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Beauty Revisited: Interview with Alexander Nehamas

KHŌREIN: The cover of your seminal book "Only a Promise of Happiness: The Place of Beauty in a World of Art" focuses on two details of Victorine Meurent – the model in Manet's *Olympia* – the eyes and the hand covering her intimate parts. Was this your choice of how to illustrate the book that deals with the topic of beauty or to emphasize the "complex affair" you have with this painting? Perhaps both?

ALEXANDER NEHAMAS: The idea for that wonderful cover, I confess, was not mine but the art editor's. I was delighted with it because it captures my idea that in love and beauty the "high" and the "low," the spiritual and the bodily, are very closely, perhaps inextricably, connected with each other. It combines in one the "heavenly" and the "earthly" versions of Aphrodite, the goddess of love, of Plato's *Symposium*. It reflects both my own relationship to Manet's painting and my understanding of love and beauty as I present it in my book.

KH: Manet is regarded as one of the pillars of Modernity in visual arts. In your book, you cite a famous statement by the American painter Barnett Newman from 1948, "the impulse of modern art was to destroy beauty." Would you say it succeeded?

AN: The short answer is "No." Modernism destroyed a *conception* of beauty that took it to be immediately obvious and limited to the appearance, not the true nature, of things—a sort of "rhetorical" trick, as the critic Dave Hickey put it, to attract its audience to its often controversial, if not "litigious or neurotic," content, which they might well have ignored otherwise. Hickey rejected modernism because he thought that it had forsaken beauty. I think, by contrast, that Modernism showed, perhaps inadvertently, that beauty is not always immediately apparent and not only a matter of seeing. It is by no means as Bellini or perhaps

Bouguereau made it seem. It can require growing familiarity, effort, and understanding—in a word, interpretation—in order to emerge. If I am right to think that beauty is the object of love and that we can't love what we don't find beautiful, then, to the extent that a modernist work is loved it is to that extent beautiful. Think of beauty as what makes you want to devote a part of your life to a particular work, something that draws you to it with a promise that things will be well with you if do, and you no longer have to give up either Modernism or beauty.

KH: You write that "the art we love is art we don't yet fully understand," which raises many questions about the role of interpretation and its entanglement with beauty. How do you see this interdependence?

AN: You are right, it raises many questions, not all of which I can answer. To love a work of art (or, for that matter, a person) is to want to engage actively with it, to interrogate it, to understand what about it accounts for its effect on you. What draws you to it is the promise it makes, and the hope it generates, that what you will come to understand will be as beautiful as what you have already come to know about it. None of that is possible with something that you fully understand. It is deeply ironic that success—full understanding—signals the end of our active engagement. It seems almost as if love, when it achieves its aim, cancels itself.

We must be careful here. The fact is that you can never fully understand *anything,* since everything has indefinitely many features of its own and even more relationships to everything else. What usually happens is that as you get to know something better you may reach a point where the effort to learn more about it becomes too costly in comparison to what you are likely to learn. That's what happened when I went back to Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain*, which I had read several times before. I am sure I would have seen new things in it but, having already engaged so extensively with it, I also felt (perhaps wrongly) that they would not be important enough to justify the effort I would have to make to see them.

But that doesn't mean that I am now indifferent to it. As Aristotle says about old friends with whom you are no longer directly involved, you still love them because of your history together, because of what you have both become through your friendship. You still feel affection, concern, and respect for them but you no longer have the desire to interact with them as passionately as you once did.

I once felt about Manet's *Olympia* as I felt about *The Magic Mountain*. I thought there was nothing more I could get out of it, and it gradually became less important to me. But when I saw the painting again recently, I noticed something new: as she lies on her bed, Olympia is holding the edge of a silk coverlet, prompting the question, is she about to lift it and cover her naked body or has she just pulled it down, revealing it? And, all of a sudden, the painting came alive again and our "complex affair" was rekindled. (I still don't know the answer.)

KH: In your work you acknowledge the importance of Arthur Danto: he considered beauty only one among many aesthetic qualities in art. And although not crucial, beauty for Danto had an important role if its presence made a difference to the meaning of an artwork. Do you find aesthetic pleasure in looking for meaning in art and not just in looking at art as it stands before us?

AN: "Looking at art as it stands before us" seems to me one of the least productive and satisfying ways of interacting with a work of art. When you are attracted to something, you want to understand the source of the attraction, you want to see exactly how the work produces that reaction in you—that is, you want to interpret it. Interpretation, as I see it, is the effort to determine as precisely as possible *what* the work is that attracts you and the better you come to know it the better you come to understand the features that draw you to it. If beauty is only a promise of happiness, then, as long as you find something beautiful, you will keep looking for an account of its beauty that you don't yet have. And, as Plato said, what makes something beautiful must be itself beautiful. Beauty and meaning and intimately interrelated. When I ask what an element of a work means, I want an answer that will show why it is as it is, how it supports and is supported by the work's other elements, and how it contributes to my delight.

KH: Of all the possible definitions of beauty, you paraphrase Stendhal's: *la beauté n'est que la promesse du bonheur*.

AN: My use of Stendhal's phrase is not meant as an explication of his view. It is what the phrase suggests rather than what Stendhal may have taken it to suggest that I wanted to emphasize. Whether or not he would have agreed with my interpretation, the idea of beauty as only a promise of happiness, as an incitement to continue to interact with the beautiful

object rather than as an opportunity for a passive (and, in more than one sense, a dumb) contemplation has proved, to me at least, profoundly helpful.

KH: Moreover, the conception of beauty as "the promise of happiness" binds strongly the idea of beauty to the idea of a promise. The latter term belongs to the register of belief, trust, faith and even to what Plato refers to as *doxa*, or even more precisely, *pistis*. Can beauty go beyond the realm of opinion?

AN: If to say that promise belongs to the register of belief is to say that we can never be certain that the promise a work issues will be fulfilled, then I agree that beauty and certainty don't go together. Plato thought that beauty does lead to certainty because he considered that the "ascent" of beauty he describes in the *Symposium* ends with a revelation of the Form of Beauty, the one and only explanation of the beauty of everything else. But I don't think that the search for beauty has a definite end—interpretation is interminable—nor do I believe that everything that is beautiful is beautiful for the same reason. In fact, as I claim in my book, I take beauty to be a symbol of uncertainty. At that point, though I owe a huge debt to Plato, I take a different route.

KH: You agree with Collingwood that beauty is connected with eros. However, as opposed to him, you explain that eros can be directed at art. What kind of "libidinal economy" lies in your response to art?

AN: We need to separate the erotic from the sexual. Eros, which is produced by beauty, is the desire to spend part of your life—sometimes more, sometime less—with a particular object or person so that you can get to know it better and submit to its influence, perhaps changing yourself as a result. When the object in question is a person, eros often (though not always—not, say, in many cases of friendship) involves sexual desire. When it is a work of art, sexuality is not directly involved: the work is not itself an object of sexual interest (though its content may be). The reason is not that there are, as some believe, different kinds of love; the reason is that love is prompted by different kinds of things.

KH: Do you think that beauty can be considered separately from art and love? Or even, from aesthetics? What could be the "je-ne-sais-quoi"

or "presque-rien" (as Vladimir Jankélévitch says) that would be specific exclusively to beauty?

AN: I believe that beauty is essentially connected to art and love—in fact, the really essential connection is with love: art simply consists of objects that many people find beautiful and on account of which they love them. But we need to distinguish between beauty, so to speak, "in itself" and what people actually find beautiful. It is the latter that I am concerned with: with the question what it is *to find something beautiful,* not with the question what beauty is. The answer to the latter question, as far I am concerned, is "the object of love." That is, I don't think that there are any structural features that are common to all beautiful objects and explain why they are beautiful. Features like *symmetry* can only take us so far because what counts as symmetry is not the same in every case. Renaissance paintings, for example, generally rely on geometrical symmetry according to the laws of perspective; but the axis of symmetry of earlier works, like Duccio's or Cimabue's, depends on the relative size of the depicted figures, the more important ones, like the Madonna and the Child, being much larger than, say, angels or donors. Similarly, some faces that have been very much admired, Loren Hutton's for example, are anything but classically symmetrical. The "presque-rien" that is exclusive to beauty is love: it is almost nothing because, however obvious the beauty of an object is to me and however passionate I may be about it, its beauty may be quite imperceptible to, and excite no passion at all in, you. What is everything to one person may be nothing to another.

KH: How might we distinguish architecture from art, such as painting?

AN: All the arts are important to us and all of us—those of us at least who are not in constant danger and who have enough to eat—are in one way or another exposed to them. We live *with* them but, in contrast to architecture, we don't live *in* them, nor do they surround us in the literal sense in which an urban landscape or a particular building we happen to be in creates an environment within which we move, within which we in fact live. That, to me, suggests that architecture has certain obligations toward its "audience" that the other arts either lack altogether or have to a much lesser extent. It is, for example, a good thing for some paintings or literary works to be disturbing, to raise issues that make their audience

uncomfortable. I wonder, though, whether that is a legitimate purpose in architecture.

KH: Keeping in mind the issue of function or purpose, do you think that the relationship the observer has towards architectural objects is radically different than, say, towards sculpture?

AN: The practical dimension of architecture certainly influences our relationship to it in ways that are not that common in the other arts. A beautiful building may actually be a failure in terms of its function. I am thinking, for example, of Frank Gehry's Science Library for Princeton University. It is an impressive building, in several ways typical of Gehry—several surfaces that seem not to fit perfectly with one another but ultimately constitute a unified whole, serious contrast among the materials of which it consists, multi-directional planes and other shapes that seem to want to fly away but are, nonetheless, solidly held together. It is, in my opinion, a beautiful building, almost sculptural in its complexity (as Gehry's buildings often are). But once you get inside, you are instantly lost. There is no sense of direction, no way to know where you should go after entering; the building pulls you this way and that at the same time, producing a sense of bewilderment that stops you from moving. In that respect, it is a significant failure.

That dissonance between the aesthetic and the practical certainly affects our relationship with architectural objects in a way that is absent, or at least much less pronounced, in our reactions to the other arts. At the same time, architecture is much more difficult to recontextualize than the other arts. We can place a painting in different rooms, different buildings, even different countries; we can show it next to all sorts of different works, accentuating some of its features and diverting attention from others. That may make a serious difference of how we react to the painting. But buildings can't be moved, and their context is more or less given. There is a short street in Athens, Greece, on which there are five apartment building, each designed in a different decade, and none of them seems, so to speak, aware of its neighbors. Some of the building are attractive, others are not. But the street as a whole is a failure, disorganized and irrational. And we can do little about it, other than tearing it down and starting again. Again, though, if we find an architectural object beautiful, our reaction to it, in my opinion, is not different in kind from our reaction to the other arts.

KH: Would you say that in architecture, the figure of the author or creative subjectivity vanishes?

AN: I am not sure that either the figure of the author or of creative subjectivity *is* vanishing in architecture—certainly not in connection with successful architects. We do speak of Adamite or Palladian buildings, of Mies van der Rohe or Marcel Breuer, of Michael Graves or Antonio Gaudí, as we speak of Impressionism or Baroque, of Giotto or Caravaggio, and so on. The difference, I think, is that we are generally exposed to the best of painting in our museums, galleries, and so on whereas there is no such vetting process for the buildings around us. For that reason, we are exposed to many more mediocre or inferior buildings, which, not having an arresting style, are simply non-descript and seem to be designed either by committee or by no one in particular. But the same is true of most of the paintings and the novels that have ever been created—it's just that we are not as insistently and unavoidably exposed to them. If you consider a medium like television, whose works are much more generally available than painting, you will be faced with the very same situation: most of them are non-descript, unable to express a unified vision, and also apparently created either by committee or by no one in particular. In other words, it is not architecture itself that eliminates the figure of the author but *bad* or *mediocre* architecture that does so. And the same is true of the other arts, as long as we are not exposed, by and large, to their better instances.

KH: You argue that the judgment of beauty or taste has a social dimension, but only on a personal level that lies between the private and public spheres. Could you elaborate on this claim?

AN: If we think of the private as what affects yourself only and the public as what affects everyone, the personal affects both yourself and a circle of others. But that circle is never as broad as the range of the public. When we find something beautiful, we are moved to share our feelings, and our reasons for them, with others—we are in "a rush to converse," as Dave Hickey once put it. We want others to share our view (although they may also convince us to abandon it) but, contrary to Kant's influential approach, we do not *everyone* to do so. The art we love unites us with some people and separates us from others: it confirms some of our friendships and undermines others, and it also creates new ones. It creates

a community but it neither envisages or wants that community to extend universally. My personal taste distinguishes me from my circle, my circle's taste distinguishes us from many others, and I belong to many circles, some which do and some of which do not overlap.

KH: One perspective of beauty, at least since Kant, is to understand it as disinterested and disconnected from everyday desires. Kant himself, however, allows that art, as well as nature, provokes both social and moral interest in beauty. You tackle these issues and criticize Schopenhauer's radicalization of disinterestedness. In which sense can we speak about the "autonomy" of art?

AN: I am as suspicious of the isolation of beauty and art from our everyday desires as I am of their subjugation to our moral concerns. When we find something beautiful, we are committed to making it part of our life. Beauty, therefore, truly affects our life's shape. It leads us to new places, new people, new experiences—places, people, and experiences that we would not have known without it. For Plato, beauty (he had little to say about *art*), inevitably leads to virtue. I am not so sure. The promise of beauty is not a guarantee—that is part of the reason I connect it with uncertainty. Although it promises happiness, it often delivers disappointment. If we think of our relationship with art not as the passive contemplation I mentioned above but as an active investigation, a continuing involvement with it, then it is clear that it affects the life it becomes a part of. How exactly it affects it, however, necessarily differs from one case to another. While our moral and political values aspire to connect us with everyone else, aesthetic values help to differentiate us from one another. Art is autonomous not because it is distinct from *life* but because it is a distinct *part of life*. Aesthetic reasons are *sui generis* but a beautiful work, like a beautiful person, can still have unacceptable practical or ethical effects on a life and even undermine its overall value.

KH: Throughout the book, you make connections between the notions of beauty and value. How are evaluation and worth related to beauty? Further, is evaluation to be understood as an onto-genetic prerequisite of beauty? Is beauty intrinsically connected with value and worth?

AN: Beauty is intimately connected with value, it *is* a value. It is something, especially if we agree that appreciating it is not, as we have said,

a passive affair but an active pursuit, to which we devote considerable parts of our life through interpretation and the various engagements interpretation requires—examination of the beautiful work, of course, but also the need, if be, to travel to see it and to see other works with which it is related, to meet people with whom we can discuss it (and perhaps to avoid others with whom we can't). Interpretation, in short, presupposes that its object is valuable, though perhaps not always positively. We sometimes interpret in order to show that something does not deserve our attention. But that is as it should be: the ugly belongs to aesthetics. What doesn't, what really is the negation of beauty is not the ugly but the non-descript, what we don't notice at all. It is the same with love, whose opposite is not hatred but indifference, the absence of salience. Beauty, love, and value—positive or negative—form an essential nexus. They either come altogether or not at all.

KH: You seem to insist on the fact that when we find an object or a person beautiful, we necessarily commit ourselves to it – we devote our time and our attention to it, we engage deeply and durably with it in active pursuit. Yet, what about things we find beautiful just in passing? Beauty whose specificity escapes us, which we cannot fully articulate? Is there beauty in ephemeral objects or phenomena? Is there something we might call "beauty of the moment?"

AN: Two things. First, love and beauty come in degrees. I can say that I love both Proust and whodunits but my relationship to Proust is one that has lasted a lifetime while no whodunit has occupied me longer than a few hours or days. So, the time and attention I devote to Proust are vast compared to how long I remain focused on a mystery novel. The same holds true of my relationships with people: some last a lifetime, others are much shorter. But I believe they are all on one and the same continuum: we can't identify love only with its greatest cases just as we can't identify, say, the novel only with the very, very, very few great novels with which we are familiar. Yes, there is what you call "beauty of the moment" but every moment has some duration, during which the relationship I am trying to describe obtains: a commitment doesn't have to be lifelong in order to qualify as love.

Second, there are many cases where something strikes us as beautiful but, for all sorts of different reasons, we decline to pursue it. I may not

approach someone I find beautiful because I suspect that they will not enjoy it or because doing so might hurt someone else I love or because I am shy or because I suspect that they may be in some way or other dangerous for me. I may not approach a work of art because of time constraints or because I feel that doing so will take me away from others with which I want to interact in more detail or even because of moral qualms I may have regarding it. These too may be "beauties of the moment:" I recognize their attraction but, for some particular reason, I resist them.

In any case, the specificity of beauty always escapes us—at the beginning. That is why we want to commit ourselves to the beautiful object: to *articulate* what it is that we find beautiful in it. It is very likely, therefore, that the beauty that we can't articulate is either the beauty of something that we have only begun to interact with or the beauty of something that we decide to stay away from—a beauty that might have become articulate had we stayed with it instead.

KH: By revisiting the dilemmas in history of aesthetics and following the difference between Kant, Schopenhauer and Plato, but also Nietzsche, you claim that art has more than a contemplative value, and in a certain sense that it has value in itself. Can you tell us more about this specific aesthetic value?

AN: There is a contrast between the values of science, morality and politics on the one hand and the values of art and beauty on the other. There is, of course, disagreement in science but its purpose is to reach a conclusion that is common to everyone: the goal is consensus, a general agreement. Similarly, the values of morality and politics depend on our similarities to one another—similarities that exist or that we want to encourage—and to the extent that they are correct they are binding on everyone. But the values of art and beauty emphasize our differences from one another. In the arts, differentiation is of the essence. The goal is to establish new ways of looking at things and new things to look at, new ways of representation that add to our repertoire without making our repertoire's past obsolete. The best way to learn Newtonian physics is to study the most recent textbook on the subject, not to go back to Newton's *Principia*. But the only way to learn what Manet was doing is to look at Manet's own paintings and to do so for oneself. Scientific, moral, and political thought is (or aspires to be) independent of the particular

individuals who engage in it, responsible only to the rational considerations that (we hope) are common to us all. But artistic accomplishment is essentially tied to the individuals whose accomplishment it is, whether as artists or critics. Art and beauty are valuable because they are emblems of the importance of developing our own personality, of perhaps accomplishing something with our life that differs significantly from what others have accomplished with theirs. Something that may allow us to stand apart, be noticed, and perhaps become an object of love in our own right.

Consider Descartes and Montaigne for a moment. Descartes begins his *Meditations* concretely, placing himself in a particular situation, at this desk, near his fireplace, and so on. But as the book continues the "I" that was individual in the beginning gradually speaks for everyone, it gradually becomes what all human beings have in common. Montaigne, by contrast, piles detail upon detail in his account of himself in the *Essays*, and the more we know about him, the more he turns out to be a specific individual, idiosyncratic and firmly located in a historical and social context. I believe that both are necessary if we are to understand ourselves better. Our similarities are crucially important. But so are our differences. Human beings are not ants, and art is one of our main tools for making something of ourselves that is truly our own and not merely a repetition of what others have already accomplished.

KH: How do you relate to other categories that were the subject of philosophical analysis in art, such as the *sublime* that was put forward by Edmund Burke and further developed, particularly concerning avant-garde art of the twentieth century, by Lyotard with his "aesthetic of sublime?"

AN: I am afraid I am bound to disappoint you on this question. I have serious doubts about the distinction between the beautiful and the sublime, especially as Burke, who understands it in explicitly gendered terms, presents it. I suspect that the sublime re-entered aesthetic thought in the twentieth century because people, having identified beauty with an object's immediate attractiveness, realized that, on that understanding, modern art is not beautiful. The sublime, which also spoke to the difficulty, distance, and demandingness of much of modern art, was then introduced as the alternative to beauty. But if we think of beauty as the object of love instead of as a set of specific visual features, we can see that everything that we want to say about the sublime can also be said in terms of the beautiful.

Matisse once wrote, "What I dream of is an art of balance, of purity and serenity devoid of troubling or depressing subject matter [...] a soothing, calming influence on the mind, rather like a good armchair which provides relaxation from physical fatigue." I am not sure that this is true of most of his own work but, no doubt, his words express what many people would identify as beauty's effect. Perhaps some art is like that. But it is also true that beauty can disturb, challenge, and, in the magnitude of its accomplishment, generate the awe that supposedly belongs only to the sublime.

The appreciation of art is not the work of a moment. It is the work of a lifetime. A lifetime whose shape and quality are as they are because of art, beauty, and love.

Interview conducted by Zoran Erić, Snežana Vesnić, Igor Cvejić, and Andrea Perunović.