

E S S A Y

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# GOODNESS KNOWS NOTHING OF BEAUTY

On the distance between morality and art

By *William H. Gass*

W

e are to imagine a terrible storm like that which opens Verdi's *Otello*. The pavement of the *piazzetta* is awash. St. Mark's pigeons are flying about looking for land. The Venetian sun has gone down like a gondola in the lagoon. As we wade along in the dying light, a baby in a basket passes. It is being swept out to sea with the rest of the city's garbage. So is a large painting, beautifully framed, which floats its grand nude by us as if she were swimming. Then the question comes, bobbing like a bit of flotsam itself: Which one should we save, the tiny tot or the Tintoretto? the kid in the crib or the Canaletto?

It may be that during two thousand or more years of monsoons, tidal waves, and high water, this choice has not once actually presented itself, yet, undismayed, it is in this form that philosophers frequently represent the conflict between art and morality—a conflict, of course, they made up in the first place. Baby or Botticelli. What'll you have?

Not only is the dilemma an unlikely one; the choice it offers is peculiar. We are being asked to decide not between two different actions but between two different objects. And how different indeed these floating objects are. The baby is a vessel of human consciousness, if its basket isn't. It is nearly pure potentiality. It must be any babe—no one babe but babe in general, babe in bulk—whose bunk is boating by. Never mind if it was born with the brain of an accountant, inflicted with a cleft palate, or given Mozartian talents: these are clearly irrelevant considerations, as are ones concerning the seaworthiness of the basket, or the prospect of more rain. One fist in this fight swings from the arm of an open future against the chest of a completed past . . .

. . . A completed past because we have to know the pedigree of the painting or it's no contest. If it is the rosy nude who used to recline behind the bar in Harry's, or just another mislaid entrant in the latest Biennale, then the conditions of the case are fatally altered and there is no real conflict of interest, though the blank space behind the bar at Harry's will surely fill us

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with genuine sorrow each scotch-and-water hour. It is not between infant and image, then, that we are being asked to choose, but between some fully realized aesthetic quality and a vaguely generalized human nature, even though it is a specific baby who could drown.

It is the moralists, of course, who like to imagine these lunatic choices. It is the moralists who want to bully and beat up on the artists, not the other way around. The error of the artists is indifference. Not since Plato's day, when the politicians in their grab for public power defeated the priests, the poets, and the philosophers, have artists, except for an occasional Bronx cheer, molested a moralist. Authors do not gather to burn good deeds in public squares; laws are not passed by poets to put lying priests behind bars, nor do they usually suggest that the pursuit of goodness will lead you away from both beauty and truth, that it is the uphill road to ruin. Musicians do not hang moralizing lackeys from lampposts as though they were stringing their fiddles; moralizing lackeys do that.

On the other hand . . . We know what the other hand is full of: slings and arrows, slanders and censorship, prisons, scaffolds, burnings and beatings. To what stake has Savonarola's piety been bound by the painters he disgraced? Throughout history, goodness has done more harm than good, and over the years moralists have managed to give morality a thoroughly bad name. Although lots of bad names have been loaned them by the poets, if the poets roast, they roast no one on the coals, while moralists, to their reward, have dispatched who knows how many thousands of souls.

**T**he values which men prize have been variously classified. There may be said to be, crudely, five kinds. There are first of all those facts and theories we are inclined to call true, and which, we think, constitute our knowledge. Philosophy, history, science, presumably pursue them. Second, there are the values of duty and obligation—obedience and loyalty, righteousness and virtue—qualities which the state finds particularly desirable. Appreciative values of all kinds may be listed third, including the beauties of women, art, and nature, the various sublimes, and that pleasure which comes from the pure exercise of human faculties and skills. Fourth are the values of self-realization and its attendant pleasures—growth, well-being, and the like—frequently called happiness in deference to Aristotle. Finally, there are those which have to do with real or imagined redemption, with ultimate justice and immortality. Some would prefer to separate political values like justice or freedom from more narrowly moral ones, while others would do the same for social values like comfort, stability, security, conditions often labeled simply "peace." But a complete and accurate classification, assuming it could be accomplished, is not important here. Roughly, we might call our goals, as tradition has, Truth, Goodness, Beauty, Happiness, and Salvation. (We can reach port, sometimes, even with a bad map.)

If we allow our classificatory impulse to run on a little longer, it will encourage us to list at least four customary attitudes which can be taken toward the relationship of these value areas to one another. First, one can deny the legitimacy or reality of a particular value group. Reckless pragmatists and some sophists deny the objective existence of all values except utility, while positivists prefer to elevate empirical truth (which they don't capitalize, only underscore) to that eminence. It is, of course, truth thinned to the thickness of a wire, which is fine if you want to cut cheese. The values which remain are rejected as attitudes, moods, or emotions—subjective states of various sorts like wishing, hoping, willing, which suggest external objects without being able to establish them. I happen to regard salvation values as illusory or mythological, since I deny any significance to the assumptions on which they are grounded, but other people may pick out different victims.

Second, we might accept the values of a certain sphere as real enough,



but argue that some or all of them are reducible to others, even eventually, to one. Reductionism is characteristic of Plato's famous argument that virtue is knowledge; of Keats's fatuous little motto, Beauty Is Truth; of materialists and idealists equally. Rather than reduce moral values to those of happiness, Aristotle simply ignored them.

Third, we can try to make some values subordinate to others. This is not the same as reduction. One might argue that artistic and moral values are mutually exclusive, or unique, and yet support the superiority of one over the other. There are, however, two kinds of subordination. One asserts that X is more important than Y, so that when one has to choose between them (baby or Botticelli), one must always choose the baby. When designing buildings, for instance, beauty regularly runs afoul of function and economy. The other sort of subordination insists not only that X is more important, or "higher" in value, than Y, but that Y should serve or be a means to X: the baby is a model for the baby in the Botticelli. The slogan Form Follows Function is sometimes so understood. I take crude Marxism to require this kind of sacrifice from the artist.

Fourth, it is possible to argue, as I do, that these various value areas are significantly different. They are not only different; they are not reducible, but are independent of one another. Furthermore, no one value area is more important, abstractly considered, than any other. In short, these various values are different, independent, and equal.

This does not imply that in particular instances one would not choose one over the other and have good reasons for doing so; it is simply that what is chosen in any instance cannot be dictated in advance. Obviously, if one is starving, whether one's eventual food is served with grace and eaten with manners is less than essential. Should you skip dinner or lick the spilled beans from the floor? Should you choose to safeguard a painting or the well-being of its model? Should you bomb Monte Cassino?

That attachment to human life which demands that it be chosen over everything else is mostly humbug. It can be reasonably, if not decisively, argued that the world is already suffering from a surfeit of such animals; that most human beings rarely deserve the esteem some philosophers have for them; that historically humans have treated their pets better than they have treated one another; that no one is so essential he or she cannot be replaced a thousand times over; that death is inevitable anyhow; that it is our sense of community and our own identity which lead us to persist in our parochial overestimation; that it is rather a wish of philosophers than a fact that man be more important than anything else that's mortal, since nature remains mum and scarcely supports the idea, nor do the actions of man himself. Man makes a worse God than God, and when God was alive, he knew it.

**B**aby or Botticelli is a clear enough if artificial choice, but it places the problem entirely in the moral sphere, where the differences involved can be conveniently overlooked. What differences?

The writing of a book (the painting of a painting, the creation of a score) is generally such an exacting and total process that it is not simply O.K. if it has many motives, it is essential. The difference between one of Flaubert's broken amatory promises to Louise Colet and his writing of *Madame Bovary* (both considered immoral acts in some circles) is greater even than Lenin's willingness to board a train and his intended overthrow of the czar. Most promises are kept by actions each one of which fall into a simple series; that is, I meet you at the Golden Toad by getting up from my desk, putting on my coat, and getting into my car: a set of actions each one of which can be serially performed and readily seen as part of "going to lunch." I may have many reasons for keeping our date, but having promised becomes the moral one.

However, when I create a work of art, I have entered into no contract of any kind with the public, unless the work has been commissioned. In this

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sense, most aesthetic acts are unbidden, uncalled-for, even unexpected. They are gratuitous. And unlike Lenin's intention to overthrow an empire (which can scarcely be an intention of the same kind as my meeting you for lunch, involving, as it does, several years, thousands of folks, and millions of dollars), my writing will, all along, be mine alone, and I will not normally parcel out the adjectives to subordinates and the sex scenes to specialists, or contract the punctuation.

I have many reasons for going to the Golden Toad, then: I am hungry; you are pretty; we have business; I need a change from the atmosphere of the office; you are paying, and I am broke—oh yes . . . and I promised. All these interests are easily satisfied by our having lunch. There is no need to order them; they are not unruly or at odds.

So why am I writing this book? Why to make money, to become famous, to earn the love of many women, to alter the world's perception of itself, to put my rivals' noses out of joint, to satisfy my narcissism, to display my talents, to justify my existence to my deceased father, to avoid cleaning the house; but if I wish to make money I shall have to write trash, and if I wish to be famous, I had better hit home runs, and if I wish to earn the love of many women, I shall have more luck going to work in a bank. In short, these intentions do conflict; they must be ordered; none of them is particularly "good" in the goodie sense; and none is aesthetic in any way.

But there is so much energy in the baser motives, and so little in the grander, that I need hate's heat to warm my art, I must have my malice to keep me going. For I must go, and go on, regardless. For making a work of art (writing a book, being Botticelli) requires an extended kind of action, an ordered group of actions. Yet these actions are not the sort which result, like a battle, in many effects, helter-skelter: in broken bodies, fugitive glories, lasting pains, conquered territories, power, ruins, ill will; rather, as a funnel forms the sand and sends it all in the same direction, the many acts of the artist aim at one end, one result.

We are fully aware, of course, that while I am meeting you for lunch, admiring your bodice, buying office equipment, I am not doing the laundry, keeping the books, dieting, or being faithful in my heart; and when I am painting, writing, singing scales, I am not cooking, cleaning house, fixing flats. So the hours, the days, the years of commitment to my work must necessarily withdraw me from other things, from my duties as a husband, a soldier, a citizen.

So the actions of the artist include both what he does and, therefore, what he doesn't do; what he does directly and on purpose, and what he does incidentally and quite by the way. In addition, there are things done, or not done, or done incidentally, which are quite essential to the completion and character of the work, but whose effects do not show themselves in the ultimate object or performance. As necessary as any other element, they disappear in the conclusion like a middle term in an argument. A deleted scene, for instance, may nevertheless lead to the final one. Every line is therefore many lines: words rubbed out, thoughts turned aside, concepts canceled. The eventual sentence seems to lie there quietly, "kill the king," with no one knowing that it once read, "kiss the king," and before that, "kiss the queen." For moralists, only too often, writing a book is little different than robbing a bank, but actions of the latter sort are not readily subject to revisions.

The writer forms words on a page. This defaces the page, of course, and in this sense it is like throwing a brick through a window; but it is not like throwing a brick through a window in any other way. And if writing is an immense ruckus made of many minor noises, some shutting down as soon as they are voiced, reading is similarly a series of acts, better ordered than many, to be sure, but just as privately performed, and also open to choice, which may have many motives too, the way the writing had. Paintings and performances (buildings even more so) are public in a fashion that reading and writing never are, although the moralist likes to make lump sums of

everything and look at each art as if it were nothing but a billboard or a sound truck in the street.

If we rather tepidly observe that a building stands on its street quite differently than a book in its rack, must we not also notice how infrequently architects are jailed for committing spatial hanky-panky or putting up obscene facades? Composers may have their compositions hooted from the hall, an outraged patron may assault a nude, a church burned to get at the God believed to be inside, but more often than not it is the littérateur who is shot or sent to Siberia. Moralists are not especially sensitive to form. It is the message that turns their noses blue. It is the message they will murder you for. And messages which are passed as secretly as books pass, from privacy to privacy, make them intensely suspicious. Yet work which refuses such interpretations will not be pardoned either. Music which is twelve-toned,

paintings which are abstract, writing which seems indifferent to its referents in the world—these attacks on messages themselves—they really raise the watchdog's hackles.

**I**n life, values do not sit in separate tents like harem wives; they mix and mingle rather like sunlight in a room, or pollution in the air. A dinner party, for example, will affect the diners' waists, delight or dismay their palates, put a piece of change in the grocer's pocket, bring a gleam to the vintner's eye. The guests may be entertained or stupefied by gossip, chat, debate, wit. I may lose a chance to make out, or happily see my seduction advance past hunt and peck. The host may get a leg up in the firm whose boss he's entertaining, serious arguments may break out, new acquaintances may be warmly made. And if I, Rabbi Ben Ezra, find myself seated next to Hermann Goering, it may put me quite off the quail—quail which the *Reichsminister* shot by machine gun from a plane. We should all be able to understand that. It would be a serious misjudgment, however, if I imagined that the quail was badly cooked on account of who shot it, or to believe that the field marshal's presence had soured the wine, although it may have ruined the taste in my mouth. It might be appropriate to complain of one who enjoyed the meal and laughed at the fat boy's jokes. Nevertheless, the meal will be well prepared or not quite independently of the guests' delightful or obnoxious presence, and it would be simple-minded to imagine that because these values were realized in such close proximity they therefore should be judged on other than their own terms—the terms, perhaps, of their pushier neighbors.

The detachment it is sometimes necessary to exercise in order to disentangle aesthetic qualities from others is often resented. It is frequently considered a good thing if moral outrage makes imbeciles of us. The aesthete who sees only the poppies blowing in Flanders fields is a sad joke, to be sure, but the politicized mind is too dense and too dangerous to be funny.

I have been mentioning some differences between moral acts as they are normally understood (keeping promises, saving the baby) and what might be called artistic ones (dancing the fandango, painting the Botticelli), and I have been drawing our attention to the public and private qualities of the several arts lest they be treated en bloc. Finally, I have suggested that values have to be judged by sharply different standards sometimes, though they come to the same table. However, my dinner party differs from Petronius' banquet in another essential: it is "thrown" only once. Even if the evening is repeated down to the last guest's happy gurgle, the initial party can be only vaguely imitated, since you can't swallow the same soup twice (as a famous philosopher is supposed to have said). The events of my party were like pebbles tossed into a pond. The stones appear to shower the surface of the water with rings, which then augment or interfere with one another as they widen, although eventually they will enlarge into thin air, the pond will become calm, and the stones' effects negligible.

Art operates at another level altogether. Petronius' story does not fling itself like a handful of stones at the public and then retire to contemplate

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the recession of its consequences, but occurs continually as readers reenact it. Of course these readings will not be identical (because no reading is written or a part of the text), but the text, unless it has been mutilated or reedited, will remain the same. I shall recognize each line as the line I knew, and each word as the word that was. The letter abides and is literal, though the spirit moves and strays. In short, the mouth may have an altered taste, but not the soup.

For this reason the powers of events are known to be brief, even when loud and unsettling, and unless they can reach the higher levels of historical accounts—unless they can reach language—the events will be forgotten and their effects erased. Accounts, too, can be lost or neglected, so those texts which are truly strong are those whose qualities earn the love and loyalty of their readers, and enlist the support and stewardship of the organizations those readers are concerned with and control (schools, societies, academies, museums, archives), because the institutions encourage us to turn to these now canonical texts again and again, where their words will burn in each fresh consciousness as if they had just been lit.

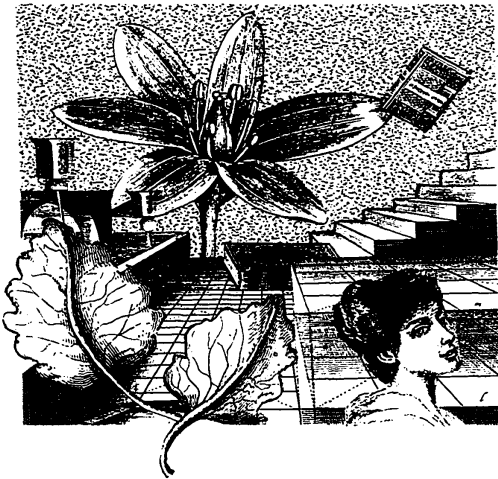
Moralists are right to worry about works of art, then, because they belong to a higher level of reality than most things. Texts can be repeated; texts can be multiplied; texts can be preserved; texts beget commentaries, and their authors energize biographers; texts get quoted, praised, reviled, memorized; texts become sacred.

The effect of a text (as every failed commission on pornography has demonstrated) cannot be measured as you measure blows; the spread of a text cannot be followed like the course of an epidemic; there is no dye which can be spilled upon the ground to track the subtle seepages of its contamination. Texts are not acts of bodies but acts of minds; for the most part, then, they do not act on bodies as bodies act, but on minds as minds do.

**S**o my position is not that literature has no relation to morality, or that reading and writing, or composing, or painting, aren't also moral, or possibly immoral, acts. Of course they can be. But they are economic acts as well. (They contribute to their author's health or illness, happiness or melancholy.) My position, however, is that the artistic value of a book is different from its economic value, and is differently determined, as is its weight in pounds, its utility as a doorstop, its elevating or edifying or life-enhancing properties, its gallery of truths: new truths, known truths, believed truths, important truths, alleged truths, trivial truths, absolute truths, coming truths, plain unvarnished truths. Artistic quality depends upon a work's internal, formal, organic character, upon its inner system of relations, upon its structure and its style, and not upon the morality it is presumed to recommend, or upon the benevolence of its author, or its emblematic character, when it is seen as especially representative of some situation or society.

As I have already suggested, values may reinforce one another, or interfere with their realization in some thing or person. The proximity of Herr Goering may put me off my feed. Perhaps I ought to be put off. Perhaps the chef should have poisoned the quail. Perhaps all of the guests should have left in a huff. And the housemaid and the butler grin as they quaff champagne in the kitchen, grin so little bones appear between their open teeth. How's the pâté no one would eat? Deelish.

Wagner's works are not wicked simply because he was; nor does even the inherent vulgarity deep within the music quite destroy it. Frost's poetry seems written by a better man than we've been told he was. In fact, we are frequently surprised when an author of genius (like Chekhov) appears to be a person of some decency of spirit. The moral points of view in works of art differ as enormously as Dante's do from Sophocles', or Shakespeare's from Milton's. Simply consider what we should have to say if the merit of these writers depended at all upon their being correct, even about anything. In



any case, Balzac sees the world quite differently than Butor does; Goethe and Milton cannot both be right; so if being right mattered, we should be in a mess indeed, and most of our classics headed for the midden.

If author and art ought not to be confused, neither should art and audience. If we were to say, as I should prefer, that it is the moral world of the work which ought to matter to the moralist, not the genes of the author's grandfather, or the Jean who was a longtime lover, or a lean of the penholder toward the political right or left, we ought also to insist that the reactions of readers aren't adequate evidence either. If Wagner's anti-Semitism doesn't fatally bleed into his operas, and, like a bruise, discolor them, and if Balzac's insufferable bourgeois dreams don't irreparably damage his fictions, then why should we suppose the work itself, in so much less command of its readers than its author is of it, will communicate its immoral implications like a virus to the innocents who open its covers?

To be sure, authors often like to think of their works as explosive, as corrupting, as evil. It is such fun to play the small boy. Lautréamont asks Heaven to "grant the reader the boldness to become ferocious, momentarily, like what he is reading, to find, without being disoriented, his abrupt and savage path through the desolate swamps of these somber and poison-filled pages." Yet this is an operative attitude; reading is never more than reading, and requires a wakeful understanding—that is all. Certainly we should like to think that we had written some "poison-filled" pages, but no luck. Even chewing them won't make you sick, not even queasy.

**I**f the relation of morality to art were based simply on the demand that art be concerned with values, then almost every author should satisfy it even if they wrote with their pricks in their sleep. (Puritans will object to the language in that sentence, and feminists to the organ, and neither will admire or even notice how it was phrased.) Henry Miller's work has been condemned, but Henry Miller is obsessed with ethical issues, and his work has a very pronounced moral point of view. *Madame Bovary* was attacked; *Ulysses* was forbidden entry into the United States; *Lady Chatterley's Lover* was brought to court, where they worried about signs of sodomy in it; *Lolita*, of course, was condemned; and, as someone has said, who also has suffered such censorship, so it goes. How long the list would be, how tiresome and dismaying and absurd its recital, if we were to cite every work that has been banned, burned, or brought into the dock.

It is simply not possible to avoid ethical concerns; they are everywhere; one is scarcely able to move without violating someone's moral law. Nor are artists free of the desire to improve and instruct and chastise and beam on their fellow creatures, whether they call themselves Dickens, D. H. Lawrence, or Hector Berlioz. Céline is so intensely a moral writer that it warps his work. That is the worry. "There are still a few hatreds I'm missing," he wrote. "I am sure they exist." Hate, we mustn't forget, is a thoroughly moralized feeling.

It is the management of all these impulses, attitudes, ideas, and emotions (which the artist has as much as anyone) that is the real problem, for each of us is asked by our aims, as well as by our opportunities, to overcome our past, our personal aches and pains, our beloved prejudices, and to enlist them in the service of our skills, the art we say we're loyal to and live for. If a writer is in a rage, the rage must be made to energize the form, and if the writer is extended on the rack of love, let pain give the work purpose and disappointment its burnished point. So the artistic temperament is called cold because its grief becomes song instead of wailing. To be a preacher is to bring your sense of sin to the front of the church, but to be an artist is to give to every mean and ardent, petty and profound, feature of the soul a glorious godlike shape.

It is actually not the absence of the ethical that is complained of, when complaints are made, for the ethical is never absent. It is the absence of the

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who served immoral  
systems, who went  
to bed with snakes,  
by schemers and  
panderers*

*right* belief, the *right* act, which riles. Our pets have not been fed; repulsive enthusiasms have been encouraged; false gods pursued; obnoxious notions noised about; so damn these blank and wavy paintings and these hostile drums, these sentences which sound like one long scratch of chalk.

Goodness knows nothing of Beauty. They are quite disconnected. If I say *shit* in a sentence, it is irrelevant what else I say, whether it helps my sentence sing or not. What is relevant is the power of certain principles of decorum, how free to be offensive we are going to be allowed to be. When the Empress Dowager of China, Ci Xi, diverted funds intended for the navy to construct a large and beautiful marble boat, which thousands now visit at the Summer Palace in Beijing, she was guilty of expropriation. If her choice had been a free one, she would seem to have chosen to spend her money on a thing of peace rather than on things of war (a choice we might applaud); in fact, we know she simply spent the money on herself. She cannot have chosen the beauty she received because beauty is beyond choice. The elegant workmanship which went into the boat, the pleasure it has given to many, its rich and marvelous material, are serendipitous, and do not affect the morality of the case.

When a government bans nonobjective art, it is the threat of the very look it has, its veer from the upright, its deviationism, that is feared—a daub is just as dangerous. Finally, when the Soviet authorities decide to loosen their restrictions on the publication of books and the holding of performances, this is not suddenly a choice of art over politics on their part; it is politics, and has to do with issues such as the freedom of information, the quashing of the Stalin cults, not with art. They know what the novels in the drawers are about.

I do happen to feel, with Theodor Adorno, that writing a book is a very important moral act indeed, consuming so much of one's life, and that, in these disgusting times, a writer who does not pursue an alienating formalism, but rather tries to buck us up and tell us not to spit in the face of the present, this to serve a corrupt and debauched society in any way, is, if not a pawn of the system (a lackey, we used to say), then probably a liar and a hypocrite. It is a moral obligation to live in one's time, and to have a just and appropriate attitude toward it, not to live in the nineteenth century or to be heartless toward the less fortunate or to deny liberty and opportunity to others or to fall victim to nostalgia.

But good books have been written by bad people, by people who served immoral systems, who went to bed with snakes, by people who were frauds in various ways, by schemers and panderers. And beautiful books have been written by the fat and old and ugly, the lonely, the misbegotten (it is the same in all the arts), and some of these beautiful books are like Juar Goytisoló's, ferociously angry, and some of them are even somewhat sinister like Baudelaire's, and some are shakingly sensuous like those of Colette and still others are dismayingly wise, or deal with terror tenderly, or are full of lamentable poppycock. (I am thinking most immediately of Pope's *Essays on Man*.)

I think it is one of the artist's obligations to create as perfectly as he or she can, not regardless of all other consequences, but in full awareness nevertheless, that in pursuing other values—in championing Israel or fighting for women or defending the faith or exposing capitalism or speaking for your race—you may simply be putting a saving scientific, religious political false face on your failure as an artist. Neither the world's truth nor a god's goodness will win you that race.

Finally, in a world which does not provide beauty for its own sake, but where the loveliness of flowers, landscapes, faces, trees, and sky are adventitious and accidental, it is the artist's task to add to the world objects or ideas—delineations, symphonies—which ought to be there, and whose end is contemplation and appreciation; things which deserve to become the focus of a truly disinterested affection.

There is perhaps a moral in that.