

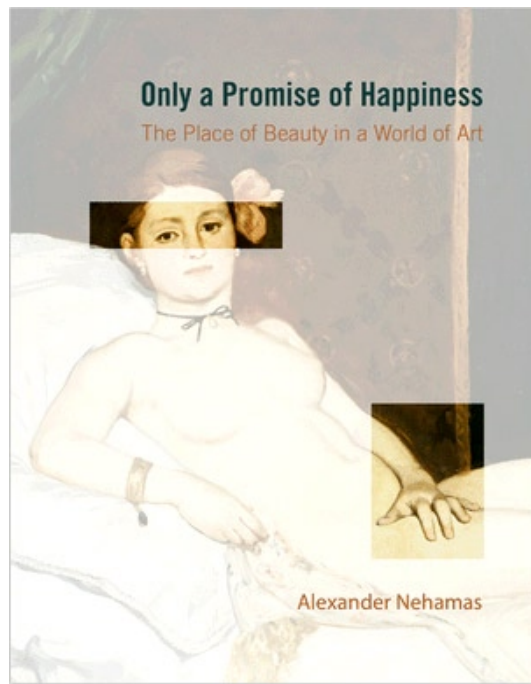
Book Review

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

by Alexander Nehamas (Princeton: Princeton University Press 2007)

reviewed by Jill Marsden (University of Bolton)

As Diotima acknowledges in Plato's *Symposium*, there is something exorbitant about our craving for beauty. To be initiated into knowledge of Eros, the true follower of this subject must begin in his youth with the pursuit of physical beauty in its carnal form, attaining with the intensity of his ardor, ever more surprising insights into beauty's metamorphic power. With desire at the threshold, the philosophical quest is consecrated as an erotic drive, a longing that ever reaches beyond itself. It is precisely this 'risky language of passion' (2) which Alexander Nehamas finds lacking in twentieth century discussions of art. In *Only a Promise of Happiness: The Place of Beauty in a World of Art*, he remarks:



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. (10)

The broad thesis of his book is that the Platonic idea that beauty is the object of love has been extinguished from modern conceptions of art and aesthetics, a gesture which represents both a change in artistic preoccupations in the twentieth century and a more general philosophical suspicion of passion, pleasure and desire. The concept of the 'aesthetic' which features prominently in this argument is derived from Kant's *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (1790) which isolates the judgment of the beautiful from all the sensual, practical and ethical issues so central to Platonic thought. Much hinges for Nehamas's thesis—and for the tradition he seeks to challenge—

on how this Kantian legacy is to be understood.

In marking out a domain for the autonomy of aesthetic reflective judgment in the *Third Critique*, Kant introduces the contentious notion of a *pure* judgment of taste, a liking for the beautiful which seemingly carries with it no admixture of self-interest or personal investment in the object so judged. According to Nehamas, Kant's notion of disinterestedness is to be understood as pleasure bereft of desire: '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' (3). Sketching a lineage from Kant to early Modernism, Nehamas highlights the suppression of rapturous discourse in accounts of beauty. Citing Schopenhauer's idiosyncratic identification of Kantian aesthetic judgment with the cessation of worldly desire, he notes how in 'disinterested' contemplation of art the unhappy slave of the passions wins liberation from the torture wheel of endless craving and thereby transcends all worldly involvements ('the penal servitude of willing'). It is perhaps a short step from this view of art as a palliative for desire to the 'anemic' conceptions of the aesthetic that Nehamas identifies and sets out to challenge in late modernity.

In charting his trajectory thus it is possible that Nehamas may be influenced by Nietzsche's allusions to Schopenhauer and Kant in *On the Genealogy of Morals* (1887). As Nietzsche observes, 'Schopenhauer made use of the Kantian version of the aesthetic problem—although he certainly did not view it with Kantian eyes' (GM III, §6). Not without irony, Nietzsche notes that Schopenhauer interpreted the term 'without interest' in an extremely personal way, seeking out the kind of 'disinterested' aesthetic experience that would afford a glancing respite from the 'vile urgency of the will' (GM III, §6). So tormented by his libidinal proclivities that even a plausible still life of edible objects was a taunting prospect, Schopenhauer championed a notion of the aesthetic that was tantamount to the staunching of desire. The more immediately plausible position of the sensualist provides a sharp counterpoint. In this context, Nietzsche writes that the happily constituted Stendhal saw beauty as '*la promesse de bonheur*' precisely because it *arouses the will* (GM III, §6). In this section of the *Genealogy*, Nietzsche takes a mischievous delight in contrasting Stendhal with Kant, noting that 'under the spell of beauty' our Kantian aestheticians 'can even view undraped female statues "without interest"' (GM III, §6). His mockery notwithstanding, Nietzsche remarks that this is not the place to debate whether or not Kant's attribution of impersonality and universality to aesthetic experience is mistaken, thus reserving in principle the possibility that the Kantian view might yet be upheld.

It is notable that Nietzsche's rhetorical strategy in this essay ('Who is right: Kant or Stendhal?') has echoes in the opening section of *Only a Promise of Happiness*, 'Plato or Schopenhauer?' From the outset, Nehamas works to vindicate the Platonic view by means of an extended meditation on the Stendhalian notion of promise:

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 . . . inseparable from the judgment

of beauty. (9)

The accent in Nehamas' account is on the anticipation of happiness contained in the attraction we experience. For Stendhal, love is as much about projection as perception. It is part of the mesmerizing power of love that we are impelled beyond what we can reasonably imagine in the first flush of excitement. Since 'beauty mobilizes the emotions and always looks to the future' (68) our voyage into the realm of the beautiful bears with it a hope that our life will be endlessly enriched. In this way, desire necessarily exceeds understanding: 'we can be attracted to things of which we are not fully aware' (71). Once again, the thirst for beauty exhibits an exorbitant migration beyond the dictates of sense, undermining the certainties of the 'self' it holds captive.

Such extravagant notions are hotly contested by the contemporary aesthetician. According to Nehamas, 'the position of judgment in criticism is in real conflict with the place of beauty in art' (15). In making this claim he seeks to engage with those philosophers in the Analytical tradition who have downplayed the role of beauty in their considerations of art. Nehamas names Clive Bell, R. C. Collingwood and Arthur Danto, amongst others, as figures who have driven a wedge between beauty and aesthetic value. More polemically Nehamas presents a picture of a general community of philosophical aestheticians who are frightening in their classificatory zeal: their 'passion for ranking' and 'fervor for verdicts' has 'deformed our attitude to the arts' (137). Accordingly, the reader is introduced to a world in which 'aesthetic features' are listed as 'stock components in text-books' (99), where it is an 'institutional commonplace' to regard certain terms as 'aesthetic' (49) and for which it is 'almost an article of faith that the end of our interaction with the arts comes when we are in a position to make a judgment of taste' (15). In this characterization the philosopher is presented as less a judge than an auctioneer, passing 'verdicts' on works of art in order to hand them on to a more interested party.

No less controversially, this aesthetic community is presented as the privileged source of evaluations and interpretations which are more sophisticated than the testimony of direct and immediate experience. This prompts Nehamas to conclude that:

If the beauty of things strikes us as soon as we are exposed to them, beauty can't be the same as the value that criticism is supposed to determine through the interpretations it offers. (16)

It would be unfair to suggest that this characterization of his opponents presents them as more forward-looking than those who perceive beauty at a stroke. To clarify, we must note a second set of implied interlocutors in Nehamas's text, the proponents of high Modernism for whom the difficult labors of the intellect are superior to the appeal of the senses: 'genuine value is not obvious pleasure: the obvious is common' (29). Part of Nehamas' more democratic agenda is to insist on the value of popular art forms and the cultural legibility of the appeal of beauty. However, this is not to imply that he subscribes to the view that unrestrained liking for the beautiful is

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brutally ‘instinctual’ or incompatible with further reflection. In fact, the reverse is true:

The experience of beauty is inseparable from interpretation, and just as beauty always promises more than it has given so far, so interpretation, the effort to understand what it promises, is further work in progress. (105)

In defiance of these real or imagined dogmatists Nehamas asserts that there can be no impetus to forestall or curtail our acquaintance with the objects of our desire. His frank and enthusiastic accounts of attraction for beautiful things, his untroubled adoption of the male gaze and his candid exploration of his pleasure responses to paintings of the female nude underscore his thesis that the discourse of beauty is a tale of desire: ‘Beauty beckons as love impels. The art we love is art we don’t yet fully understand’ (76). Indeed, the author’s detailed account of his fascination for Manet’s *Olympia*—a work which defies all his attempts to penetrate its enigma—succeeds in communicating a contagious excitement, reminding the reader that aesthetic judgments are so often suitors for our agreement whether they succeed in eliciting our assent or not.

The elusive nature of beauty, its inexplicable power and mute implacability render the beholder humbled in his or her vain attempts to articulate its force. For Kant the reason we cannot explain why we find something beautiful is that the judgment of taste lacks the conditions of determinate judgment. Nehamas’s reading of this Kantian position takes a more tenuous line:

.. the reason we can’t fully explain either to others or to ourselves why we find something beautiful is that the judgment of taste is simply not a *conclusion* at all. (75)

This slightly odd nuance is illuminated when placed in the context of the aforementioned institution of philosophical aesthetics. It is for others to decide whether this account of current practice is representative of the field but the weakness of this argument cannot be so easily concealed. A disinterested judgment is not equivalent to a discontinuous one. Whilst disinterested liking may sound inherently contradictory, Kant’s insistence on the impersonality of our judgment serves to emphasize the estranging effect of beauty, its enchanting, entrancing power. Satisfaction without interest is a prescription against *personal* desire. Our inability to account for our experience of beauty in rational or practical terms is indicative of a potential transpersonality. Perhaps what goes by the name of beauty is the uncanny magnetism which defeats all worldly explanations that the subject could adduce. The impersonality of this liking is not a marker of its objectivity but rather its exorbitance. What Kant presents us with is a kind of immanent transcendence. The judgment of beauty is one that characteristically reinforces a ‘lingering’ [*weilen*] (§ 12), a liking which ‘carries with it directly a feeling of life’s being furthered, and hence is compatible with charms and an imagination at play’ (§ 23). The ‘forward-looking element’ of Nehamas’s account is more than hinted at here. Wonder ensues when excitement is registered yet understanding withheld.

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In this regard, Nietzsche's own characterization of liking for the beautiful in terms of the transpersonality of libidinal drives (the 'Apollinian') is more Kantian in spirit than it might initially seem. In other words, we may question whether in the final reckoning Nietzsche actually endorses the Stendhalian position. That this prospect remains unavailable to Nehamas is a consequence of his essentially humanist conception of desire. Whilst Manet's rejection of the conventions of beauty may have been scandalous in its day, his *Olympia* is not a difficult painting to adore. It would be harder for Nehamas to advance his Stendhalian thesis in relation to more contemporary, more controversial art works, ones which test the bounds of rational, liberal values. Whilst keen to acknowledge that in the pursuit of beauty there is 'an element of ineliminable risk' (133) this is not to do justice to the terrible pull of bad gravity, our liking for what will surely undo us.

In his concern to reject a notion of the 'aesthetic' which he reads as formalist, dispassionate and potentially elitist Nehamas jettisons the notion that art might be world-disclosing:

[B]eauty .. is part of the everyday world of purpose and desire, history and contingency, subjectivity and incompleteness. That is the only world there is, and nothing, not even the highest of the high arts, can move beyond it. (35)

Such a prosaic conclusion is in conflict with the ambition of the work and also with the spirit of Stendhal, so famous for his accounts of the transfiguring power of love. If Nehamas is to be taken at his word, it is not obvious why this is a book about the place of beauty in a 'world' of art if, for him, there is nothing distinctive about creative production as such. As a disinterested aesthetics ultimately attests, it is by virtue of its gratuitousness that art confounds our view of the everyday world of purpose and desire. The promise of happiness is an arc of expectation reaching into the future, an optimism charged with the weight of conviction and the frailty of prayer. Perhaps this is simply to underline the point—which is also Plato's—that Eros tends to overreach its boundaries.

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