



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

Alexander Nehamas

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Neither art nor philosophy was kind to beauty during the twentieth century. Much modern art disdains beauty, and many philosophers deeply suspect that beauty merely paints over or distracts us from horrors. Intellectuals consigned the passions of beauty to the margins, replacing them with the anemic and rarefied alternative, "aesthetic pleasure." In *Only a Promise of Happiness*, Alexander Nehamas reclaims beauty from its critics. He seeks to restore its place in art, to reestablish the connections among art, beauty, and desire, and to show that the values of art, independently of their moral worth, are equally crucial to the rest of life.

Nehamas makes his case with characteristic grace, sensitivity, and philosophical depth, supporting his arguments with searching studies of art and literature, high and low, from Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice* and Manet's *Olympia* to television. Throughout, the discussion of artworks is generously illustrated.

Beauty, Nehamas concludes, may depend on appearance, but this does not make it superficial. The perception of beauty manifests a hope that life would be better if the object of beauty were part of it. This hope can shape and direct our lives for better or worse. We may discover misery in pursuit of beauty, or find that beauty offers no more than a tantalizing promise of happiness. But if beauty is always dangerous, it is also a pressing human concern that we must seek to understand, and not suppress.

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