

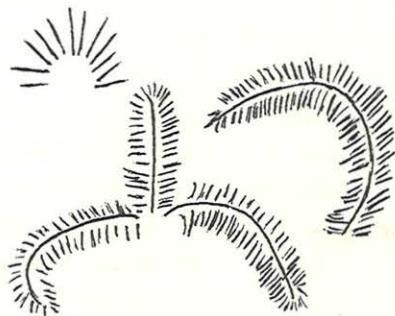
encountering something beautiful. One walks down a street and suddenly sees a redbud tree—its tiny heart-shaped leaves climbing out all along its branches like children who haven't yet learned the spatial rules for which parts of the playground they can run on. (Don't they know they should stay on the tips of the twigs?) It is as though one has just been beached, lifted out of one ontological state into another that is fragile and must be held onto lest one lose hold of the branch and fall back into the ocean. Like Odysseus, one feels inadequate to it, lurches awkwardly around it, saying odd things to the small leaves, wishing to sing to them a hymn or, finding oneself unable, wishing in apology to make a palinode. Perhaps like Dante watching Beatrice, one could make a sonnet and then a prose poem explaining the sonnet; or, like Leonardo looking at a violet, one could make a sketch, then another, then another; or like Lady Autumn, listening with amazement to a stanza Keats has just sung her, one could sit there patiently staring moment after moment, hour by hour. Homer was right: beauty is lifesaving (or life-creating as in Dante's title *La vita nuova*, or life-altering as in Rilke's imperative "You must change your life"). And Homer was right: beauty incites deliberation, the search for precedents. But what about the immortal, about which Homer may or may not have been right? If we look at modern examples of the

palinode for a missing precedent, does the plenitude and aspiration for truth stay stable, even if the metaphysical referent is in doubt?



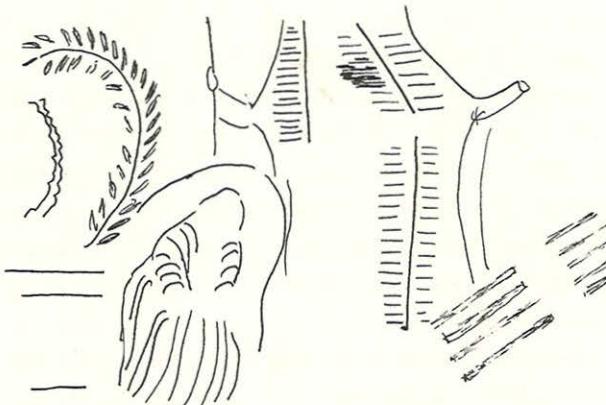
Matisse never hoped to save lives. But he repeatedly said that he wanted to make paintings so serenely beautiful that when one came upon them, suddenly all problems would subside. His paintings of Nice have for me this effect. My house, though austere inside, is full of windows banking onto a garden. The garden throws changing colors into the chaste rooms—lavenders, pinks, blues, and pools of green. One winter when I was bereft because my garden was underground, I put Matisse prints all over the walls—thirteen in a single room. All winter long I applied the paintings to my staring eyes, and now they are, in retrospect, one of the things that make my former disregard of palm trees so startling. The precedent behind each Nice painting is the frond of a palm; or, to be more precise, each Nice painting is a perfect cross between an anemone flower and a palm frond. The presence of the anemone I had always seen—in the mauve and red colors, the abrupt patches of black, in the petal-like tissue of curtains, slips, parasols, and tablecloths, in the small pools of color with sudden drop-offs at their edges. But I

completely missed what resided behind these surfaces, what Odysseus would have seen, the young slip of a palm springing into the light.



The signature of a palm is its striped light. Palm leaves stripe the light. The dyadic alternations of leaf and air make the frond shimmer and move, even when it stays still, and if there is an actual breeze, then the stripings whip around without ever losing their perfect alignment across the full sequence. Matisse transcribes this effect to many of the rooms in the Nice paintings. Here is the structure of one entitled *Interior, Nice, Seated Woman with a Book*, where the arcings and archings of the fronds are carried in the rounding curves of the curtain and chair and woman. The striped leaf-light is everywhere in the room, in the louvered slats of the slanted window, in the louvered slats of the straight window, in the louvered slats reflecting in the glass window, in the striped

blue-and-white cloth on the lower right and its mirrored echo, in the woman's striped robe, lifting out from its center like an array of fronds from a stalk, and in the large bands of color in the architectural features of the room. On the upper left, lifting high above the woman, a single curved frond cups outward, its red, blue, and green leaf colors setting the palette for the rest of the room: it registers the botanical precedent, in case the small surface of the actual black-green palm (visible in the upper half of the window and indicated in my sketch by dark ink) is missed. Light trips rapidly across the surface of the room: in out in, out in out in, out off on off, on out off in, on off on off. It feathers across the eye, excites

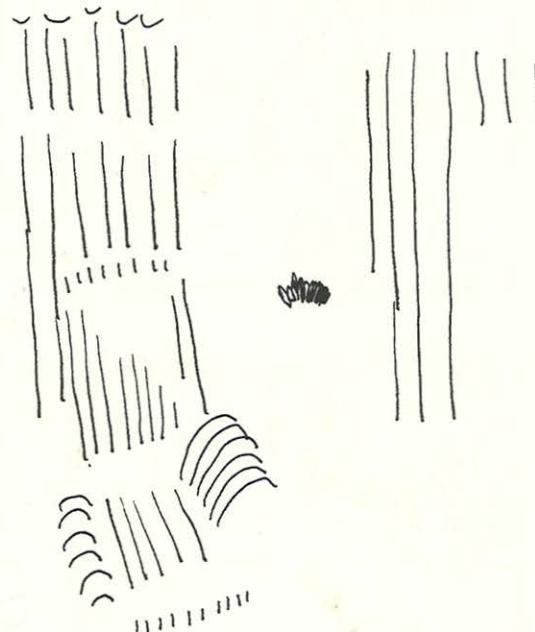


Interior, Nice. Seated Woman with a Book

it, incites in it saccadic leaps and midair twirls ("retinal arabesques," my friend calls them). It is as though the painting were painted with the frond of a palm, or as though the frond were just laid down on the canvas, as though it swished across the canvas, leaving prints of itself here there here there here there.

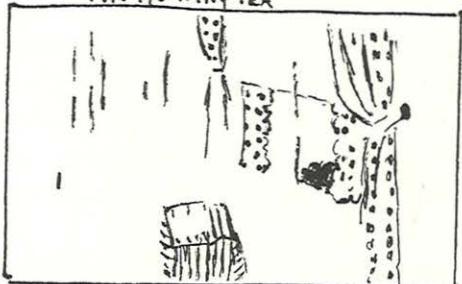
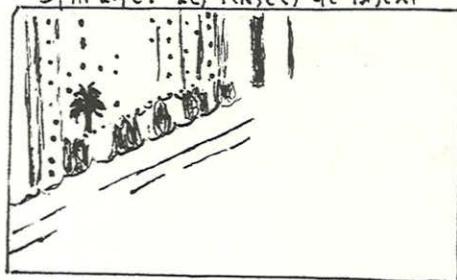
In *My Room at the Beau Rivage*, the striping, the stationary equivalent of shimmering, is accomplished through the pink-and-yellow wallpaper stripes and the curved lines of the satin chair, where the leaf-light is so concentrated it simply whites out in one section. The pliant chair, like the woman in *Seated Woman with a Book*, is the newborn palm tree, the place where light pools and then spills outward in all directions. Like silver threads appearing and disappearing behind the cross threads of a weaving—not a finished weaving but one whose making is just now under way—the silver jumps of our eyes trip in unison across the stripes, appearing and disappearing beneath the latticing of the guide threads. It is as though white sea-lanes have been drawn on the surface of the ocean and across them Nereids dive in and out.

Missing the print of the palm seems remarkable. The thing so capacious and luminously dispersed throughout the foreground of the room is concretely specified at the very back of (almost as if behind) the



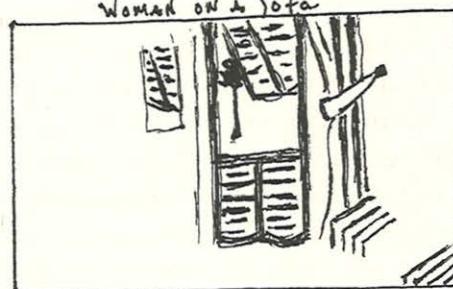
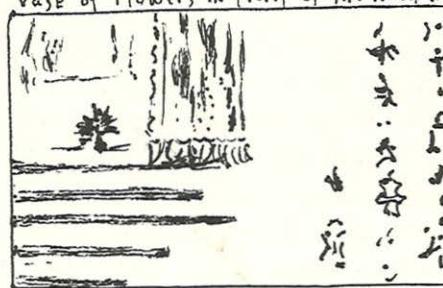
My Room at the Beau Rivage

painting. The palm is present in all, or almost all, of the Nice paintings. But the amount of surface that is dedicated to the actual tree, as opposed to the palmy offspring stripings inside the room, is tiny—one-thirtieth of the canvas in *Seated Woman with a Book*, one-fiftieth of the canvas in *My Room at the Beau Rivage*, and similar small fractions in others of the 1920s, such as *The Morning Tea*, *Woman on a Sofa*, *Still Life: 'Les*

The Morning Tea*Still Life: 'Les Pensées de Pascal'*

Pensées de Pascal, *Vase of Flowers in Front of the Window*, in each of which the tree occupies between one-fiftieth and one sixty-third of the full surface.

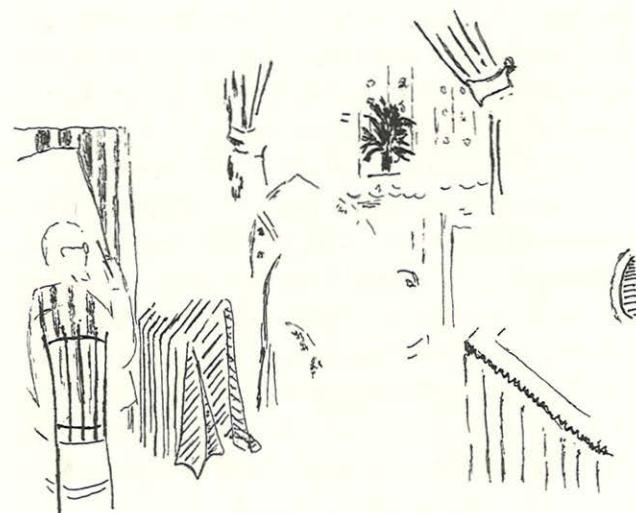
Further, the tree's individuated fronds are themselves seldom visible, and the leaves, never. A curtain may be striped; a wall may be striped; a bowl of flowers may be striped; a floor may be striped; a human figure may be striped; a table, bed, or chair may be striped. The fronds are the one thing to

WOMAN ON a Sofa*Vase of Flowers in Front of the Window*

which stripes are disallowed, except perhaps in "*Les Pensées de Pascal*" where (on close inspection of the very small tree) the green branchings have a cupped pink underside that sets in motion, inside the room, the soft blocks of gray and pink where the curtain overlaps the windowsill, and the hot pink and gray stripes on the sill below. More typically the tree canopy looks like a knob of broccoli, sometimes lacks a trunk, and may even be positioned in the lower half

of the painting. It provides just a fleeting acknowledgment of the fact that it is the precedent that sets in motion all the light-filled surfaces in the foreground. The tree is the only thing in the paintings to which the palm-style is not applied, just as when Matisse includes a bowl of actual anemones or nasturtiums or fritillarias in his paintings, it is often the one thing to which the anemone-style, nasturtium-style, or fritillaria-style (everywhere else filling the room) will be disallowed.

But at least one painting from the Nice period—*The Painter and His Model, Studio Interior* (1919)—explicitly announces the fact that the palm frond is the model from which, or more accurately the instrument with which, Matisse paints. Perhaps the palm is here openly saluted and seized because the painting is overtly about the act of painting. The room is full of sunlight. Yellow. Cream. Gold. White. These colors cover two-thirds of its surface, which is also awash with lavenders and reds falling in sun-filled stripes from the curtains, the walls, the man, the table, the chair, the dresser. The palm in the window is still only a small fraction of the surface, one thirty-fifth, but unlike many other Nice paintings, it is here stark, self-announcing. The palm now has emphatic fronds. It is brown, like the painter's brush, which has only a shaft and no brush, and so seems supplied by the tree, as though the palm were a continuation

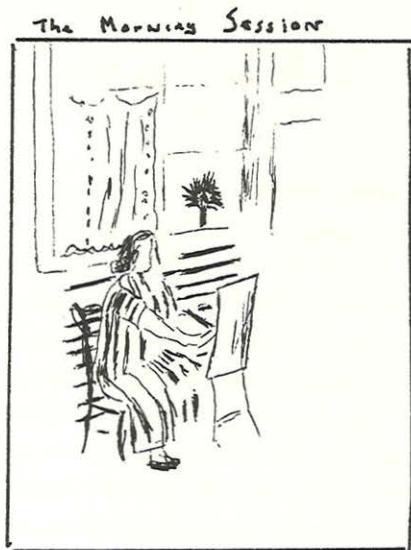


The Painter and His Model
1919

of the tool he holds, interrupted by the woman's body (the woman who is technically the model referred to in the title, though the palm seems more model than she). The palm seems not just the model, the thing that inspires him or the thing he aspires to copy, but much more material in its presence. It is what he reaches out for, closes his hand around, and presses down on the surface of the canvas he is lashing with light. It is a graphic literalization of "brush," "to brush," a brush with beauty. Because

the palmy stripings incite the silver cross-jumps of light over our face and eyes, it is as though the painting in turn paints us, plaiting braids of light across the surface of our skin.

Other Nice paintings depicting the act of composition similarly register the palm as instrument. The woman painter in *The Morning Session* (1924) wears a yellow-and-black striped dress that covers her torso, lap, and legs—the vertical stripes become horizontal when they reach her lap, raying out like sunlight before becoming vertical again as they turn at her knees and drop to the floor. She sits in front of a red-and-white striped wall, and long vertical bands of peach



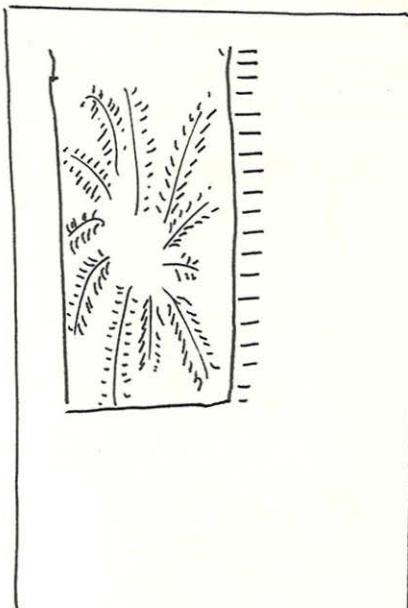
streak down the window, down the walls, and down the back of her painting. Because of the angle at which she sits, the brush with which she paints (like the man's in *The Painter and His Model*) has only a shaft and no brush, but by good luck there stand directly above her hand the open fronds, the luxurious canopy brush, of a distant palm. This vision of creation extends to auditory composition. The musician's bow in *Young Woman Playing the Violin in Front of the Open Window* (1923) is also completed and continued by the fronds of the palm outside her window, turning her bow into a brush. She is safely held in the lap of the striped walls on three sides. Above her head,

Young Woman Playing the Violin in Front of the Open Window



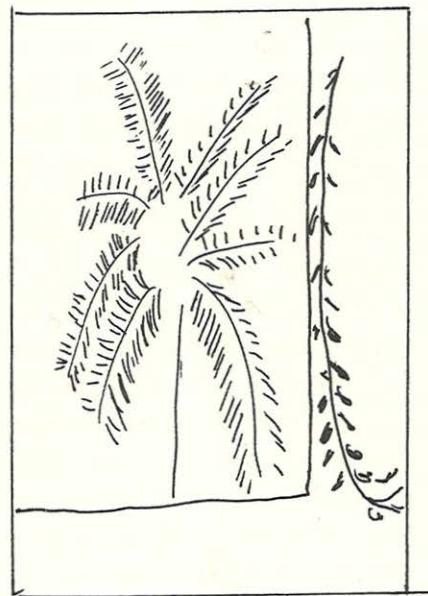
the huge open window—open sky, open sea, open sail, open palm—seems the picture of the airy music she is playing, a picture painted with the brush of her bow.

Three decades later, Matisse still paints palms in windows, but now as the fulsome, fully saluted precedent. The pictures seem Odyssean palinodes to the once insufficiently acknowledged tree. By 1947 the



1947 Still Life with Pomegranate

palm fills not one sixty-third or one-fiftieth or one-thirtieth of the painting but one-quarter. By 1948 it fills one-half. In both pictures it has become the central subject. Formerly deprived of the very style it inspired, it is now the single thing in the picture to which the leaf-light striping is emphatically applied. The palm in *Still Life with Pomegranate* is composed of hundreds of green stripes against light blue. The



1948 Interior with Egyptian
Curtain

palm in *Interior with Egyptian Curtain* is composed of hundreds upon hundreds of stripes in black, green, yellow, white. On the wall inside the 1948 canvas *Large Interior in Red* hangs a black-and-white picture with a palm outside the window and another palm inside the room—palm fronds painted with a palm frond on a palm frond—the painter's material, instrument, and subject.



I began here with the way beautiful things have a forward momentum, the way they incite the desire to bring new things into the world: infants, epics, sonnets, drawings, dances, laws, philosophic dialogues, theological tracts. But we soon found ourselves also turning backward, for the beautiful faces and songs that lift us forward onto new ground keep calling out to us as well, inciting us to rediscover and recover them in whatever new thing gets made. The very pliancy or elasticity of beauty—hurtling us forward and back, requiring us to break new ground, but obliging us also to bridge back not only to the ground we just left but to still earlier, even ancient, ground—is a model for the pliancy and lability of consciousness in education. Matisse believed he was painting the inner life of the mind; and it is this

elasticity that we everywhere see in the leaf-light of his pictures, the pliancy and palmy reach of the capacious mind. Even when the claim on behalf of immortality is gone, many of the same qualities—plenitude, inclusion—are the outcome.

It sometimes seems that a special problem arises for beauty once the realm of the sacred is no longer believed in or aspired to. If a beautiful young girl (like Nausicaa), or a small bird, or a glass vase, or a poem, or a tree has the metaphysical in behind it, that realm verifies the weight and attention we confer on the girl, bird, vase, poem, tree. But if the metaphysical realm has vanished, one may feel bereft not only because of the giant deficit left by that vacant realm but because the girl, the bird, the vase, the book now seem unable in their solitude to justify or account for the weight of their own beauty. If each calls out for attention that has no destination beyond itself, each seems self-centered, too fragile to support the gravity of our immense regard.

But beautiful things, as Matisse shows, always carry greetings from other worlds within them. In surrendering to his leaf-light, one is carried to other shorelines as inevitably as Odysseus is carried back to Delos. What happens when there is no immortal realm behind the beautiful person or thing is just what happens when there *is* an immortal realm

behind the beautiful person or thing; the perceiver is led to a more capacious regard for the world. The requirement for plenitude is built-in. The palm will always be found (whether one accidentally walks out onto a balcony, or follows at daybreak the flight path of an owl, or finds oneself washed up in front of Nausicaa or a redbud or *Seated Woman with a Book*) because the palm is itself the method of finding. The material world constrains us, often with great beneficence, to see each person and thing in its time and place, its historical context. But mental life doesn't so constrain us. It is porous, open to the air and light, swings forward while swaying back, scatters its stripes in all directions, and delights to find itself beached beside something invented only that morning or instead standing beside an altar from three millennia ago.

This very plasticity, this elasticity, also makes beauty associate with error, for it brings one face-to-face with one's own errors: momentarily stunned by beauty, the mind before long begins to create or to recall and, in doing so, soon discovers the limits of its own starting place, if there are limits to be found, or may instead—as is more often the case—uncover the limitlessness of the beautiful thing it beholds. Though I have mainly concentrated here on failures of plenitude and underattribution—mistakes that

involve not seeing the beauty of something—the same outcomes can be arrived at by the path of over-attribution, as registered in the poems about error by Dickinson, Hopkins, Shakespeare. This genre of error, however, has the peculiarity that when the beautiful person or thing ceases to appear beautiful, it often incites the perceiver to repudiate, scorn, or even denounce the object as an invalid candidate or carrier of beauty. It is as though the person or thing had not merely been beautiful but had actually made a claim that it was beautiful, and further, a claim that it would be beautiful forever.⁹ But of course it is we—not the beautiful persons or things themselves (Maud Gonne, Mona Lisa, "Ode to a Nightingale," Chartres, a columbine, a dove, a bank of sweet pea, a palm tree)—who make announcements and promises to one another about the enduring beauty of these beautiful things. If a beautiful palm tree one day ceases to be so, has it defaulted on a promise? Hopkins defends the tree:

No, the tropic tree
Has not a charter that its sap shall last
Into all seasons, though no Winter cast
The happy leafing.

The temptation to scorn the innocent object for ceasing to be beautiful might be called the tempta-

tion against plenitude; it puts at risk not the repudiated object but the capaciousness of the cognitive act.

Many human desires are coterminous with their object. A person desires a good meal and—as though by magic—the person's desire for a good meal seems to end at just about the time the good meal ends. But our desire for beauty is likely to outlast its object because, as Kant once observed, unlike all other pleasures, the pleasure we take in beauty is inexhaustible. No matter how long beautiful things endure, they cannot out-endure our longing for them. If the beauty of an object lasts exactly as long as the life of the object—the way the blue chalice of a morning glory blossom spins open at dawn and collapses at noon—it will not be faulted for the disappearance of its beauty. Efforts may even be made to prolong our access to its beauty beyond its death, as when Aristotle, rather than turning away from a dying iris blossom, tracks the changing location of its deep colors, and Rilke, rather than turning away from the rose at the moment it breaks apart, describes the luxurious postures the flower adopts in casting down its petals.

But if the person or thing outlives its own beauty—as when a face believed ravishing for two years no longer seems so in the third, or a favorite vase one day ceases to delight, or a poem beloved in

the decade when it is written becomes incomprehensible to those who read it later—then it is sometimes not just turned away from but turned upon, as though it has enacted a betrayal. But the work that beautiful persons and things accomplish is collectively accomplished, and different persons and things contribute to this work for different lengths of time, one enduring for three millennia and one enduring for only three seconds. A vase may catch your attention, you turn your head to look at it, you look at it still more carefully, and suddenly its beauty is gone. Was the beauty of the object false, or was the beauty real but brief? The three-second call to beauty can have produced the small flex of the mind, the constant moistening, that other objects—large, arcing, flexuous—will more enduringly require. We make a mistake, says Seamus Heaney, if, driving down a road between wind and water, overwhelmed by what we see, we assume we will see “it” better if we stop the car. It is there in the passage. When one goes on to find “better,” or “higher,” or “truer,” or “more enduring,” or “more widely agreed upon” forms of beauty, what happens to our regard for the less good, less high, less true, less enduring, less universal instances? Simone Weil says, “He who has gone farther, to the very beauty of the world itself, does not love them any less but much more deeply than before.”

I have tried to set forth the view here that beauty really is allied with truth. This is not to say that what is beautiful is also true. There certainly are objects in which “the beautiful” and “the true” do converge, such as the statement “ $1 = 1$.” This may be why, though the vocabulary of beauty has been banished or driven underground in the humanities for the last two decades, it has been openly in play in those fields that aspire to have “truth” as their object—math, physics, astrophysics, chemistry, biochemistry—where every day in laboratories and seminar rooms participants speak of problems that are “nice,” theories that are “pretty,” solutions that are “beautiful,” approaches that are “elegant,” “simple.” The participants differ, though, on whether a theory’s being “pretty” is predictive of, or instead independent of, its being “true.”¹⁰

But the claim throughout these pages that beauty and truth are allied is not a claim that the two are identical. It is not that a poem or a painting or a palm tree or a person is “true,” but rather that it ignites the desire for truth by giving us, with an electric brightness shared by almost no other uninvited, freely arriving perceptual event, the experience of conviction and the experience, as well, of error. This liability to error, contestation, and plurality—for which “beauty” over the centuries has so often been belittled—has sometimes been cited as evidence of

its falsehood and distance from “truth,” when it is instead the case that our very aspiration for truth is its legacy. It creates, without itself fulfilling, the aspiration for enduring certitude. It comes to us, with no work of our own; then leaves us prepared to undergo a giant labor.

pleasure"; a bright cloth or fabric spanning the entire country, a canopy of shelter and shared regard.²⁰

We have so far shown how features that have been located at the site of the beautiful object (features such as the object's symmetry, equality, and pressure against lateral disregard) assist us in getting to justice. There remain two other sites—the "live" mental action of perceiving and the "live" action of creation—where the complicity between beauty and justice can again be seen.

But it will be helpful to locate ourselves and see what has so far been said. The equality of beauty enters the world before justice and stays longer because it does not depend on human beings to bring it about: though human beings have created much of the beauty of the world, they are only collaborators in a much vaster project. The world accepts our contributions but in no way depends on us. Even when beauty and justice are both in the world, beauty performs a special service because it is available to sensory perception in a way that justice (except in rare places like an assembly) normally is not, even though it is equally material and comes into being because of the fragility of the material world. By now we can begin to see that the equality of beauty, its pressure toward distribution, resides not just in its interior feature of symmetry but in its generously being present, widely present, to almost all people at almost all

times—as in the mates that they choose to love, their children, the birds that fly through their garden, the songs they sing—a distributional availability that comes from its being external, present ("prae-sens"), standing before the senses.

When aesthetic fairness and ethical fairness are both present to perception, their shared commitment to equality can be seen as merely an analogy, for it may truly be said that when both terms of an analogy are present, the analogy is inert. It asks nothing more of us than that we occasionally notice it. But when one term ceases to be visible (either because it is not present, or because it is present but dispersed beyond our sensory field), then the analogy ceases to be inert: the term that is present becomes pressing, active, insistent, calling out for, directing our attention toward, what is absent. I describe this, focusing on touch, as a weight or lever, but ancient and medieval philosophers always referred to it acoustically: beauty is a call.

Radical Decentering

We have seen how the beautiful object—in its symmetry and generous sensory availability—assists in turning us to justice. The two other sites, that of the perceiver and that of the act of creation, also reveal the pressure beauty exerts toward ethical equality.

Once we move to these two sites, we enter into the live actions of perceiving and creating, and are therefore carried to the subject of aliveness, our final goal.

The surfaces of the world are aesthetically uneven. You come around a bend in the road, and the world suddenly falls open; you continue on around another bend, and go back to your conversation, until you are once more interrupted by the high bank of radiant meadow grass rising steeply beside the road. The same happens when you move through a sea of faces at the railroad station or rush down the aisle of a crowded lecture hall. Or you may be sweeping the garden bricks at home, attending with full scrutiny to each square inch of their mauve-orange-blue surfaces (for how else can you sweep them clean?); then suddenly a tiny mauve-orange-blue triangle, with a silver sheen, lifts off from the sand between the bricks where it had been sleepily camouflaged until the air currents disturbed it. It flutters in the air, then settles back down on the brick, demure, closed-winged, a triangle this big:  Why should this tiny fragment of flying brick-color stop your heart?

Folded into the uneven aesthetic surfaces of the world is a pressure toward social equality. It comes from the object's symmetry, from the corrective pressure it exerts against lateral disregard, and from its own generous availability to sensory perception. But a reader may object that even if the idea of ethi-

cal fairness does come before one's mind at the moment one beholds something beautiful, the idea remains abstract. Nothing requires us to give up the ground that would begin to enact such symmetries. It is here that great assistance is provided by Simone Weil, whose mystical writings and life practices—working side by side with laborers in the Spanish Civil War; exacerbating the TB from which she was dying by refusing to eat more than her compatriots in France who were starving under German occupation—were inspired by her commitment to justice. (We are trying to hold steady to the agreement we made that we would, in this section, draw primarily from defenders of justice, not defenders of beauty, even though the two so often converge.)

At the moment we see something beautiful, we undergo a radical decentering. Beauty, according to Weil, requires us "to give up our imaginary position as the center. . . . A transformation then takes place at the very roots of our sensibility, in our immediate reception of sense impressions and psychological impressions."²¹ Weil speaks matter-of-factly, often without illustration, implicitly requiring readers to test the truth of her assertion against their own experience. Her account is always deeply somatic: what happens, happens to our bodies. When we come upon beautiful things—the tiny mauve-orange-blue moth on the brick, Augustine's cake, a sentence

about innocence in Hampshire—they act like small tears in the surface of the world that pull us through to some vaster space;²² or they form “ladders reaching toward the beauty of the world,”²³ or they lift us (as though by the air currents of someone else’s sweeping), letting the ground rotate beneath us several inches, so that when we land, we find we are standing in a different relation to the world than we were a moment before. It is not that we cease to stand at the center of the world, for we never stood there. It is that we cease to stand even at the center of our own world. We willingly cede our ground to the thing that stands before us.

The radical decentering we undergo in the presence of the beautiful is also described by Iris Murdoch in a 1967 lecture called “The Sovereignty of Good over Other Concepts.” As this title indicates, her subject is goodness, not beauty. “Ethics,” Murdoch writes, “should not be merely an analysis of ordinary mediocre conduct, it should be a hypothesis about good conduct and about how this can be achieved.”²⁴ How we make choices, how we act, is deeply connected to states of consciousness, and so “anything which alters consciousness in the direction of unselfishness, objectivity and realism is to be connected with virtue.” Murdoch then specifies the single best or most “obvious thing in our surroundings

which is an occasion for ‘unselfing’ and that is what is popularly called beauty.”²⁵

She describes suddenly seeing a kestrel hovering; it brings about an “unselfing.” It causes a cluster of feelings that normally promote the self (for she had been “anxious . . . resentful . . . brooding perhaps on some damage done to [her] prestige”) now to fall away. It is not just that she becomes “self-forgetful” but that some more capacious mental act is possible: all the space formerly in the service of protecting, guarding, advancing the self (or its “prestige”) is now free to be in the service of something else.

It is as though one has ceased to be the hero or heroine in one’s own story and has become what in a folktale is called the “lateral figure” or “donor figure.” It may sound not as though one’s participation in a state of overall equality has been brought about, but as though one has just suffered a demotion. But at moments when we believe we are conducting ourselves with equality, we are usually instead conducting ourselves as the central figure in our own private story; and when we feel ourselves to be merely adjacent, or lateral (or even subordinate), we are probably more closely approaching a state of equality. In any event, it is precisely the ethical alchemy of beauty that what might in another context seem like a demotion is no longer recognizable as

such: this is one of the cluster of feelings that have disappeared.

Radical decentering might also be called an opiated adjacency. A beautiful thing is not the only thing in the world that can make us feel adjacent; nor is it the only thing in the world that brings a state of acute pleasure. But it appears to be one of the few phenomena in the world that brings about both simultaneously: it permits us to be adjacent while also permitting us to experience extreme pleasure, thereby creating the sense that it is our own adjacency that is pleasure-bearing. This seems a gift in its own right, and a gift as a prelude to or precondition of enjoying fair relations with others. It is clear that an *ethical fairness* which requires “a symmetry of everyone’s relation” will be greatly assisted by an *aesthetic fairness* that creates in all participants a state of delight in their own lateralness.

This lateral position continues in the third site of beauty, not now the suspended state of beholding but the active state of creating—the site of stewardship in which one acts to protect or perpetuate a fragment of beauty already in the world or instead to supplement it by bringing into being a new object. (The latter is more usually described as an act of creation than the former, but we have seen from the opening pages of this book forward that the two are prompted by the same impulse and should be per-

ceived under a single rubric.) The way beauty at this third site presses us toward justice might seem hard to uncover since we know so little about “creation”; but it is not difficult to make a start since justice itself is dependent on human hands to bring it into being and has no existence independent of acts of creation. Beauty may be either natural or artifactual; justice is always artifactual and is therefore assisted by any perceptual event that so effortlessly incites in us the wish to create. Because beauty repeatedly brings us face-to-face with our own powers to create, we know where and how to locate those powers when a situation of injustice calls on us to create without itself guiding us, through pleasure, to our destination. The two distinguishable forms of creating beauty—perpetuating beauty that already exists; originating beauty that does not yet exist—have equivalents within the realm of justice, as one can hear in John Rawls’s formulation of what, since the time of Socrates, has been known as the “duty to justice” argument: we have a duty, says Rawls, “to support” just arrangements where they already exist and to help bring them into being where they are “not yet established.”

Another feature shared by the kind of creation we undertake on behalf of beauty and the kind of creation we undertake on behalf of justice has been suggested by political philosopher Andreas Eshete.²⁶

In both realms, the object that one aspires to create may be completely known, partially known, or completely unknown to the creator. It is precisely on this basis that John Rawls differentiates three forms of justice: in "perfect justice" we know the outcome we aspire to achieve as well as the procedure by which that outcome can be brought about (food should be shared equally, and we can ensure this outcome by arranging that the person who slices the cake is also the last to select his own slice); in "imperfect justice" we know the outcome we aspire to achieve, and we know the procedure that gives us the best chance of approximating this outcome (persons guilty of a crime should be convicted and innocent persons should go free; a jury trial gives us the best hope of achieving this outcome, though it by no means guarantees it); in "pure procedural justice," finally, we have no picture of the best outcome, and we must trust wholly in the fairness of the procedures to ensure that the outcome itself is fair (here equality of opportunity is Rawls's illustration).²⁷ Aesthetic creation, too, has this same variation: one may have a vision of the object to be created and the path by which to bring it into being; one may instead have a vision of the object to be created and a technique that brings only its approximation into being; or one may have no prior vision and may simply entrust oneself to the action of creating (as in Richard

Wollheim's account of the way one learns what one has been drawing only when the drawing is done).²⁸

The nonself-interestedness of the beholder has—to return to the subject of adjacency—been seen in a number of ways: first, in the absence of continuity between the beholder and the beheld (since the beholder does not become beautiful in the way that the pursuer of truth becomes knowledgeable); second, in the radical decenteredness the beholder undergoes in the presence of something or someone beautiful; third, in the willingness of the beholder to place himself or herself in the service of bringing new beauty into the world, creating a site of beauty separate from the self.

The unself-interestedness becomes visible in a fourth odd feature. Since beauty is pleasure-producing, one might assume that one would be avid to have it in one's own life and less avid, or noncommittal, about the part it should play in other people's lives. But is this the case? As was noticed at the opening, over the last several decades many people have either actively advocated a taboo on beauty or passively omitted it from their vocabulary, even when thinking and writing about beautiful objects such as paintings and poems. But if one asks them the following question—"Thinking not of ourselves but of people who will be alive at the end of the twenty-first century: is it your wish for them that they be beauty-

loving?"—the answer seems to be "Yes"; and "Yes," delivered with speed and without hesitation. My own sample is informal and small, but does it not seem likely that a larger group would answer in similar fashion? If they would, the response suggests that whatever hardships we are willing to impose on ourselves we are not willing to impose on other people. Or perhaps phrased another way: however uncertain we are about whether the absence of beauty from our own lives is a benefit or a deficit, once we see the subject from a distant perspective, it instantly becomes clear that the absence of beauty is a profound form of deprivation.

A related outcome seems to occur if one asks people who are individually opposed to beauty to think in terms of our whole era or even century: "Do you hope that when people in the twenty-first and twenty-second centuries speak of us (the way we so effortlessly make descriptive statements about people living in the nineteenth or eighteenth or seventeenth centuries), do you hope these future people will describe us as beauty-loving? or instead as neutral with respect to beauty? or instead as beauty-disregarding?" Those I have questioned state their hope that we will be spoken about by future peoples as beauty-loving. Does it not seem reasonable to suppose that many people might give this same answer? Let us suppose this and then see what it would mean:

it would mean, oddly, that although beauty is highly particular and plural, one can suffer its loss to oneself, or even to those within the daily circle of one's activities, but cannot wish so grave a loss to the larger world of which one is a part, to the era in which one has lived. Neither from one's own century nor from any future century can one imagine its disappearance as anything but a deprivation.

There is one additional thought experiment that, like those above, seems to reinforce the recognition that beauty (though experienced intimately and acutely on each person's individual pulse) is unself-interested. Picture a population empowered to make decisions about the forms of beauty that will be present in our world and picture also that, in making decisions about this, none among them knew any of his or her own features: not gender, not geography, not talents or powers (level of sensory acuity, compositional abilities, physical agility, intellectual reach), not level of wealth, not intimacy or friendships. The population would make their judgments from behind "the veil of ignorance" that we now (at the invitation of John Rawls) often enlist in picturing decisions about social and economic arrangements but that may also assist us in clarifying our relation to the aesthetic surfaces of the world.

Suppose this population were presented with this question: "In the near future, human beings can

arrange things so that there either will or will not be beautiful sky. Do you wish there to be beautiful sky?" (The issue before them is not the presence or absence of life-supporting oxygen for which wholly separate arrangements, due to technological advances, can swiftly be made; the question is about the way the sky's beauty itself is perceived to be part of a life-support system.) Because the sky is equally distributed throughout the world—because its beautiful events are equally distributed—it will not be surprising if the population in large numbers, or even unanimously, agree that the beautiful sky should continue. Because most of its manifestations—its habit of alternating between blue and black, the phases of the moon, the sunrise and sunset—are present everywhere, those voting do not need to know where they are living to know that they will be beneficiaries.

It is true that in addition to the constant sky events there are nonconstant ones, but these varied events are unvarying in the intensity of their beauty. The sky where I now am is subject to motions I have never known before, rivulets of air moving vertically up in streams that wash sideways, so that the black ravens and red-tailed hawks tumble in it all day, somersaulting and ferris-wheeling through the air, placing themselves in invisible fountains that lift them up until suddenly, tucking in their wings, they

plunge rapidly down, spinning head over tail until out come their wings and the slow float upwards starts over again. But each piece of sky is like every other in being in some feature incomparable: one moves each day across five hundred shades of azure and aquamarine; another is so moist in its lavenders, silvers, and grays that the green ground beneath it glows and becomes a second sky; another on long winter nights becomes black with wide pulsing streams of pink, green, blue. The members of our population need not know the specific ground on which fate has placed them (Antigua, Ireland, Siberia) to know that they will be the beneficiaries of both shared and exceptional beauties of the sky. There is therefore no reason to construe their positive vote as anything other than self-interest.

The same outcome seems likely to occur if we ask this population their decision about blossoms. Although they are not so evenly distributed as the sky—in some latitudes covering the meadows for only six weeks and in other latitudes covering the hillsides almost year round—they are so generously distributed across the earth that it would not be surprising if people, without knowing anything about their own attributes, would affirm the continuous existence of plants and blossoms. The population might reason that whichever geography they find themselves living in (once they step out from behind

the "veil of ignorance" and recover knowledge of their own features), their local ground will be better with, than without, flowers. So here again we have no reason to search for descriptions other than vibrant self-interest and self-survival, which are compatible with the intense somatic pleasure, the sentient immediacy of the experience of beauty.

But what if now the deliberation turned to objects and events that instead of being evenly distributed across the world were emphatically nondistributional. "Shall there be here and there an astonishingly beautiful underground cave whose passageways extend several miles, opening into crystal-lined grottos and large galleries of mineral latticework, in other galleries their mute walls painted by people who visited thousands of years earlier?" Those from whom we are seeking counsel cannot assume that they are likely to live near it, for they have been openly informed that the caves about which they are being asked to vote exist in only two places on earth. Nor can they even assume that if fate places them near one of the caves, they will be able to enter its deep interior, for climbing down into the galleries requires levels of physical agility and confidence beyond what are widely distributed among any population. But here is the question: isn't there every reason to suppose that the population will—even in the face of full knowledge that the cave is likely to be

forever unavailable to them—request that such a cave be kept in existence, that it be protected and spared harm? Isn't it possible, even likely, that the population will respond in exactly the same way toward objects that are nondistributional as to those that are shared across the surface of the earth, that they will—as though they were thinking of skies and flowers—affirm the existence of remote caves and esoteric pieces of music (harder to enter even than the cave) and paintings that for many generations are held by private collectors and seen by almost no one's eyes?

People seem to wish there to be beauty even when their own self-interest is not served by it; or perhaps more accurately, people seem to intuit that their own self-interest is served by distant peoples' having the benefit of beauty. For although this was written as though it were a thought experiment, there is nothing speculative about it: the vote on blossoms has already been taken (people over many centuries have nurtured and carried the flowers from place to place, supplementing what was there); the vote on the sky has been taken (the recent environmental movement); and the vote on the caves has innumerable times been taken—otherwise it is inexplicable why people get so upset when they learn that a Vermeer painting has been stolen from the Gardner Museum without any assurance that its surface is being

protected; why people get upset about the disappearance of kelp forests they had never even heard of until the moment they were informed of the loss; why museums, schools, universities take such care that beautiful artifacts from people long in the past be safely carried forward to people in the future. We are not guessing: the evidence is in.

NOTES



THE NOTES that follow specify the English translation and edition used for works originally written in another language. Passages quoted from works originally written in English are not footnoted except where variations occur across different editions (as in the case of Emily Dickinson) or where the work may not be instantly familiar to the reader (as in the book form of Iris Murdoch's 1967 lecture).

PART ONE: ON BEAUTY AND BEING WRONG

1. The translation used here, and whenever Dante's *Vita nuova* is quoted, is Mark Musa (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), xv, xvi, 29, 30.
2. Marcel Proust, *Remembrance of Things Past*, trans. C. K. Scott Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin (New York: Vintage-Random House, 1982), 1:706–7.
3. Simone Weil, "Love of the Order of the World," in *Waiting for God*, trans. Emma Craufurd, introd. Leslie A. Fiedler (New York: Harper & Row, 1951), 180.
4. Emily Dickinson, *The Poems of Emily Dickinson: Variorum Edition*, ed. R. W. Franklin (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, Belknap Press, 1998), 785. Variants in wording in other editions are given on the same page. My thanks to Helen Vendler for bringing