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Nehamas, Alexander. *Only a Promise of Happiness: The Place of Beauty in a World of Art*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007. Pp. 186. ISBN 978-0-691-09521-9. \$29.95.

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A book must not be judged by its cover. Though this is an indisputable truth, the cover of Nehamas' work can be regarded as a good starting point for appreciating it. The detail of Edouard Manet's *Olympia* on the 10 for 8 inches hardcover volume tells much about its content and also about its author.

The cover tells much about the content. First because it seems to unfold an art book. Indeed, much of Nehamas' strength and originality comes from his crossing the boundaries between philosophy and art criticism. The 13 color plates and 79 reproductions of various artworks play an effective role in the argumentative line. Second because it warns us that, exactly as Manet's nude did at its time, Nehamas will dialogue with an old and rich tradition to establish something new, challenging, daring.

And the cover tells much about the author. *Olympia* is a central piece in Nehamas' thought on beauty and aesthetic value, for it

is from his own feelings towards this work that he erects a great deal of his reflections in the book. Thus the cover also warns that the book is personal, in the sense that it discloses the author's personality and taste. In fact it is remarkable that the philosophical vigour of Nehamas' book springs not only from his vast erudition and lucidity, but also from the meditation on what could seem banal aspects of everyday life: from pondering why he likes (and watches!) some TV show, or why we come to be friends with someone. Nehamas' nudity - for he reveals himself just as Manet's model does - confers to his work a very distinct trace, making it not only one more excellent piece of scholarship, but also a sincere quest for the meaning and the importance of beauty for human life.

In the first of its four chapters, Nehamas sketches the origin and evolution of the modern account of true artistic pleasure that dissociates aesthetic value from the immediate and emotional perception of beauty. When, asks the author, has the latter, deeply Platonic, become a kind of apprehension of beauty that would be confined to everyday life and proper to ordinary people? It was perhaps first formulated clearly by Kant's *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, though it can be traced even earlier, and radicalized by Schopenhauer. They refused that the contemplation of true beauty could arise from interest or should cause disturbance or excitement. This trend culminates with Modernist art, that increasingly emphasized what is powerful or daring rather than what is attractive. Now it is the universally accepted distinction between high and low art, where the first stimulates intellect while the latter pleases senses. Nehamas' reply is also his main claim in this book: "beauty is part of the everyday world of purpose and desire, history and contingency, subjectivity and incompleteness" and "that is the only world there is, and nothing, not even the highest of high arts can move beyond it" (p. 35).

Art criticism, continues Nehamas in the second chapter, shows how far we are from Plato's account of beauty in the *Symposium*, where beauty in general invites us to pass beyond its contingent material source and then engage in

activities and domains that produce beauty, and are beautiful themselves, impelling us towards happiness and goodness. Since attractiveness has become an attribute of lower art, art criticism has, so to speak, the fundamental task of interpreting the artwork, of asking for its meaning, and of evaluating it. If not a preoccupied role, it is at least an innocuous one, because criticism seems to aim nothing more than judgments of value and “end when it has issued them – reviewing” (p. 44). And, what is worse, employing vague, meaningless concepts that are thought to convey features on which aesthetic value depends, such as “powerful”, “fluid”, “solid”, and so on. Criticism, suggests platonically Nehamas, should not end with a verdict, but rather be an invitation to make the work of art part of our life, pursuing the concerns of our life and engaging life with beauty and art.

Two sections concerning mainly human beauty and attractiveness complete the second chapter bringing in arguments from psychology to endorse the relevance of appearance. Beauty may be only a promise of happiness, but it is a promise of something, though. The promise is issued by a person's or an object's appearance – and appearance must be understood in a broad sense not only as the visual aspects of something, “but as every one of its features, physical or psychological, of which we are aware by looking” (p. 63). This may seem somewhat obvious, but it is a strong statement. Either if beauty and attractiveness are nothing but a physical aspect of a thing, or if they are a complex of features, amidst which is the physical one, the fact is that the way a thing or person appears to us is primarily important: it is the first aspect we see and it is the last too, since as long as we consider that thing or person beautiful, for any reasons, the thing or person will appear beautiful. As Nehamas puts it, simply and directly, it does not matter whether “I can love someone who is *in fact* ugly, but whether I can love someone I *find* ugly”, which is impossible; “but to the extent that I find you beautiful – which is always, in one degree or another, a matter of love – life will seem better to me with than without you” (p. 62).

In the following chapter - as in the whole book, it must be said - Plato's *Symposium* stands as the dominant scenery for Nehamas developing his conception of beauty as a form of desire. What is true in life must have some truth also in art: beauty is intimately linked with eros (love). Platonic *Eros*, being the offspring of *Poros* (resource) and *Penia* (poverty), by nature seeks completion for its deficiency, just as beautiful things or people spark in us the need to approach, not only because we feel they have more to offer but also because we desire to understand what that is. Nehamas conceives beauty as the emblem of what we lack, the mark of an art that speaks to our desire.

Unlike Kant, Nehamas thinks that one's judgment of beauty need not to expect universal agreement; but it hopes communion. In spite of his great effort, Kant failed in trying to make aesthetics speak with universal voice. My judgment of beauty, even when made to myself, expects that others join me; it is an expectation founded on the belief that a beautiful thing can make one's life better and that its beauty is its distinctive features, that which only it possesses and which can only be known through direct, immediate contact. Nothing but the beautiful object itself, the direct contact with beauty, can spring or transmit that promise.

In offering us, in the last chapter, a detailed report of his relationship with Manet's *Olympia*, Nehamas exposes how it required him, trying to go deeply into the portrait, to explore many other subjects: the history of female nudes, prostitution in 19-century France, the impact of photography in painting, etc. Beauty, never dissociated from some mode of love and attraction, always impels us further; it provokes modes of urgency that resemble love more than an abstract judgment, and our response to it often leads us into the rest of the world as well. In this erotic hermeneutics what something is is not independent of what it means, no more, in fact, than what something seems to be is independent of what it is.

Nehamas concludes his book with a lucid reflection on the moral implications of beauty. The author argues that beauty and morality can conflict both in individuals and in works of art. Beauty always carries with it an element of uncertainty, offering us only the promise that, being in contact with what we find beautiful, it will make a valuable difference in our lives. A great knower of Plato but also of Nietzsche, Nehamas makes both converge in him, affirming, with them, that beauty has a direct and undeniable impact on our lives. He denies however, supported by Nietzsche, that beauty offers us any guarantee of virtue or happiness. While for Plato it is the contemplation of beauty that makes life worth living because he saw beauty as moral, Nietzsche thinks that existence and the world are justified only as an aesthetic phenomenon because he believed there are no moral values at all. "The value of beauty", writes Nehamas, "lies no further than itself: it is its own reward", and as, "for Socrates, virtue was nothing but its own pursuit", "only the promise of happiness" issued by beauty "is happiness itself" (p. 138).

Nehamas, who wrote important studies on Plato and Nietzsche, is one of the most brilliant, amazing and amusing philosophers of our day. Though many other thinkers surely are as important as he, few rival his elegance, for he cultivates these almost forgotten qualities among scholars: writing well and wit. From its extrinsic features to the inmost convictions of its author, *Only a Promise of Happiness* is a notable book.