do not possess. Aesthetic pleasure is the pleasure of anticipation, and therefore of imagination, not of accomplishment. The judgment of taste is prospective, not retrospective; the beginning, the middle, but never the end of criticism. If you really feel you have exhausted a work, you are bound to be disappointed. A piece that has no more surprises left—a piece you really feel you know "inside and out"—has no more claim on you. You may still call it beautiful because it once gave you the pleasure of its promise or because you think that it may have something to give to someone else. But it will have lost its hold on you. Beauty beckons.

What you come to see as a result of such beckoning you come to see for yourself. Odysseus had to listen to the sirens' song on his own, not through the ears of one of his sailors. I can talk to you forever—or close to it—about Socrates, Proust, *The Magic Mountain*, *Pale Fire*, Wagner's *Ring*, *Don Giovanni*, *Los Caprichos*, *St. Elsewhere*, or *Frasier*, but even if you learn my account perfectly, it

will never be yours unless you work it out for yourself, directly interacting with the work.

An aesthetic feature cannot be reproduced unless the whole work whose feature it is is itself reproduced. Unlike some of the endless philosophical conversations of Socrates in Plato's dialogues, the endless philosophical disquisitions of Naphta and Settembrini in *The Magic Mountain* cannot be detached from the novel and appreciated for what they are because they are what they are only within the novel itself. That is another way of saying that the more we love it for itself, the more we know it in itself, in its own particularity. That is the only truth in Matthew Arnold's formula that the object of criticism is "to see the object as in itself it really is." The point has nothing to do with objectivity or reality: it has everything to do with individuality. Aesthetic features are so specific that they only belong to one work. That's what it means to say that it is not any sexual tension that makes *Frasier* delectable, but "the particular" tension that binds Niles and Daphne to one another—a tension you have to see for yourself, although of course there is much more to it than meets the eye.

I am afraid that my description of the particularity of aesthetic pleasure may have left you with an image of Odysseus tied to his mast, isolated from his deaf comrades, listening to the sirens, who make the only sound in that isolated world. Each one of us comes to each work alone, drawing a line between ourselves and the work on one side and the rest of the world on the other. Harold Bloom sometimes seems to have such an image in mind:

The reception of aesthetic power enables us to learn how to talk to ourselves and how to endure ourselves. The true use of Shakespeare or of Cervantes, of Homer or of Dante, of Chaucer or of Rabelais, is to augment one's own growing inner self. Reading deeply in the Canon will not make one a better or a worse person, a

more useful or more harmful citizen. The mind's dialogue with itself is not primarily a social reality. All that the Western Canon can bring one is the proper use of one's own solitude, that solitude whose final form is one's confrontation with one's own mortality.

Aesthetic power has nothing to do with citizenship and morality in any art. But must we think, therefore, that art requires that sort of isolation? Must we contrast the public and the private so starkly that we can only choose between society as a whole and the single individual? Earlier, I rejected Kant's view that the judgment of taste demands that everyone agree with it; I still denied that this was subjectivism. For when I say that *The Magic Mountain* is beautiful, that my life would be more worthwhile if it were to include it, I also say that the lives of some at least of the people I care for would be more worthwhile on its account. And, further, I say that there are people I don't know, whose lives are made more worthwhile by that book, and that I would care for them if I knew them. To find *The Magic Mountain* beautiful is to imagine that the novel is the focus of a community to which I want to belong, a community I want partially to form by my interpretation of the work and by whose views I want in turn to be formed. That is certainly not society as a whole—no one would want the whole world to like the same things even if that were possible. Its concerns are not social but personal, something between the strictly private and the fully public. Beauty requires communication. Harold Bloom describes a solitary encounter, but like everyone who is in love with a book or a picture, he can't wait to tell us about it. In telling us about it, he participates in a community he is in the very process of creating. And those who are moved by his sense of the beautiful will respond in turn, in a never-ending conversation.

The conversation is never-ending partly because beauty, as I said, is a promise, an anticipation, a hope as yet unfulfilled. To find

something beautiful is, precisely, not yet to have finished with it, to think it has something further to offer. But also because the more we come to know the beautiful thing itself, the more we come to know other things as well. Bloom talks of reading “deeply”: I distrust that word, with its suggestion that there is a rock-bottom. Think instead of reading, or looking, or listening, as a broadening of vision. The better you come to know something you love in itself, the better you understand how it differs from everything else, how it does something that has never been done before. But the better you understand that, the more other things you need to know in order to compare them to what you love and to distinguish it from them. And the better you know those things, the more likely you are to find that some of them, too, are beautiful, which will start you all over again in an ever-widening circle of new communities and new things to say. It is a dangerous game, pursuing the beautiful. You may never be able to stop.

Kant is famous for believing that you must never break a promise, whatever the consequences. Beauty has no such compunctions. Like everything that beckons, beauty is risky and dangerous. It may disappoint and hurt. Worse, it may cause harm by fulfilling its promise. I may find beautiful what others consider disgusting and ugly; I may be tempted to find beauty in something about which I am myself of two minds; or I may just have made the wrong choice. Spending time with such a thing, with other things like it, with other people who like it as well will have an effect on me which I cannot predict in advance. Once that effect is in place, I may have changed into someone I would not have wanted to be before I began. But I may now no longer be able to see that what I am, perhaps, is perverted. How can I tell if I have followed the right course? Which standards should I apply to myself? Those I accepted when I believed, as I once did, that television is vulgar, disgusting, commercial, and boring, or those that now make Homicide a worthy

competitor to Ian McEwan? Another hour with the scathing social satire of *Los Caprichos* or a look at the searing sarcasm of Garry Shandling?

That is another reason why Platonists have always feared the new and transgressive. Plato, of course, was always a step ahead of his followers. He wrote of “the ancient quarrel between poetry and philosophy” precisely to mask the fact that philosophy did not even exist until he composed *The Republic*, where he first announces the quarrel, and that it was he who was on the side of the new and against the traditional. But his brilliant move has made his adherents think of themselves as protectors of tradition against perverse innovation. Compared to Milton and Shakespeare, Coleridge wrote,

I will run the risk of asserting that where the reading of novels prevails as a habit, it occasions in time the entire destruction of the powers of the mind: it is such an utter loss to the reader, that it is not so much to be called pass-time as kill-time. It...provokes no improvement of the intellect, but fills the mind with a mawkish and morbid sensibility, which is directly hostile to the cultivation, invigoration, and enlargement of the nobler powers of the understanding.

But as to Shakespeare himself, that is how Henry Prynne thought of the typical audience of Elizabethan theater:

*Adulterers, Adulteresses, Whore-masters, Whores,  
Bawdes, Panders, Ruffians, Roarers, Drunkards,  
Prodigals, Cheaters, idle, infamous, base, profane,  
and godless persons, who hate all grace, all goodness,  
and make a mock of piety.*

Aesthetic and moral terms are often used together in denouncing arts that are new, transgressive, or popular. But the moral dangers of art are small, and so are its benefits. That is not

because the arts do not address situations of moral significance. But to derive a general lesson from those situations is to stop much too soon, before you see them in their full particularity; and once you do, you will not be able to use them. The mark of great works, in the end, may be the mark Nietzsche once attributed to great human beings: "One misunderstands [them]," he wrote, "if one views them from the miserable perspective of some public use. That one cannot put them to any use, that in itself may belong to greatness." If you believe, as I heard someone say in all seriousness, that Agamemnon's anguish at having to butcher his daughter on the altar of Artemis so that the Greek fleet can set sail in Euripides' *Iphigeneia in Aulis* illuminated her anguish over whether to attend a faculty meeting or her daughter's school play, then you stopped too early and learnt too little from tragedy. And if you learn more, you will learn something too special and also too alien to apply to your everyday life. You will have become more complex, subtle, nuanced, unusual, individual, more open to different ways of thinking and feeling – but certainly not, for those reasons, a better mother. Perhaps you will even be, just for those reasons, worse on that front. Moral behavior requires perceiving the ways in which people are like one another and deserve to be treated the same. Aesthetic perception aims to discern difference, to acknowledge individuality, to recognize what has never before been accomplished, and perhaps to produce it. As the fifth of A.J. Verdelle's *Six Prayers*, the one she calls "For Culture," says, "May we never have a universal language. May the lilt and trip of sister lands and brother lexicons cause us to lean forward, to cup our ears, to strain to understand."

Beauty leads further into the individual features of things at the same time that it requires a constant comparison of each individual with everything else. It is only by seeing exactly how a work is close enough to the conventions of its time to be recognizable as a work in the first place that we can begin to see how it is also

distant enough to stand on its own and to invite further interpretation in order to be seen for what it is. To stand on its own, it must have a discernible structure, a narrative unity that gives it its own character among the many things it resembles. Whatever does something that has never been done before also has its own unmistakable arrangement. That – for these two really are one – is what makes it an individual.

It is possible that spending a life, or part of a life, in the pursuit of beauty – even if only to find it, not to produce it – gives that life a beauty of its own. For in the end the standard by which I can judge whether my choices of what to pursue were the right ones or not is whether they turned me into an individual in my own right. That is a question of style. If there is coherence in my aesthetical choices, in the objects I like, in the groups I belong to, in my reasons for choosing as I do, then I have managed to put things together in my own manner and form. I have developed, out of the things I have loved, my own style, a new way of doing things – and that is the only truth in Oscar Wilde's subversion of Arnold: "the primary aim of the critic," he wrote, "is to see the object as in itself it really is not... To the critic, the work of art is simply a suggestion for a new work of his own, that need not necessarily bear any obvious resemblance to the thing it criticizes." Consider "the new work" not as a single work of criticism, but as the self we become as a result of all the works we admire and criticize, and Wilde – who thought his life was his greatest work of art – turns out to be less wild than he has seemed.

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