Oh, have you looked wistfully
into the lush bodies of the
flowers?

Mary Oliver

If you are squeamish,
Don't prod the beach rubble.

Sappho

And God saw everything that He had
made, and behold, it was very good.

Genesis 1.31

1. I shall attempt in this essay to provide a definition of the beauty of "ordinary objects," that is, of natural objects such as butterflies, and of artificial objects such as automobiles, provided only that objects of this latter sort are not produced by the fine arts, such as paintings, statues, sonnets, and sonatas. The question I shall set before me is, "What makes these ordinary objects beautiful?" What is it about a butterfly, or a baby, or a woman, or a glass vase, or a tiger, or the ocean, or mountains, or a swallow, or a fine automobile, or a fighter jet, or a carpenter's hands, or trees, or a cobra, or china cups, or lace, or clouds, or a castle, or lightning, or a flower, that makes it beautiful?

2. I differentiate between ordinary objects and the output of the fine arts only because when I first began to think about the question, my mind leaped spontaneously to objects that seemed not to have anything to do with art, and I have, since then, worried little about
art. This is not a bad practice because for art and ordinary objects to be investigated together, they would need to possess beauty of the same type, which they do not. There is something about art and our experience of it that puts it in a different class from lightning, butterflies, or fast cars. Claims I would have no trouble whatsoever in making about ordinary objects, I would be reluctant to make concerning art, so I have decided to give the beauty of ordinary objects an independent look. I start from the assumption, therefore, that there are two different and incommensurable types of beauty: that which manifests itself in art and that which manifests itself in ordinary objects.

3. As a first starting point, I would like to say that the beauty of ordinary objects derives from two projections, one moral, the other libidinous – taking the terms, “moral,” and “libidinous,” very broadly, of course.\(^1\) If the things of our world can appear “beautiful” to us it is because we read into them moral values and libidinal symbols.

4. Let me also say at the onset that, to make my points, I will deploy the logic of genus and species. When I spoke of ordinary beauty being formed by moral and libidinous projections, I had the genus of ordinary beauty in mind, that is, the general pattern into which all the varieties of ordinary beauty fit (with one exception).\(^2\) The genus of ordinary beauty splits up, however, into a variety of species depending on the type of moral and libidinous projection involved. One particular type of moral and libidinous projection produces one particular species of beauty, another type. The advantage, as I see it, of the genus and species approach is that it can explain why very different things – swords and snowflakes, or airplanes and autumn leaves, for example – can be described by the same word beautiful. There are moral and libidinous projections we make into each of them that

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\(^1\) The word “moral” makes me a little nervous, of course, as it has connotations of the dutiful and moralistic, which have a part in my own thinking. If I use the word at all, it is to extrapolate to the entire range of those things that we value, such as strength, compassion, efficiency.

\(^2\) If my suspicion about art and ordinary objects is correct, then art will be a different genus of beauty, and will have a different generic definition.
qualifies each of them to be called beautiful (in the generic sense). At the same time, however, the moral and libidinous projections involved in each case are quite different, which is why there are beauties of quite (specifically) different kinds. This pattern of genus and species also appears in our language. For example, we might call a piece of lace beautiful (that’s the genus) or we might call it delicate or precious (that’s the species). Or, to take another example, we might call a tree beautiful (genus), or we might call it sturdy or imposing (species).

5. There is quite a wealth and variety of material here. The species of ordinary beauty are probably not as numerous as the species of Amazonian beetles, but there are quite a few of them. The “anatomy” of some of these species could turn out, in fact, to be quite complex. What I am trying to say is that I can’t, without becoming hopelessly long-winded and boring, talk about everything. So I have decided, in a sort of compromise, to talk about one species of beauty in very careful detail, and then to talk about the other species of beauty a little more generally. Bear in mind, however, even as I talk on and on about the one species of beauty, that not all beauty is like this – I am talking of only beauty of this one species.

Part A: A First Species Of Ordinary Beauty, Discussed In Some Detail

7. Let’s begin with flowers and the species of beauty that flowers belong to. This is a species characterized by its fragility. Besides flowers, other members of this species are: china tea cups, butterflies, lace, vases, autumn leaves, and women of a particular sort of delicate (fragile flower) beauty. Before proceeding to show how this species of beauty is constructed out of moral and libidinous projections, I would like to address the question concerning the sort of relationship which exists between the fragility of these objects and their beauty.

8. It is, of course, commonplace to say that fragile things are beautiful. The problem is in thinking that these things are beautiful and fragile, as if their beauty and fragility were two different things, their beauty coming first and then their fragility coming second and attaching itself to this beauty like an unfortunate accident or a tragic
fate. One might, according to this interpretation, say that the beauty of a flower is comprised of its shape and color, and that the fragility of the flower, though it might add a certain poignancy to this beauty, does not help to actually create it. In scholastic terminology, this interpretation is treating fragility as an accident of beauty rather than as part of its substance.

I would like to insist, however, that these objects are not merely beautiful and fragile, but actually beautiful because they are fragile. In other words, it is because they are fragile that, in the first place, they are beautiful. We don’t love these objects for other reasons and then sadly watch them whither or shatter or die; rather we love them because we know they do wither and shatter and die. This is easy enough to prove if we take an example: Let’s imagine, first, a fine china cup. Now I think it is the fragility of this cup which makes it beautiful. To ascertain that this is true, imagine an identical cup made, not of china, but of an absolutely indestructible kevlar polymer. This new cup, although it would look and feel exactly like the old cup, is completely accident-proof. Despite being hurled against a wall or dropped to the floor, it would simply bounce back, whole.

Here’s the question: Is this new kevlar cup still beautiful? Is it the sort of cup we would still proudly display in our china cabinet? Is it the sort of cup we would show off to our dinner guests, pointing out to them that our china is almost as good as rubber and could be thrown against the wall without injury? If the reader is anything like me, his or her response would have to be, “No!” Somehow this new kevlar cup would not be beautiful anymore. The fact that the original china cup had been fragile was what had made it beautiful. Once its fragility had gotten bartered for its indestructibility, as much as one might still find upon its surface the same alluring decorative pattern, its beauty would have simply disappeared. The fragility of the cup did not simply add poignancy to the beauty of the cup, but formed an inalienable part of its beauty.

Take another example, say flowers. Imagine holding a flower fashioned out of flexible and scented titanium. Imagine this flower in

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3 In this, and in the other “thought experiments” to follow, I will be applying Husserl’s method of eidetic variations. It is not necessary to know this in order to understand what I am saying, but I wanted to acknowledge my debts.
exactly the same color and shape as the real one, with the difference only that it is indestructible; it could never fade or die. Is this titanium flower as beautiful as a real one. I think the answer would be a resounding, “No!” It may be as attractive to the eye as the real thing, but it would not be as beautiful. I have experienced this with artificial flowers. No matter how cleverly made, no matter how wonderful in appearance, they would still never be as beautiful as the real things.

Does this mean that the titanium flower lacks beauty, because, notwithstanding its imperishability, it is not the real thing at all, but its counterfeit and would, as such, tend to be disliked (fakes, after all, tend to be disliked)? Is it this dislike – rather than any melancholy talk about fading and dying – that explains why the titanium flower does not seem beautiful to us? But suppose such a flower could sprout in the manner of a natural flower. Once sprouted, of course, it would remain insusceptible to insects, impervious to scissors or plucking, subject to neither fading nor change. Would it still be beautiful? The answer, I think, would still have to be “No!,” as there would be something quite cold about it, even frightening and repulsive, rather than beautiful. We find ordinary flowers beautiful not because we think them natural but because they are perishable. An object could be supremely natural, yet not possess beauty. What would need to be added to flowers to qualify them as beautiful is perishability. If something happened and these titanium flowers did begin to fade and die, were torn by the wind and ravaged by insects ... well, our hearts would then go out to them and we would find them truly beautiful with that same fragile beauty that real flowers have.

In addition to these fanciful examples, I would also like to talk about a couple of real ones. And I would like to start with things that are fragile in that particular way we call delicate. For in their case I think it is especially clear that it is the fragility or delicacy itself which we find beautiful. A specific example would be lace, for it is the delicacy of lace which attracts us to it. Lace, surely, is not just beautiful and delicate, but beautiful because it is delicate. The whole point of its laciness, after all, is to stretch this delicacy out and make it manifest to

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4 And if someone were to further object that these flowers can’t be natural because they never die, he or she would actually have conceded our point, because he or she would have admitted that it is dying which is the precise issue involved here.
the eyes. And the best lace is the sheerest lace, i.e., the lace that manages to take this delicacy and stretch it out to within a single ache of the breaking point.

Other examples would be wine glasses and butterfly wings. The long and narrow neck of the wine glass and the brightly colored but paper-thin wings of the butterfly stretch out before our eyes an image of fragility, an image that we find exquisite and beautiful. Think as well of the way a butterfly flies (i.e., by fluttering). There is a sort of fragility or weakness that we find beautiful here. Butterflies, after all, do not fly with the strength and assurance of bees or of birds. Instead, they flit or flutter; they move their wings a lot, but manage all the same to fly slowly and not quite straight, and for short distances only. Yet this weak and fluttering flight is something we find charming and lovely. If we weren’t convinced that it was the weakness itself that we found beautiful here, all we would need to do would be to imagine that butterflies swooped like falcons or sped along like fighter jets, and then to ask ourselves whether such super-strong butterflies would still be beautiful? And if we answered, as I think we would, that they would not be beautiful any more, then we would be admitting that the weakness and the fluttering were actually an essential aspect of what we found beautiful. In a similar way, a kite that was nailed securely to the sky would not be as beautiful as one held tenuously there by a piece of string and the wind’s caprice.

Babies are still another example. Their weakness or utter dependence upon their caregivers would seem to be an important part of their beauty. I can remember my father saying, as he was holding a baby in his arms, “Isn’t it amazing how helpless babies are?” What’s interesting is that my father – who is certainly no fan of weakness – was using the word “helpless” in a positive sense to indicate a charm which he thought the baby possessed. “Helpless” is merely a more blunt version of a variety of other words used of babies – “sweet,” “trusting,” “innocent” – all of which in some way attribute a positive beauty to the babies’ fragility and dependence.
I would like to close this section with a few lines from e. e. cummings's poem #57, from his collection *Viva*. He writes to the woman for whom it is written,\(^5\)

nothing which we are to perceive in this world equals
the power of your intense fragility: whose texture
compels me with the colour of its countries,
rendering death and forever with each breathing

I am quoting these lines because I want to agree with e. e. cummings about the power of fragility, and because I want to say that this power is possessed not just by women but also by all the other fragile things we have talked about. In all these cases, fragility gives the object an appeal which goes beyond mere superficial attractiveness and which tugs on us in a pretty deep way. We can measure the strength of this appeal by the way we shout "Oh no!" as a china cup drops to the floor, or by the extent to which we are secretly rooting for the kite to stay

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\(^5\) Here is the whole poem:

\textit{#57}

somewhere I have never travelled, gladly beyond
any experience, your eyes have their silence:
in your most frail gesture are things which enclose me,
or which i cannot touch because they are too near

your slightest look easily will unclose me
though i have closed myself as fingers,
you open always petal by petal myself as Spring opens
(touching skillfully, mysteriously) her first rose

or if your wish be to close me, i and
my life will shut very beautifully, suddenly,
as when the heart of this flower imagines
the snow carefully everywhere descending;

nothing which we are to perceive in this world equals
the power of your intense fragility: whose texture
compels me with the colour of its countries,
rendering death and forever with each breathing

(i do not know what it is about you that closes
and opens; only something in me understands
the voice of your eyes is deeper than all roses)
nobody, not even the rain, has such small hands
aloft, or by the shock we feel if we see someone tearing up a piece of lace, or by the sadness we feel when a flower withers.

9. I want to come back to a point which I passed over sort of quickly in the last section. This is the status of things like the color and shape of the flower, or the intricate knottings of the lace, or the bright colors on a butterfly’s wings. What I want to say is that, considered just by themselves and separately from the object’s fragility, these things are attractive or eye-catching, but not yet really beautiful. I think these things are the “triggers” or “catalysts” or “attention getters” of beauty, rather than beauty itself. The color and shape of a flower, for example, draw our attention to it and set up an initial feeling of liking. But it is only when we move beyond this to an awareness of the flower’s fragility that our initial liking deepens into beauty. I think that the examples we considered earlier of the kevlar cup and the titanium flower prove this distinction between triggers and beauty, because in these cases we have the triggers without the beauty. I admit, however, that the distinction can be a little hard to see in such cases where the triggers are, after all, attractive ones. But there are also other cases where the trigger is not really attractive in itself, and where there is, therefore, no temptation to confuse the trigger with actual beauty. One example would be a kite, where the trigger is the height of the kite above the ground. Now, height is clearly not something beautiful in itself. Height tips us off to the kite’s precarious and delicate situation, and it is in our response to this precariousness that the kite becomes beautiful. Another example would be a baby. Imagine, for example, a baby who was drooling a bit lying in a crib, and who seemed a little uncomfortable, and who was beginning to jerk his or her little arms around. We then rush over and pick the baby up and say “Oh poor dear” and “Oh how beautiful.” Now I have nothing against babies and am probably as fond of them as a bachelor is able to be, but I don’t think the triggers in this case — the drooling, the discomfort, the arms jerking around — are beautiful by themselves and in their own right. What canons of aesthetics, after all, would such things exemplify? I think, here at least, beauty is not occurring at

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6 I am not supposing that there is an actual time lag involved here; I am only expressing it this way in an effort to make the two layers of our response clear.
the level of the triggers themselves, but only at the level of that dependency which they signal and that gentleness they elicit from us. In these two cases, then, the distinction between triggers and actual beauty is a very obvious one, and could help us to see, even in the case of flowers, where it might not seem so obvious at first, that the color and shape of a flower are not actually beautiful, but merely attractive or eye-catching triggers that engage our attention and pull us into the contemplation of an object which, when we do come to realize its fragility, will then come to seem beautiful in our eyes.

10. But why does fragility cause these things to be beautiful? This, it seems to me, is odd. A fragile tea cup, after all, is not a better tea cup for breaking easily. Why, then, do we give this fragile cup the honorific title “beautiful” and prefer it to its sturdier and more useful brethren? Why would we prefer an ordinary flower that faded quickly to a titanium one that would last forever? Why, in sum, do we prefer objects that break, wither, fade, tear, die?

The answer, it seems to me, is that the fragility of these objects elicits our compassion and our melancholy. This is what I mean by a “moral projection.” The projection of our compassion and melancholy onto these objects is what renders them beautiful. Fragility comes into play here because it is the fragility of these objects that elicits our compassion and calls forth our melancholy.

Let me turn now to compassion, which I take to cover concern, sympathy, care, assistance, condolence, protection. We pick up a baby, for example, and rock him or her gently to stop his or her crying. We put fine china in a cabinet that not only displays it but keeps it safe, so safe that it cannot even be touched. We carefully tend the flowers in our garden in and through our activities of weeding, watering, fertilizing. In other cases, the compassionate response to things is more subtle and takes the form of feeling rather than of action. As we watch a kite dipping and wavering in the sky, for example, our feelings go out to it, and though we cannot, of course, actually do anything to help, it is still as if our feelings were trying to somehow reach up to steady the kite and hold it aloft. Another example would be flowers. I must confess that the beauty of flowers has always been, for me, a little bit melancholy. I think the reason for this is that, somewhere in the
back of my mind, there is always the knowledge that this flower will soon fade away and die. As I look at the flower, it is almost as if I were in some secret way, condoling with it over the brevity of its life. Robert Herrick, in his poem, “To Daffodils,” put it far more eloquently\(^7\)

Fair daffodils, we weep to see
    You haste away so soon:
And yet the early-rising sun
    Has not attained his noon.

    Stay, stay
    Until the hastening day
        has run
But for the even-song;
    And, having prayed together, we
    Will go with you along.

There is, in other words, a correlation between beauty and compassion. This is not, perhaps, all that surprising. But there is, I think, something a little surprising and paradoxical about how this

\(^{7}\) Here is the poem in toto:

**To Daffodils**

Fair daffodils, we weep to see
    You haste away so soon:
As yet the early-rising sun
    Has not attained his noon.

    Stay, stay
    Until the hastening day
        has run
But for the even-song;
    And, having prayed together, we
    Will go with you along.

We have short time to stay, as you,
    We have as short a Spring;
As quick a growth to meet Decay,
    As you or anything.

    We die
    As your hours do, and dry
        away,
Like to the summer’s rain;
    Or as the pearls of morning’s dew
    Ne’r to be found again.
correlation works. I do not think we treat these objects with compassion because we find them beautiful, so much as we find them beautiful because we treat them with compassion. Beauty does not elicit compassion; compassion causes beauty. What makes this a little complicated is the “triggers” I spoke of earlier. In many cases, we need an attractive trigger to get the whole process started. I must insist, however, that this attractive trigger is not beauty itself, but is what attracts our eyes to something fragile and our compassion then goes out to this fragile thing. Beauty, in that sense, rides atop this compassionate response. To begin with, let’s look back at the example of kites, for I think we can see, in this example, how compassion generates beauty. If we imagine just an ordinary kite without any sort of artistic patterns on it, the kite will not be beautiful by itself, and certainly its flight, as it either just sits there or as it spins and ducks, is no model of beauty or grace or power either. Whence does its beauty come from then? It comes, I think, from the fact that we feel for it — maybe even feel like it — as it struggles to stay precariously aloft. When we extend our feelings to it like this it suddenly becomes beautiful, something we care about, something with an uncertain fate we can identify our own.

This same sort of compassion at the heart of beauty is, I think, evident in Herrick too, whose first stanza talks about weeping and about accompanying the daffodils, and whose second stanza begins by mentioning this identification with the daffodils yet again.

We have short time to stay, as you,
We have as short a Spring.

Herrick, to be fair, is not trying to sort out which came first, the compassion or the beauty, and so I don’t want to quote him as if he were explicitly agreeing with me. I think, however, that his poem makes clear that behind his response to the flowers there is a sense of fellow-feeling; his own life is all too brief, and it is this fellow-feeling which makes him turn such sad and admiring eyes to the field of daffodils. There is here, literally, a compassion or “suffering with” that produces the poignancy and the beauty. Using the method of thought experiment to confirm this result, let us imagine a town in which people smash china tea cups as a form of recreation. Just as boys in
wintertime throw snowballs against walls for fun, so assume that the people in this town throw china tea cups against walls for fun. Just as adolescents sometimes shoot at tin cans with their rifles, so the people in this town shoot at china tea cups with their rifles. Let us imagine a world where china gets no compassion at all, but is busted or smashed without a second thought. The question that arises is would the people in this world – whether or not we ourselves live in such a world – still find china beautiful or not? The answer, I think, is that they (we) would not. A particular tea cup might look like a nice shiny one to throw – sort of like a well-packed snow ball – but this is a far cry from being beautiful. In learning that it is perfectly allowable and okay to use the household china for target practice, the young men of this world would also be learning that china is not something especially beautiful but merely something to shoot at.

What this little experiment is designed to show is that compassion really does function as a cause of beauty. For when we remove the compassion we seem to remove the beauty as well. Another version of the same idea would go like this: It might seem logical to say that what we want is something beautiful, and that when we do get something beautiful we of course take care of it. But it seems to me that, logical or not, the truth is often the other way around, i.e., that what we want is something to take care of, and that when do we get something to take care of we of course find it beautiful. The advantage of looking at things this way, it seems to me, is that it offers simple explanations for some behaviors which would otherwise be very odd and puzzling. For example, I have often wondered why a person would want cups which were so fragile that they needed to be kept in a special cabinet and never used. For the longest time, this just didn’t make much sense to me. But now I see (or think I see) that the answer, paradoxical as it might seem, is that we want such cups precisely because they need to be cared for so carefully, precisely because we want something which we can build a special cabinet for. We want, as it were, to be the conservators of something precious, and this causes us to enshrine the cups and then find them beautiful because we have enshrined them. Or, to take another example, I still remember all the effort my grandfather once put into growing a bird of paradise flower. I did not understand this at the time. There were many other flowers which seemed to me to look as nice and which would certainly have involved
far less to grow. Why then this seemingly perverse preference for the very difficult? Now I see (or think I see) that this was not just my grandfather showing off his (considerable) horticultural skills. My grandfather must have thought the bird of paradise flower was especially beautiful precisely because it was so especially difficult to grow. Its cultivation required of him all of his skill, which he generously gave: The result is that he had something he could look on as his exquisite, darling flower.

Let us call this, the “Exupéry Effect,” mindful of the fact that one of the things the Little Prince discovers is that the beauty of the other flowers in the rose garden is empty, that the rose with four thorns which grew on his planet was more important than all of the roses in the garden put together. The reason for this, as the Prince himself put it, is:

because it is she that I have watered, because it is she that I have put under the glass globe, because it is she that I have sheltered behind the screen, because it is for her that I killed the caterpillars (except the two or three we spared to become butterflies), because it is she that I have listened to …

Or, as the fox in his more blunt way opines:

It is the time you have wasted for your rose that makes your rose so important.

Exupéry is expressing himself here by using the word “important.” But I think the same thing would be true of beauty too, i.e., I think the rose with four thorns would – for these same reasons – also be more beautiful to the prince than any other flower. Isn’t it true for us as well that we find our lovers more beautiful simply because we love them? Doesn’t the garage sale enthusiast find an antique especially beautiful simply because he or she has rescued it? I must admit that, although I can find all these examples, I am not completely sure just how they work. What puzzles me is not our care itself or even the way this care extends itself to so many things. For present purposes at least, I am willing to say that this is simply a fact about our human nature and to

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8 Both this quote and the next come from chapter XXI. The translation is by Katherine Woods.
let it go at that. What does have me puzzled, though, is why this care should make something appear beautiful. How, in other words, does something like care get converted into something like beauty? I have found many examples which show that this conversion happens, but I haven’t found any solid answers as to how or why it happens.

I have come up with a couple of guesses, however, and, in lieu of anything more solid, I would like to offer these guesses now. In one sense, I think that care might be producing beauty because, when we care for an object, that object would then be reflecting our care back to us. So it might actually be the moral value of our own care which we are finding beautiful here – though in a reflected form which keeps us from seeing that it is actually our own care-giving which we are admiring. The object, along with our care, might also be accumulating the status of our beloved – and therefore beautiful – one. In any event, I would like to end this section by mentioning what I think is probably the clearest example of this beautiful-because-cared-for phenomenon. This is the example of babies – an example so obvious I will not belabor the point.

11. For the sake of greater clarity, I shall now lay all this out in terms of what’s objective and what’s subjective. Objectively, there is an object which is possessed of both fragility and of certain triggers. Subjectively, there is a spectator with a reservoir of care within himself or herself. When such an object comes in contact with such a subject, the care rushes out of the subject towards the object, with the result that the object becomes precious, delicate, dear, exquisite – in a word, beautiful. The beauty which results here is neither wholly objective nor wholly subjective, but is based on the interaction of these objective and subjective components. An analogy for how all this works is what happens when we call an apple luscious. Objectively, there is an apple which is sweet and which has a color and shape that are indications of this sweetness. Subjectively, there is a desire called hunger. At the sight of the apple’s color and shape, this desire rushes out of us to play fondly round the apple – with the result that the apple now seems

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9 Color and sweetness are, of course, secondary qualities. But in respect to the hunger I think we can treat them as relatively primary, i.e., as far as the hunger is concerned, at least, these qualities really are in the object.
luscious to us. The thing to notice in this example is that the quality of being luscious is neither wholly objective nor wholly subjective, but is a sort of mixture or interaction of the two. It is something like this which I think is true of beauty as well.

An example that enables us to examine our reaction to it in slow motion might permit us to see all the different steps in this process. Imagine, therefore, that we are taking a walk in the mountains on a windy day. We come to an exposed ridge with rocks upon it and some grass. We then notice a bit of bright purple off in the grass a little distance from us. It is a violet, but we don’t know that yet. We know only that there is a bit of bright color which catches our eye. This is the step I am calling a trigger. Though there is a certain attraction here already, there clearly is not beauty yet. Then we walk over to the purple object that turns out to be a flower that has managed to grow way up in the mountains, and that even now is bending and twisting in the strong, even violent, wind. This is the step I am calling fragility. Suddenly the frightening thought that the violet might tear or be otherwise damaged by the wind, races through our heads. “I wonder how it can survive way up here,” we might say to ourselves – and say with as much concern as wonder. This is the step I am calling compassion. Finally, as a result of all this, the violet takes on a new aura in our eyes. It is now a brave but beleaguered little flower struggling to hold its head up in the wind, a flower which we wish we could aid if only we knew how. This makes the flower appear precious, fine, and beloved. This is the step where I think the flower becomes beautiful.

I have spoken about a moral value being “projected onto” an object. The problem with the word “projection” is that it makes it sound like the process is totally subjective and that the object is no more than a blank screen. These are connotations I don’t want. As I have tried to explain here, the moral value is projecting itself almost in the sense of responding to the object (or to the object’s fragility). The moral value, in other words, is not being pasted over the top of the object, but is finding something in the object which it can embrace.
12. This sort of beauty also involves, it seems to me, a sort of beguilement. Because beautiful objects are, on the one hand, attractive, they create a feeling of attraction in the spectator, and because, on the other hand, they are manifestly fragile, they convert the spectator's attraction to them into a feeling of concern. It is this conversion of attraction into concern that I am calling beguilement. Take the beauty of women. A woman becomes beautiful to a man when she takes his desire for her and beguiles this desire into tenderness and care. For as long as his desire for her remains only desire, she will remain to him a sexual object, attractive, but not, I think, truly beautiful. I do not wish by this to make some sort of a statement about gender roles, feminism, or things of that sort. As much as a certain perverse impulse overtook me as I was choosing the word "beguilement," I can assure the reader that, in fact, I have no larger political purpose here. I merely seek to describe how, for better or worse, a certain sort of beauty gets created. And I believe, as a matter of fact, and without any moral endorsements or condemnations, that a certain sort of beguilement has traditionally been part of the beauty of women. The most obvious (or flagrant) example is probably the cult (or caricature) of women as delicate and fragile flowers, more or less helpless by themselves, and therefore so desperately in need of male protection and support. What this is, it seems to me, is an attempt to convert (or beguile) male desire into male concern.

When a woman drops her handkerchief so that a man can perform the gallant service of retrieving it for her, for example, what she has dropped is an intimate object, doubtlessly scented, a very feminine object. In allowing the man to touch her handkerchief, the woman is giving to the man a sexual token – and giving it to him in such a way that his response does not have to be salacious but even chivalrous. What is more, the dropped handkerchief is a display of the woman's weakness and of her awkwardness at handling even such a small thing as a handkerchief. This display of weakness has an interesting double purpose. On the one hand, it is designed to stimulate the male's sense of manliness and what we might politely call his manly desires, which have somehow been trained to respond to a passive sexual object. On the other hand, this same display of weakness is designed to force the man into a response of kindness and assistance, i.e., his role is to stoop
and retrieve the handkerchief. This attempt to stimulate desire, and yet turn this desire into service, is an example of what I mean by beguilement. While none of this is news, the beguilement involving women is quite similar to the beguilement attending the beauty of all fragile things. Women are a good first example because, in their case, the pattern appears to be clear. There likely is, however, a similar, if less obvious, pattern in all the other examples of fragile things, which charm or beguile us into tenderness or care.

An obvious similarity between the beauty of women and the beauty of ordinary objects may be found in the use of attractive triggers. A woman will dress well, put on jewelry, etc. Fragile objects similarly “dress” in attractive ways: the cup, with its graceful shape, often has a design painted on it; the lace has its intricate patterns; the flower has its bright colors. The baby and the kite are, perhaps, exceptions to this, but even the baby should be smiling and happy, and kites are often decorated to make them look more attractive. But however closely these first two cases do or do not fit the pattern, I think that in most cases at least charm or beguilement starts out the same way: something pretty to catch the eye, something sexual. The sexual dimension is present in most of the other examples as well. At a later part of this essay, I will argue that most of these other fragile things are actually sexual symbols. So at least on a symbolic level, there is a parallel to the sexual attraction we saw in the example of woman.

Finally, I think that another common aspect is the display of fragility or weakness as a method of transforming this attraction and desire into care. Of course, these other objects don’t actually drop handkerchiefs, but they do put their weakness on attractive display in other ways: the baby by falling cutely as he tries to walk; the lace by having not just an intricate pattern but also an almost appalling thinness; the flower by having bright colors which we know will fade so very quickly; and so on. Because we feel compassion for these fragile objects, the attraction and desire we felt before turn into the delicate feeling of concern. I think the notion of beguilement is crucial here because I think it captures something of how this beauty feels or is experienced. We feel, for example, captivated by the delicacy and beauty of a flower. We feel charmed by the exquisite fineness of this lace. We feel surprised by tenderness as we watch the baby toddle. We feel our attention captured by the sight of a butterfly as it flutters from flower
to flower. In all these cases we can, I think, almost feel the beguilement, i.e., we can almost feel our sympathies being caught by an attractive display of weakness or fragility.

13. But I think there is also a perverse side – or at least the potential for a perverse side – in all this. For along with a display of fragility comes a temptation to cruelty, i.e., a temptation to shatter or break or tear. What seems to me most interesting here is how these fragile things manage to both produce this temptation and then beguile it into a more intense devotion. Lace, to take a first example, is not just fragile in a general or abstract way. It is fragile in the sense that we could, if we wanted to, easily tear it with our bare hands. Lace presents itself to us, in other words, not just as fragile but as vulnerable. This makes the beauty of lace both more complex and more intense. For lace now offers us the opportunity to violence and cruelty – it offers us the opportunity to violate something lovely by tearing what places itself, so weak and defenseless, in our hands. I don’t want to go into the issue of whether the urge to violence is instinctive or somehow learned. But I do want to say that the urge is, whatever its origin, certainly inside us. Lace (this is part of its appeal) offers us a chance to satisfy this urge. Lace, as it were, is a stimulus (or temptation) to this urge since it seems almost as if it were explicitly made for easy tearing. Lace becomes beautiful – intensely, complexly, perversely beautiful – because it takes this urge to destruction and beguiles it into concern and careful handling instead.

Of course, I don’t want to say that every time a person is holding a piece of lace that he or she is actually thinking of tearing it up. Rather, I think we have gotten into the habit of automatically beguiling this urge, and so all we are aware of anymore is the (habitual, automatic) perception that lace is beautiful, while the actual process of beguilement which is producing this beauty has dropped from sight. But how, then, do we know that this process of beguiling is actually going on? To say that it is happening unconsciously or habitually is all very well, but once we admit that it’s beneath the surface in this way, how do we know it’s really there at all?

Well, first of all, I think this process does leave some clues or traces in how we perceive the lace. We perceive lace (and it’s important to see
the precision of this word) as vulnerable. In this perception of lace as vulnerable, there is a sort of sotto voce recognition of our own possibilities of tearing or otherwise damaging it. Along the same lines, we are liable to perceive the lace as too delicate to touch, despite the fact that we know we actually could touch it without causing any harm. We may even perceive the lace as something we are forbidden to touch, or at least as something we ought not to touch. These prohibitions, too, seem to indicate a dimly perceived fear of our own destructive capabilities. There are, at least for me, moments when the impulse to destroy breaks a little bit closer to the surface. Sometimes, as I’m stretching out a piece of lace, I will find in myself the stray thought, “How easy this would be to tear.” Or sometimes as I’m holding up and looking at a china cup which is thin almost to the point of translucence, I will find myself thinking, “My, wouldn’t this cup break easily.” Providing indirect evidence at best, these quick and fleeting thoughts appear nonetheless to be consistent with an unconscious gravity in ourselves towards destruction – one, however, that has been so habitually repressed that we become aware of it only in these fleeting ways. I know about this “gravity” because it “feels right” to be able to talk about it. One of the marks Freud proposed in deciding for or against an explanation to an unconscious process was whether or not one “felt right” about it. That is, a correct explanation would eventually make intuitive sense to the patient. Working through the aforementioned examples, the explanation presented of beguilement does feel right to me, and I hope that, after we talk through the other examples, it will feel right to the reader as well.

But, to continue, I think that something similar is true of flowers too. For as disturbing as this might be to say, I think that some of their beauty comes from the fact that we know we could so easily destroy them. To make this clearer, perhaps we should imagine, again, our old friends the titanium flowers. One of the reasons why these titanium flowers are a sort of colorful oddity but not truly beautiful is because they are totally invulnerable to our depredations. If we tried to pluck their petals off, nothing would happen; if we tried to cut them with a scissors, nothing would happen; if we tried to trample them underfoot, nothing would happen. Upon realizing just how indestructible they are, I think our perception of their beauty would decrease. “A freak in contradistinction to something really beautiful,” we might say. Yet the
reason we would say this is that we have been unable to destroy them. In contrast to this, I think the beauty of real flowers derives from the vulnerability with which they present themselves to us. It is as if they were saying to us, "I am lovely; I am delicate; I am in your hands; shred me if you want to, but love me as you shred." When we hear this and realize the extremity with which this delicate flower is giving itself to us — well, all the impulses which really might want to dominate and shred and tear find themselves beguiled into a sudden tenderness. At this moment the flower becomes heartachingly beautiful.

At the end of the novel Silk by Alessandro Boricco, there is a love letter from a woman to a man, in which the former asks the latter to imagine that they are together in the same room, even though they are, in fact, separated by a great distance and will, most likely, never be able to meet again. She tells him to imagine, among other things:\n
you inside me, moving slowly, your hands on my face, your fingers on my mouth, pleasure in your eyes, your voice, you move slowly but to the point of hurting me, my pleasure, my voice. My body on yours, your back lifting me up, your arms that will not let me go, the thrusts inside me, it is sweet violence, I see your eyes probing mine, they want to know how far to go in hurting me, as far as you please, my master and beloved ...

The point of this, of course, is not to turn the man into a sadistic monster, but by freely offering him the possibility of violence, to make his love still more tender.

Something similar is happening with all, or almost all, these fragile things. To take one last example, I know that my hands always tremble a little when I handle fine china — or if they don’t actually tremble, they feel like they should be trembling. But why? The chances of accidentally dropping it while paying such close attention are miniscule. Why tremble then? It is, I think, because the cup offers itself to us as manifestly vulnerable; it puts itself into our hands and allows us to drop and shatter it if we so desire. We tremble as we hold it, just as the man in Boricco’s novel, if he were in fact to meet the woman again and she were to renew her invitation to violence then, would no doubt tremble a bit as he held her.

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10 Chapter 59. The translation is by Guido Waldman.
14. I shall talk next about melancholy, because I think it is through the eyes both of compassion and of melancholy, of concern and of fatalism, that fragile beauty appears. If I use the word, “melancholy,” it will be to refer neither to a state of depression, nor to a condition of neurosis, nor even to grief, but rather to that classical sensibility which sees all things as fleeting and mortal. This is the sensibility of David when he writes¹¹:

As for man, his days are like grass.  
He flourishes like a flower of the field;  
For the wind passes over it and it is gone,  
And its place knows it no more.

It is the sensibility of Ecclesiastes, with its melancholy pronouncement that “All is vanity.”¹² It is also the sensibility that, in ancient Rome, appointed a servant to follow the victor in the triumphal parade, whispering to him constantly, “Remember that you are mortal.” This sort of melancholy was actually considered a morally valuable thing. I say this because my general thesis is that beauty is based, at least in part, on moral projections. It is important, therefore, to my project, to get melancholy to qualify as something moral. This, however, is not merely a case of need, for I think melancholy, as a sort of truth or wisdom, is a morally valuable thing. For the utterances of David and Ecclesiastes, as well as Roman custom, are not so much expressions of a personal sadness as they are reminders to us of an important truth that we are liable to forget.

Melancholy is the basis as well for the cultivation of fortitude – of a stoic fortitude based on the acceptance of fate. The knowledge that all things are destined to die left the melancholy man or woman somehow free to face his or her own death bravely. When Marcus Aurelius, somewhere in his Meditations, tries to get himself to face the possibility of his own death bravely, he tells himself to imagine all the millions who have died before him, and all the millions who will die after him, and then to consider that, in this giant scheme of things, his own death will neither be very unusual nor very important, and so

¹¹ Psalm 103, 15-16.
¹² Ecclesiastes 1,2.
certainly not something to get too bothered over.¹³ Melancholy, then, is not only a moral attitude but an attitudes that enables us take fragile things as beautiful. When we look at a china tea cup, for instance, and call it "fine," I think that it is our melancholy speaking. For behind this word "fine" is the knowledge that fragile things – that fine things – cannot be expected to long. It is their inherent fragility that projects into the word "fine" that connotation of sadness which it also seems to carry.

The word "fine" is a word as well of admiration or praise. What is praised is (if the reader will permit the metaphor) the courage of the tea cup, the courage it shows in being fragile in a world where fragile things don't last,¹⁴ its acceptance of a life of brief and fragile glory. In that sense, the tea cup becomes a figure for the melancholy hero who knows that he or she lives in a world where all things die and yet faces that mortality with a quiet composure. In a similar way, the word "exquisite" is a word of admiration for something so fine that it dares to poise, always, on the very brink of dissolution. In older books one often sees the word "fine" used to describe a noble or courageous action, as in the phrase "many a fine deed." It seems to me very interesting that this same word "fine" is used both for the courage of the warrior and the delicacy of the cup – an interesting fact which our theory is actually in a position to explain.

Melancholy is also what makes raindrops on a windowpane so beautiful. They hang there for a moment, and a moment later they trickle down in a pattern not quite straight, and then they are gone. This is beautiful, it seems to me, because it is an image into which we project our sadness over the brevity of life, i.e., it is an image of a world in which everything streaks such a momentary, zig zag path. This melancholy is also projected into flowers. The poem I quoted earlier by Herrick is an example of this, as is the above-quoted Psalm of David. Another example would be Robert Frost's poem, "Nothing

¹³ I don't, unfortunately, remember just exactly where in the Meditations this thought is.
¹⁴ Of course, this talk of courage and all the rest is anthropomorphic. But my whole point here is that beauty comes from a projection of our moral attitudes. So this anthropomorphism – this projection of the courage of the melancholy man or woman into the teacup – is not a problem but actually in line with what I have been trying to say all along.
Gold Can Stay,” about the first leaves in springtime. In Frost’s view, these leaves are beautiful because they carry the vision which he projects into them of the inevitable decay of all things. Frost writes:

Nature’s first green is gold,
Her hardest hue to hold.
Her early leaf’s a flower
But only so an hour.
Then leaf subsides to leaf,
So Eden sank to grief,
So dawn goes down to day,
Nothing gold can stay.

Babies are no exception to this. Even babies fit the pattern. Their appeal consists, to be sure, in the hope they carry so uncertainly forward, but also in the pathos stirred by a clear-eyed anticipation of the difficulties that, unerringly, they will encounter along their life’s way. The child’s first hopeful steps forward possesses a beauty that is both brave and sad. A kite in flight is beautiful in much this hopeful-melancholy way. It, too, is a figure for hope as it takes bravely to the sky, but always of a “frail hope,” for I think its beauty—in its melancholy aspect—derives from the knowledge that, ultimately, it will not prevail against the powerful wind and fickle sky.

15. I was looking at a calendar one day featuring Georgia O’Keefe’s paintings of flowers, and by the time I came to her painting of pink sweet peas, it dawned on me that flowers—please pardon me for the impoliteness of saying this—are a symbol for the female genitalia. We have phallic symbols, so why not a symbol of the female genitalia as well? Why not fill the world with both types of symbols? O’Keefe’s paintings, it seems to me, gesture strongly in this direction. Sigmund Freud, in his Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis, says in the chapter in which he treats of those dream symbols which do not vary from person to person but which seem to be the same for everyone, that when flowers appear in our dreams they typically symbolize or represent the female genitalia. There is also our habit

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15 Painted in 1927; held in the Collection Shapleigh, St. Louis.
16 Lecture 10, “Symbolism in Dreams.”
of naming women after flowers. We have Iris, Daisy, Lilly, Rose, Violet, Flor, Flora, Jasmine, Heather, Myrtle, and even, according to friends of mine, Amarylis and Poppy. Now I think we have usually interpreted this to mean that women are in some way flower-like (pretty, dainty, etc.). But why not read this connection in the other direction too, i.e., as meaning that flowers are also in some way feminine? If we spontaneously adapt the names of flowers to the names of women, it could be because flowers are already perceived as feminine. Flowers are connected to women in a number of other ways. Women sometimes wear flowers as adornments. Women’s clothing sometimes comes in flower prints. Women are traditionally given flowers as a tribute to their femininity. Women perfume their bodies with the scent of flowers. Is it then so far fetched to suggest that flowers are a symbol of women in some sexual sense? Finally, I have seen, in literature and in language, various metaphors that make this symbolism of flowers pretty clear. There, for example, is the scene in The King and I where the king defends polygamy to Anna by pointing out that, although the bee must be free to go from flower to flower, the flower must never be free to go from bee to bee to bee.\(^{17}\) I can remember being surprised over coming across, in a book of Jon Krakauer’s, a reference to the female labia as “petals.”\(^ {18}\) And we dare not forget the common term – “deflowering” – used to refer to intercourse with a virgin. In Ted Hughes’ translation of Ovid, a line runs\(^ {19}\):

\begin{quote}
(she) let her lust flood hot and startled
Into her cheek, eyes, lips – made her whole face
Open as a flower that offers itself,
Wet with nectar…
\end{quote}

Although Ovid is talking here only about a woman’s face, he is still connecting flowers to female sexual arousal. It also seems to me that a sexual symbolism beyond merely the face is pretty clearly implied in these lines. For all of the above reasons, I have become convinced that

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\(^{17}\) Screenplay by Ernest Lehman.

\(^{18}\) From “Into the Wild,” the very end of chapter 15.

\(^{19}\) From the story of Salmacis and Hermaphroditus. The image, I suspect, is Hughes’s and not Ovid’s, for when I checked Humphries’s translation the image wasn’t there. I am (alas) too illiterate to be able to check the original.
flowers are a symbol for the female genitalia. I think that one of the reasons flowers seem beautiful to us is that we project this symbolism into them. The thought of the female genitalia, after all, exercises quite a power over the human mind. If flowers are a symbol for these genitalia, then they should receive some share of this power — but a power which, because the genitalia are merely symbolized rather than pictured directly, will be purified of that guilt and that ambivalence which a direct picturing would entail. According to Freudian theory, symbols have the advantage of letting the unconscious mind delight in the (usually forbidden) thing the symbol refers to, while leaving the conscious mind aware of the symbol only, and so blissfully unaware of what’s really going on. The conscious mind, in other words, thinks that a flower is just a flower, and so its conscience can remain at ease as it enjoys what it takes to be an innocent delight. Underneath the surface, though, the unconscious mind will be delighting in forbidden thoughts of those female genitalia which the flower symbolizes. I want to suggest that this mechanism of unconscious symbolism is responsible for some of that deep — but somehow unnamable — attraction which flowers exert upon us, an attraction which, it seems to me, is far too strong and too instinctual to be explained by such superficial qualities as a flower’s pretty colors.

The aforementioned is an example of what I have called libidinous projections, which along with moral projections form the basis of the beauty of ordinary objects. Other objects in this class of fragile things are feminine sexual symbols too. Cups and vases are female symbols in much the same way that poles and shafts are male symbols. In his analysis of dreams, Freud found that cups and vases do typically represent the female genitalia.\(^{20}\) Butterflies could be said as well to be female symbols, if by analogy to flowers, the bright colors of which they showcase when they open themselves and spread out their wings. Owing to its close connection to women’s clothing, to intimate clothing especially such as negligées and lingerie, lace, too, might be said to be a female sexual symbol. Babies, Freud reminds us somewhere, are erotic objects that we love to fondle and kiss.\(^{21}\) While this may not

\(^{20}\) Also from “Introductory Lectures in Psychoanalysis,” Lecture 10, “Symbolism in Dreams.”

\(^{21}\) I don’t remember where he said this, but I am very sure that he did say it, because I remember that it really shocked me when I read it.
make them female symbols, they do involve a libidinal projection of some sort. Of all the objects we’ve talked about so far, only kites, and raindrops on a window pane, don’t appear to be sexual symbols with a connection to the feminine. I don’t know what to say about this, except that maybe the world isn’t completely neat and maybe not all objects which involve compassionate and melancholy projections also involve feminine sexual projections – though most of them seem to.

This general feminine quality of many of the objects of our experience is evidence, I think, of another aspect or layer of beauty, that they are “anatomically female”? Take lace. It has generally feminine characteristics. Like a certain sort of feminine beauty, lace attracts by means of its display of daintiness and delicacy. Its appeal consists in the fact that it manages to cover and reveal at the same time – an archetypal feminine gesture. China tea cups, too, are made to look dainty and delicate, yet to possess a sophistication of look marking it as feminine in a fine or high class way. Listen to the adjectives we use to describe a beautiful tea cup – sophisticated, graceful, exquisite, classic, fine, etc. etc. – more or less the same adjectives we would use in speaking of women. Flowers, too, have a feminine sort of beauty, dainty, impeccably dressed, given to self-display. It is as if, to catch our eyes, they must make a display not only of their bright colors but also of their daintiness. As Exupéry put it, the rose with four thorns, the one who captured the little Prince’s heart, was a woman, a coquettish one at that.

This point concerning sexual symbolism adds a nuance to our previous point about beguilement. It makes the idea of beguilement – and especially the part about temptations to cruelty – a good bit darker.

16. I would like to end with an example which will, I hope, tie all the different parts of this analysis together. The example comes from a friend of mine, Agnes Curry.\(^\text{22}\) One day when I was talking some of these ideas over with her, she said, “Oh yes; that’s just like the old saying, ‘There’s nothing more beautiful than a woman dying young.’” On the face of it, this is a very strange saying. Why should an early and untimely death be beautiful? It would seem, on the face of it, to be

\(^{22}\) Currently Professor of Philosophy at St. Joseph’s College, in Hartford, Connecticut.
anything but beautiful. Yet our literature and opera and movies are (from "La Boheme" to "Love Story") full of heroines dying young. Though all these deaths are presented as tragic, of course, they are also presented as somehow beautiful too. But why?

I think our theory can help us answer this question. I have argued that compassion is a cause of beauty. This is clearly the case here. There is almost nothing, after all, which calls forth our compassion so much as a young life ending. We do tend to think of young womanhood as a particularly delicate and fragile time. This fragility serves, I think, to heighten our compassion — and the woman's beauty, still more. We find the dying heroine beautiful, in other words, because she is the most delicate of flowers alone in the big wind, and because our feelings naturally go out to her. The second reason she is beautiful has to do with melancholy. Her death, of course, confirms all our melancholy thoughts about fate, mortality, and so on. But it goes much farther than this. For it is important that the heroine die bravely: quietly, serenely, sadly. In many cases she is even given the task of consoling those she will leave behind. This courage is fine in the sense we spoke about earlier. For she does not respond to the knowledge of her death by lashing out in futile anger. She accepts her death and opposes to it only the courage of remaining as fragile and unprotected as ever. The dying heroine is beautiful because we admire that awesome composure which can remain sweet right down until the moment of expiration. The third reason the dying heroine is beautiful has libidinous reasons as well. Of course, all women are, to some extent, sexual symbols, but our society seems to have defined a young woman dying as a sexual symbol par excellence. I am neither a psychologist nor a cultural historian, and so I cannot speak with confidence about just why this has happened, but I suspect that some of the reasons are unpleasant. I suspect that some of the reasons have to do with the way that female passivity has come to seem sexually stimulating. What I mean is that the disease heightens the woman's sexual appeal by heightening her passivity. At the end of the scale here, it might even be the case that the dying woman is such a potent symbol because of a sublimated version of that violence we find in snuff movies or sado-masochism.

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23 I am not, of course, endorsing any of these attitudes, but merely trying to describe them.
more generally. The advantage of the dying heroine in this regard is that she supplies an opportunity to both experience this perverse thrill, and yet deny it even to oneself. A man who unconsciously wants to inflict pain on women, but who feels too guilty about this to ever actually do it or even to think about it consciously, can now watch the woman suffer and secretly thrill to the sight of her dying, while at the same time denying this thrill even to himself, covering it up, in fact, under a rush of compassion. But, underneath this denial, the dying woman is beautiful as would be any women who offered herself to our violence and who, afterwards, cried for comfort in our arms ... But, as I said, I am not a psychologist and so this last part is all a sort of guess. What I am pretty sure of, though, is that the woman dying young, for some reason if not for this one, is a sexual symbol of great appeal.

When I look back on what I've written it seems to me that I've gone through all of this just to arrive, in the end, at a sort of giant platitude. Compassion, sadness, sex – wasn't that obvious before we even started? I am not quite sure how to feel about this. Should I be happy and say that our theory is good because it is confirmed by common sense? Or should I be sad because our theory is not more fantastical and surprising? In any case, it seems to me that if ordinary beauty really is a moral and libidinous projection, then it is bound to be platitudinous in the end, for morality represents the common attitudes of humankind rather than anything unusual, and sexual symbols refer, after all, to a pretty narrow range of organs and of acts. Must we end by suggesting, then, that ordinary objects, though beautiful, have a beauty which is, at bottom, boring?

**Part B: Other Species of Ordinary Beauty, Briefly Discussed**

17. As I mentioned at the outset, I think there are actually several species of beauty, some of them quite different from the others. In what follows I briefly survey those other species I have, so far, been able to identify. The goal of this survey will be to show that each of these other species of beauty does fit into the definition of the genus, i.e., that each is based on moral and libidinous projections. Doubtlessly, once I get started, I will at times become like the entomologist in the Amazon who, losing sight of his overall mission,
just begins pointing at all the different kinds of beetles he sees flying and crawling around him, exclaiming in a kind of hushed reverence (so as not to disturb the beetles) to his companions: “Look at that one with the grotesque snout ... and that one with the red wings ... and that one, over there, that looks like it's got several stingers...”

18. The first of these other species was also pointed out to me by my friend, Agnes. When I first explained to her my thoughts about fragile things, I was a bit apprehensive because she is a feminist and I was afraid she might find my ideas sexist and objectionable. Much to my delight, instead of rejecting these ideas, she added something to them. She told me she thought the beauty of statues to male figures was a sort of mirror image of the beauty I had been describing. For, in her view, as much as the beauty of these statues might have derived from their depiction of strength and power, it was not that simply (for, then, they would be frightening or awe-inspiring but not beautiful), but the prospect that this strength and power would be deployed to protect those who needed protection. It was as if the statues were saying, “Don’t worry; I shall protect you” – and by this token, became beautiful. Since I’m unable to recall the other examples given by Agnes of this sort of beauty, I have made up some of my own, allowing what she said about “protection” to range over such meanings as “providing service” or “providing shelter,” and about the word “strength” to evoke the passive strength of enduring as much as the active strength of doing. In particular I am thinking of draft animals such as horses or oxen straining at the plough, but also of heavy machinery such as bulldozers, forklifts, cranes, and pickup trucks. Other examples would be: a well-trained dog, an army on parade, trees, buildings, and, I think, the sun.

Zeroing in on pickup trucks and the sun, I would like to make a point parallel to the one made earlier about fragile things, namely, that these items are not simply beautiful and strong or beautiful and protective; they are beautiful because they are strong and protective.

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24 I chose these examples sort of by accident. They came up a lot in my earlier, unsuccessful attempts to write this section, and so, since I already had some things written about them, I thought it would be easier to just use them again. I no longer remember, though, why I selected just these examples back when I was writing the earlier drafts.
They are beautiful, not apart from, but on account of, their strength and manifest ability to protect. Let us consider the sun. Why should a thing that looks like a yellow circle upon a background of blue be considered beautiful? What accounts for the sun's beauty is, I think, the fact that, quite the reverse of being a yellow circle on a blue background, it is the powerful source of what heat and light we have upon our earth. There is an analogy to this mighty beneficence on the part of the sun in the dependability or serviceability of those pickup trucks the strength and safety/protection features of which are routinely extolled in formulations such as, "Like a rock!," "Built Ford tough!," "Always dependable!." What accounts for their beauty are not the shapes in which they come – functional, square, big, sturdy – but the fact that they are dependable, serviceable, ready to serve. This is a point that can also be made about ungainly-looking bulldozers and dull oxen. Such things could not be called beautiful apart from their strength and protectiveness.

I have gone into this point in hopes of a "plausibility transfer," i.e., I am hoping that because the point is pretty obvious in the case of these strong and protective things, that some of this obviousness will also transfer back to (or rub off on) the case of those fragile things I was talking about earlier. I would like to turn now to the moral projections involved. What is interesting about some of these cases is that in them one can almost see the projection taking place. Returning to the subject of the sun, clearly, its light and heat sustain life on earth. The sun, however, becomes beautiful as a result only when we project onto it the value of protectiveness, i.e., when we anthropomorphize the situation and think of the sun as protecting us, as offering us light, as being the bountiful father of us all, etc. If we did not project this value onto the situation – if we saw the sun simply for what it is, i.e., a huge thermonuclear reaction operating in complete indifference to us – the sun would likely not be beautiful in our view. It might be awesome and impressive but in its cold indifference it would not be beautiful. The same is true of the truck. Its beauty results from our projection onto it of the value of dutiful service. Truck owners take the view that their trucks are like loyal friends. It is in terms of this anthropomorphism that the truck undergoes the transfiguration from being mere heap of metal with not a care for its owner into something beautiful.
A further point I wish to make concerns what I think are two libidinal projection involved here. The first concerns the admiration of, and desire for, strength. Admiration and desire, it seems to me, are among the deepest instincts of the human being and, as such, should be considered libidinal items. The admiration of, and desire for, strength adds a layer to the way this sort of beauty feels. There is always a sort of submerged thrill at the sheer power, the brute power, of such items. In our admiration of the sun, for example, there is an element of sheer "wow!" at how strong and bright it is. In our appreciation of a pickup truck there is always, not far below the surface, an element of admiration over its power vis a vis that of an ordinary vehicle. The admiration of sheer power comes through, I think, in many of the TV commercials – one of them depicting a pickup towing an oversized regular truck – that advertise these trucks. It is the worship of strength, among other things, that underlie this sort of beauty. The second libidinal projection involved here is the projection of male symbols. All, or almost all, of the items on our list seem to be somehow masculine. Statues of males are that, of course, but so are cranes, bulldozers, and other heavy machinery, which, typically, are operated by men, and replicas of which, as toys, are given, not to little girls, but to little boys. Draft animals and dogs are male symbols as well on account of their traditional association with farming and driving wagons, with hunting, herding, and standing guard over one's property. We cannot imagine Buck, the dog in Jack London's novel, *The Call of the Wild*, other than as male. The army is a traditionally male institution, and the sun, traditionally, a male god. Trees which are admired for standing up steadily against the elements are, according to Freud, standard dream symbols for the male genitalia.

From our original list, this leaves only buildings as being the only items which do not appear to be male symbols. What else can I say about this exception, other than that, as comforting as it would be to have the pattern of male symbolism true of everything, the world is not an all-the-time-neat place! Let us, therefore, restrict ourselves to

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25 Again, I am not trying to either endorse or condemn such traditional gender roles. I am simply noting them as a matter of fact, and then trying to show their connection to what we find beautiful.

a consideration of the libidinal projections involved in those examples the beauty of which stems from their relationship to a male figure. In the case of the sun, this is the relationship to the father. The sun, traditionally, has been viewed as a father-god since, not unlike an idealized father, it is beneficent, life-giving, high up, enlightening, immensely powerful. The beauty we attribute to the sun is connected precisely with our propensity for giving it these attributes, to see it not just as an astronomical phenomenon but as a symbolic father. In the case of the pickup truck I think it is a relationship between brothers that is being projected. Brothers are supposed to work and struggle together. They are supposed to stick by one another and never to let one another down. I think these qualities are projected into the relationship between a man and his truck, i.e., the truck becomes a symbolical brother. When, for example, a commercial about a truck shows a man and his truck working happily together, when it suggests that, quite unlike a girlfriend, it won’t demand flowers and won’t nag about small things, but will simply always be there, quietly ready to help out (it will “never let you down”), it is placing the truck in the role of an idealized faithful brother capable of providing refuge to men from the confusing world of women. As misogynistic as it sounds, this image of the ideal brother forms part of the beauty of the truck.

19. Another interesting species of beauty is the beauty of lethal things. In this species are such items as: a tiger, wolves, a samurai sword, a cobra, sharks, air to air missiles hanging from the wings of a fighter jet, a heavyweight boxer, a knight in armor, a rifle, lightning, the guillotine, etc. Permit me to describe the beauty of these objects by means of two stories. The first story is a rather quotidian one. It took place a couple of months ago, when I purchased a knife at the thrift shop. The knife was a bit larger than a paring knife, but not so large as a chef’s knife. I didn’t quite notice this at the time that it was a little bit dagger-like. When I got the knife home, I sharpened it, and then put it on the kitchen table. When I looked down at it later I realized that, now that it was sharper, it had also gotten more beautiful – and it had gotten more beautiful even though there was no change in it that the eye could see. Why was this, I wondered? Well, after a little thought, the answer seemed obvious: the knife had gotten more beautiful because it had gotten more deadly.

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Another example would be the contrast between the statue of a
tiger and the tiger itself. Even if the statue is very life-like, the real tiger
would, I think, still be more beautiful than it. When I say this, I want
to compare their beauty as ordinary objects only, i.e., as tigers. The
statue, of course, would also have the beauty of an object of art, and I
don’t want to deny that this can be considerable. But I want to leave it
out of the present comparison, and say that the real tiger is much
more beautiful than the stone effigy of it. When we ask why this is so,
the basic answer, once again, seems to be that the real tiger is deadly
while the statue is not. When we pay a visit to the zoo and see a real
tiger there, we feel both a submerged thrill of terror and an
appreciation of the tiger’s beauty. These two things are not, I think,
unconnected. For I think the thrill of terror is one of the things that
makes the tiger beautiful. But when we look at the statue we know
that it is lifeless and so this thrill of terror does not occur – with the
result that the statue is not as beautiful as the tiger itself. Or, to
approach the same point from the opposite angle, the statue is only
beautiful with this sort of lethal beauty if we can imagine it as real and
ready to pounce.

But let’s come back to the knife. I want to ask why the streamlined
shape of the knife is part of its beauty? Why are the polish and glint of
its blade so important to its aesthetic appeal? I think the answer is
basically the same: the streamlined shape and the polished appearance
make the knife beautiful because they proclaim its efficiency in killing.
They promise a sharp, clean, and very fatal death. We find this,
somehow, very fascinating and attractive. One point in this which
seems especially interesting is that it’s not just death but efficient death
which we find beautiful. This is why knives are beautiful while
bludgeons are not, i.e., knives are beautiful because they kill cleanly,
while bludgeons are not because they kill in a slow and messy way. It is
the swift efficiency of death – its cold metallic kiss – that we seem to so
admire. This point about swiftness is not limited to knives but applies
to the other items in this species too. A lion, for example, is beautiful
because we think it can kill in a swift and overpowering way. But if we
were to watch a lion bungle a kill and then toy with its mangled but
still crawling victim – well, that would not be beautiful anymore. I
think that in items like rifles, lightning, or missiles, this element of
swiftness is still more apparent. In fact, it may even be the case that
these things are most strongly beautiful before they go into action. It may be the potency for swift and lethal death – but a potency held in abeyance for the moment – that we find most beautiful. It is, for example, the snake coiled rather than the snake ingesting the rabbit that is most beautiful.

I want to stop for a moment and put in a little digression before we move on to the second story. For I suspect that it might seem odd to use the word “beautiful” here. We don’t, after all, usually talk about lethal things in terms of their beauty. But even though we don’t usually talk this way, I think we do actually find such things beautiful. As a first evidence of this, I want to appeal, once again, to popular culture. For there are many movies and T.V. shows in which violence – explosions, spectacular car crashes, etc. etc. – are presented in a way which makes it clear that the viewer is expected to find such lethal action beautiful. The commentators and replays during football games leave little doubt that the swift and savage hit is also seen as a thing of beauty. Another, more high culture example, would be William Blake’s poem about the tiger, the one that begins

Tiger! Tiger! burning bright
In the forests of the night,
What immortal hand or eye
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?

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27 Here is the whole poem:

The Tyger
Tyger! Tyger burning bright
In the forests of the night,
What immortal hand or eye
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?

In what distant deeps or skies
Burnt the fire of thine eyes?
On what wings dare he aspire?
What the hand dare seize the fire?

And what shoulder, and what art,
Could twist the sinews of thy heart?
And when thy heart began to beat,
What dread hand forged thy dread feet?
Although Blake seems to have some doubts about how a good God could have possibly created something so fearful as a tiger, one of the things that comes through in the poem is that Blake, almost against his own will, can't help but find the tiger beautiful in some sort of terrible way.

But if we do actually find such lethal things beautiful, why don't we just come out and say so? Well, here I am not sure. Maybe we feel it is inappropriate to describe a deadly thing with such a strong term of approbation as the word "beautiful." But whatever the reason for our hesitation to use the word, I am pretty sure that we actually do find these things beautiful. We do, in fact, sometimes say so. I can imagine someone at the zoo saying, "Oh how beautiful that lion is," or someone at a gun show saying 'Now this is a beautiful rifle" – though without, perhaps, quite admitting to themselves that it is the enchantments of swift death which are standing behind their use of the word "beautiful."

It's time now for our second story. This story took place a few years back, when, on an outing to the mountains, I was talking with my friends Simon Gregorio and Jean Page. For some reason, we began talking about Ranier Maria Rilke and about the definition of beauty he gives in his "First Duino Elegy" where he says:

... beauty is nothing
but the beginning of terror, which we can just barely endure
and we stand in awe of it as it coolly disdains
to destroy us.

What the hammer? what the chain?
In what furnace was thy brain?
What the anvil? what dread grasp
Dare its deadly terrors clasp?

When the stars threw down their spears,
And water'd heaven with their tears,
Did he smile his work to see?
Did he who made the Lamb make thee?

Tyger! Tyger! burning bright
In the forests of the night,
What immortal hand or eye,
Dare frame thy fearful symmetry?

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28 Both at the time were instructors of philosophy at the Ateneo de Manila University.
29 Edward Snow's translation. The elegy is too long to quote the whole of it here.
And I can still remember that, in my stupidity, I suggested as a counter-example to this definition the following scenario. A deep sea diver is rising to the surface very slowly in order to prevent the bends. As he is rising, a large shark begins to circle around him, but the shark doesn’t actually rush in to attack. I then pointed out that, according to Rilke’s definition, the diver would have to find the shark beautiful — which I, deep now in my pig headed blindness, claimed was a most ridiculous result and so a clear reductio ad absurdum of Rilke’s definition. But now, having had some time to recover from my stubbornness, I want to say, “Yes, of course the diver would find the shark beautiful; it would be a terrifying beauty, of course, but it would be beauty nonetheless.” What made my comments to my friends even more idiotic was the fact that I have actually seen a shark swim by me while I was snorkeling, and though it scared the bejesus out of me, I must admit that there was something compellingly beautiful about the way it moved, so swiftly and so obviously lethal, through the water. In a similar vein, I have stared with rapt fascination — and I wasn’t alone in this — at the sharks swimming in the aquarium in Baltimore. Yes, I am willing to admit now that such lethal things really are beautiful.

Finally, I want to talk about how this species fits into the generic pattern of ordinary beauty, i.e., how it is based on moral and libidinous projections. I think the libidinal projection is pretty clear here, for I think there is, pretty clearly, something libidinous in our fascination with violence and death. Now I don’t know whether we should go so far as Freud does when, in his later works, he talks about a death wish being one of the two primary human instincts. But even if we don’t follow Freud in this, and say, instead, that the fascination with death is somehow derived rather than primary, I still think it is deep and instinctive enough to count as libidinous for our purposes here.

From the libidinal point of view, one of the interesting features of this sort of beauty is whose violent death is involved. In many cases it seems that is the spectator’s own. When we look at a sword or a rifle, we can imagine that it is we who are using it to give a violent death to someone else, but when it comes to things like lions or sharks it is hard to see how this could be the case, i.e., hard to see how it is someone

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30 Freud argues for this view in “Beyond the Pleasure Principle.”
else's violent death rather than our own which is involved. For it is not as if we are going to use the lion to kill someone else. When we stand before the lion's cage, feeling that vaguely terrified thrill and finding the lion beautiful, who are we imagining that the lion might pounce on besides ourselves? Why would there be a thrill of terror if it wasn't our own death that was at issue?

But let's move on now to the moral aspects of this species of beauty. These moral aspects are, it seems to me, much harder to find than the libidinal ones. I suspect that this is a species of beauty which is primarily libidinous. But there is, I think, at least one moral aspect involved here too. This is the aspect we talked about earlier when we said that it was important for this sort of beauty that death be clean and efficient. Slow and messy deaths, we said, did not count as beautiful. I think we have here a moral value which has no exact name so far as I know, but which I think we could call "the decency of violence" — a value which says that if one is going to kill, one should at least have the decency to do so quickly. This is a value which, though it admires violence, also abhors cruelty. I think this value, though it might not have a name, is in fact a real one: it seems to me that it played a large part in notions of chivalry and honor, and that, in an attenuated form, it still survives in such common maxims as "get it over quickly" or "don't let people dangle." It is an extreme or hypertrophied form of this value which, it seems to me, we admire in the tiger or the samurai sword.

20. The next species that I want to talk about is the beauty of vast and tumultuous things. Some examples would be the beauty of the ocean, the view from a mountain looking down, the mountains themselves seen from the plain, a fierce snowstorm, a big city seen from a tall building, and a wind large enough to make the trees twist and their branches snap. I worked out my ideas on this sort of beauty in a long conversation with my friend John Joergensen. He did not seem to agree with all my ideas, but his conversation nonetheless became the catalyst that produced them, and so he certainly deserves my acknowledgements here. John and I decided (after our first little disagreement, actually) to separate vast things into two different species. In one species we put the vast and tumultuous things (that's

31 A law librarian at Rutgers University (Camden campus).
this section), and in the other species we put the vast and peaceful things (that's the next section). We did this because John wanted to see the beauty of vast things in terms of an "oceanic feeling" where we felt some kind of merger with the universe, but I didn't want to see their beauty in such a passive or quietistic way. So we compromised by positing one species of vast and peaceful things and by defining their beauty quietistically, as John had wanted, and then a second species of vast and tumultuous things and by defining their beauty in a non-quietistic way, as I had wanted. I think vast and tumultuous things are beautiful because they both represent the challenge of the world and also provide us with a chance to feel that we are meeting that challenge. By "challenge of the world" what I mean is that the world is a big place, full of powerful forces. I am using the word "challenge" since I think that vastness and power are a challenge to us; it is in this big and powerful world, after all, that we must struggle to survive. Vast, tumultuous things present this size and power — this challenge — to us, but do so in a very interesting way. For they don't overwhelm us, but, strange as it might be to say this, they actually present the challenge of the world in a way that lets us feel that we are (symbolically of course) facing up to it.

As a first example of this, I want to talk about the ocean. When I lived in New York, I used to visit the ocean at Far Rockaway Beach, once a year, in September. On these visits I always found the ocean most beautiful in the evening, when the beach was empty of people, and the wind came up, and it was colder, and the waves got more rough. I used to put on a jacket and stand in the wind and look out at the waves which now had the look of something very impersonal and powerful and elemental and cold ... and also somehow beautiful. Why beautiful just in this way? Why not beautiful when everything was still sunny and nice and adults and children were all over the place, swimming and playing? I think the ocean in the evening was more beautiful because it was more challenging, because it represented, more clearly, the elemental forces of this big world — elemental forces which I, in my jacket in the wind, was in some small way facing. I know that it must sound crazy to describe the experience in this way, as if standing on the beach in a jacket meant that I was somehow facing the ocean's elemental powers. But I don't, of course, mean that I was facing those powers in a real sense, but only in a symbolical one. For
a man standing alone but unmoving in the wind is a stock symbol of human indomitability.

We can, if we like, break down the scene and find symbols of courageous response in several of its smaller details. First of all, simply not leaving is already a symbol of accepting a challenge. We put this symbol colloquially in the phrase “not walking away from.” Secondly, standing up (as in the phrase “standing up to”) is also a symbol of refusing to give in to something powerful. There is something important about actually standing up in the wind rather than sitting down – which, though it might be warmer, would also amount to a sort of huddling up. Thirdly, to look at something directly (to “look it in the face”) is a sign of no longer being afraid of it. In all these ways, this experience is constructed so as to give us the feeling that we really are facing up to the challenge of the world. This analysis, crazy sounding though it may be, is supported by the way this sort of beauty feels. For there is something bracing about the ocean and something awesome too. Hidden inside each of these feelings there are, I think, aspects of both challenge and response. For if the beauty of the ocean feels bracing, this must mean that, symbolically at least, there is some sort of difficulty or challenge here which we are bracing ourselves against. The feeling that the ocean is awesome is actually a feeling of respect – of respect for a potential adversary which, thought still more or less quiescent, is possessed of tremendous might. This aspect of challenge and response shows up even at the physical level: our pulse quickens and we feel invigorated and a little bit pumped up – i.e., alert and ready for action.

The next example I want to give is the example of being on top of a high mountain and looking down on the landscape beneath. This is an example which has, I think, the same structure of challenge and (symbolic) response. The challenge is conveyed by the sheer size of the view. Usually we don’t actually see how big the world is, seeing, for example, only as far as the doorway, or the wall of the study, or the houses across the street. But from the top of the mountain we do get a glimpse of the size of the world, and it is huge beyond our human scale. The view, however, not only presents this challenge, but it also

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32 An interesting fact about the view is that it is its sheer size which is making it beautiful. To mimic the formulae I have used before, the view is not just beautiful and big, but beautiful because it is big.
presents, in symbolic ways of course, our mastery of it. We are, first of all, on top of the mountain looking down. To be on top of something is, I think, a symbol of mastery. This might be a big world, but we have, after all, climbed to the highest spot on it. Secondly, we are seeing the world, but it does not see us. It is stretched out, completely unsuspecting, in front of us. We have, as it were, surprised the world unprepared. There is a lot of (symbolic) power in this. Thirdly, the world is spread out in front of us, and this is a symbol of mastery too. It is similar to how the goods of a household are spread out before an honored guest or the goods at a bazaar spread out before a buyer. Fourthly, and most basically, from the mountain top we can simply see the world — can see so much of it that we might be tempted to say “I can see the whole world from here.” There is a certain (symbolic) mastery in this too. For the fact that we can see it means that the world (seemingly the whole world) is now within our mental grasp.

It was when we were talking about this example that my friend John began to protest against what I was saying. The problem was that, when I talked to him, I phrased my idea in terms of greed, i.e., I said that the view was beautiful because we were greedy to possess as much of the world as we could, even if only by the symbolical means of taking it in through the eyes. I don’t remember just what John said about this, but I do remember that he didn’t think it sounded right. And I have now actually come to agree with John. For I now want to interpret this sort of beauty in terms of a response to the world’s challenge rather than in terms of simple greed. This now seems to me to be more accurate. For if the view from the mountain were merely something to consume in a greedy way, then it would have a certain desirability, but not grandeur; it would, in other words, inspire lust but not awe. The interpretation in terms of challenge, on the other hand, would restore these elements of grandeur and awe.

This struck me as interesting because I hadn’t quite realized that sheer size could be a beauty-producing characteristic. I had assumed that it was things like grace or sophistication or delicacy that were beautiful — and not sheer size. Yet just a little thought will show that size really is important in making such views beautiful.

And if we asked why size is so essential to this beauty, I think that our theory of challenge will give us a simple answer: size is essential because it is through its size that the view communicates the challenge of the world to us.
Or even if we wanted to insist on the word "greed," I think we would still have to say that the mountain view was beautiful not just because it satisfied this greed but also because it challenged it. In this regard, the view is beautiful, it seems to me, because it is almost too big to take in, because we have to squint and strain our eyes to catch sight of all the distant little portions of the world. Isn't this the usual pattern with greed, i.e., that what it finds beautiful is not the small thing it securely has but the big thing it is straining to get? So, even in terms of greed, it still seems that beauty is connected to a feeling of challenge.

I trust that this will — since I am, after all, agreeing with him — satisfy John. In any case, I want to move on now to one more example which is designed to show that both a challenge and meeting that challenge are necessary components of this sort of beauty. This is the example of a surfer. For I think the surfer is beautiful both because of the challenge of the ocean waves and because of the great panache with which he or she meets that challenge, riding easy and gaily atop the waves like some sort of Greek god or goddess. "Look at the big wave that person is riding," we say in admiration. In this sentence we have a statement both of nature's power and of the human being's mastery. If either of these elements disappears, then the beauty disappears with it. If the waves were small and very easy to ride, then the scene would be boring or blasé rather than beautiful. Or if the waves were so big that they simply couldn't be ridden and quickly drowned anyone foolish enough to try, then the scene would not be beautiful either but merely frightening. The beauty disappears because in the first case there is no challenge and in the second case there is no longer any prospect of mastery. It seems, then, that it is only when human ability confronts a challenge right at the limit of its prowess that real beauty results.

Finally, I want to talk a bit about how this species of beauty fits into the generic pattern of moral and libidinous projections. The moral value involved here is the value of meeting a challenge. As I tried to show above, this is a value which we read into our experience, interpreting, for example, the act of standing up in the wind on the beach as a symbolic act of facing up to the ocean's elemental power. This sort of "reading into" is an example of what I am calling a moral projection. When it comes to libidinal projections, I think there are
two of them involved here: the desire to dominate and the desire to possess. Now, I don’t know if these desires are “officially” part of the libido or not. But I do think they are deep seated and instinctual enough to count as libidinal for our purposes here. I think they are part of this sort of beauty because I think they are the desires which are satisfied when we, for example, are able to sit on top of the mountain, dominate the landscape with our eyes, and take all of its vastness in. Yet, as I said in the part about John and greed, I think that these libidinal desires only produce beauty when they are considered in relation to the moral aspect of challenge. I do not understand how or why it works, but it seems that it is the confluence of the moral and libidinal aspects which produces beauty. The libidinous aspect alone does not seem to do the trick. This seems true in all the species of beauty that we have talked about so far. We have just seen that greed alone without challenge does not produce beauty. We saw in the last section that violence and the wish for death needed to be tempered by what we called the decency of violence in order to ensure that they produced their terrible beauty and not merely awfulness and pain. Although we haven’t actually talked about it before, I think something similar is true of strong and protective things. For I think that strength and manliness alone, without the value of protectiveness added to them, would be scary rather than beautiful. I think something like this would be true of fragile things, too, for I think that a bare feminine sexual symbol, i.e., one without compassion or melancholy or beguilement added to it, would not be beautiful but obscene.

21. Next, I want to talk about the beauty of peaceful things. This is the second part of the two part arrangement I worked out with John: tumultuous things in the last section and peaceful things in this one. It seemed to me that John wanted to find religious or at least spiritual overtones in this sort of beauty. He talked about this in terms of an “oceanic feeling.” This means (I think) that in this sort of beauty we feel pulled out of our individual selves into the realization that we are connected, in some deep way, with “the All of things.” But I am merely going to mention this religious interpretation and then set it aside. I do not wish to imply by this that the religious interpretation is false. Rather, I am setting it aside because it seems too large a topic to go into here, and because, to confess the truth, I do not know what
to say about it. I should also admit that, because of this, my essay is partial and limited to the secular aspects of beauty only. In any case, some examples of these peaceful things would be: the ocean when it's tranquil; the random, flickering play of the light on the shallow waves of a lake; a gentle snowfall seen from a window; a garden on a summer day; the sound of crickets or frogs at night; the sound of a light rain on a tin roof.

The first thing I want to say is that when we experience them, these peaceful things “fill up the world” – or, still more accurately to the experience, that they become the world for us. To make this clearer, I want to distinguish between an object in the world (a knife, a flower) and the world itself. In these terms, I think that peaceful things appear as a world rather than as an object – though as a world which, temporarily at least, has been transformed. Perhaps the most obvious example of this would be a garden. For a garden is not a particular object that we’re looking at; it is not like a flower or a statue or a tree. Rather, a garden is a world that we’re in. Though it might not be so obvious, I think the other examples are actually similar to this, i.e., I think that they, too, are not so much objects as worlds of their own. For example, if we sit at the window and watch it snow, there is not some one thing we are looking at. Rather, we are looking at a new sort of world – a world of snow. The sound of crickets at night, or the sound of rain on a tin roof are not exactly a thing we are hearing, but, rather, our sonic world. We experience this in terms of the feeling that the sound “surrounds us” or “fills up the night.” This point is easy to confirm if we ask ourselves whether the sound of one cricket making one chirp, or a single snowflake falling, would still be beautiful in the same way? I think the answer, here, is clearly, “No. Of course not. We need a whole world full of them for this peaceful sort of beauty to come about.”

My first conclusion, then, is that this sort of beauty is actually not the beauty of an object but of a world. But of what kind of world? What, in other words, is the main feature of the world which these peaceful things produce? I think the answer is that the world of these peaceful things is a world with no objects in it. There will be a flickering or a hum or a haze or something like that ... but there will not be any clear form or definite thing. Light flickering on the waves of a lake, for example, has no clear form and not even a regular pattern. The sound
of crickets at night is never the sound of a definite something which is calling for our attention. In fact, the sound, since it is coming from everywhere, doesn’t even have a particular direction. The snowfall seen through the window is a sort of white haze only. One counter-example to this general rule might be the garden, for here it seems like there are still objects. Yet, even here, there is a certain indefiniteness, for as one drifts into a reverie on the garden bench, the garden no longer seems so much a set of sharply defined objects as a very gentle kaleidoscope of color or a gently waving ocean of green. But whatever the case might be with the garden, I think it is for the most part true that there are no definite objects in these cases. It might sound odd to put it this way, but it seems that these peaceful things are beautiful because they efface all the objects of the world.

Along with this lack of objects goes a lack of purposes on our part. For how can we have a purpose when this world has no objects in it? Without objects, after all, there would not be anything to act on and not even anything to think about – and this would seem to remove any basis upon which a purpose could be formed. To put it more concretely, when the whole world becomes the hum of the crickets or the haze of the snow, there is nothing really for us to do. I think this lack of purposes explains why this sort of beauty is so restful and so dreamy. Our purposes, after all, can become quite a burden to us. So it is very restful when these peaceful things let us put that burden down. Once we have lost our purposes, our mind is, it seems, released into a sort of undirected reverie.

From here I think we can also begin to see that this sort of beauty is connected to death – connected, in fact, to a wish for death. But let me be more precise about just what I mean here. For I don’t think this beauty is connected to the process of dying, but, rather, to the state of being dead. By “process of dying” I mean things like getting a heart attack, or drowning, or being fatally shot during a holdup. I don’t think this sort of peaceful beauty is connected with such events. Rather, this sort of beauty seems connected to the state when we are already dead, i.e., to that state where the struggle of dying is over and the person has entered into his or her final rest. The first thing that makes me think this sort of beauty is connected with death is what this sort of beauty is actually like. For we said that it involves a cessation of the world of objects and a cessation of our purposes too. Isn’t this – an
end to the things of the world and an end to striving—almost a definition of what it means to be dead? The release into reverie seems to fit into this theme of death too. For death is often pictured not as a total end, but as a disconnection from this world and its purposes, the soul thereupon floating into the dream of some indistinct paradise. It is just this experience which these peaceful things provide.

I think this connection with death also shows up in how this sort of beauty actually feels. For example, I think the experience of these peaceful things often involves the feeling that we are putting the burden of life down. There is also the feeling that we are in a world or state that is disconnected or separated from the real world—the feeling that we've somehow managed to leave the real world behind. Finally, there is often a feeling of immobility here too, for it seems that sitting or lying still is the appropriate way to experience these peaceful things, and it often seems like it takes a big effort to tear ourselves away from this stillness and re-enter the world of movement. All these feelings are, I think, feelings that would seem to go with the state of being dead. But these reasons are all post facto, i.e., I made them up only after I was already convinced of the main point about beauty and death. What convinced me of this point in the first place was another poem and another example (there are so many) of my own idiocy.

This time I was talking to my friend Agnes about Robert Frost. The conversation came around to his poem "Stopping by the Woods on a Snowy Evening." The poem goes like this:

Whose woods these are I think I know,
His house is in the village though;
He will not see me stopping here
To watch his woods fill up with snow.

My little horse must think it queer
To stop without a farm house near,
Between the woods and frozen lake
The darkest evening of the year.

He gives his harness bells a shake
To ask if there's been some mistake.
The only other sound's the sweep
Of snowy wind and downy flake.
The woods are lovely, dark and deep,
But I have promises to keep,
And miles to go before I sleep,
And miles to go before I sleep.

The idiotic thing I said this time was that I didn’t like this poem as much as some of Frost’s others, because this one seemed a little too nice, in a saccharine or picture-postcard sort of way. Fortunately, though, I was corrected immediately, because Agnes pointed out to me that I wasn’t reading the poem right and that there was actually a wish for death in it, i.e., that stopping by the woods and not going further (which is what the poet obviously wants to do) is a symbol for dying. At this point I began to smile and Agnes began to tease me about how I was sure to like the poem more now that it was more pessimistic ... and then the conversation just sort of moved on to something else ... But what Agnes had said stayed in my mind, and not only did I come to like the poem more, but I also came to see it as an image of how beauty is created. For Frost, it now seems to me, actually had his finger on the “secret recipe”: a peaceful scene on the outside and a wish for death on the inside. It is only because so many people share this combination of a wish for peace and a wish for death that this poem – with its thoughts of death only half an inch beneath the snowflakes – has become so widely popular.

We have, with this, reached a point where the moral and libidinous projections involved in this sort of beauty are pretty clear. For the moral projection is the value of peace, and the libidinal projection is the wish for death. Beauty is created because these peaceful things satisfy both this moral and libidinal impulse – because they provide us both peace and death – at the same time.

22. The next to last species of beauty that I want to talk about is the beauty of flying things. Into this species I want also to put fast things and gliding things, for their beauty seems to me to be related to the beauty of flight. Speed and effortlessness are, after all, important characteristics in all these cases. We can also use the word “flying” as a common metaphor for them all, saying that the sailboat or car or ice skater or other fast or gliding thing is just “flying along.” So I’m going to combine flying, speeding and gliding into a single species and analyze
them all together under the general rubric of flight. Some examples of
this sort of beauty are swallows flying, hawks soaring, antelopes
running and bounding, very fast cars moving effortlessly from lane to
lane, airplanes, pole vaulters, basketball players leaping high for the
ball, ice skaters, skiers, and sailboats.

I would like to begin by mentioning three characteristics which I
think this sort of beauty has. I would like to do this because I think
they will help us later, when we begin to talk about the moral projection
involved in this sort of beauty. The first characteristic is that the flying/
speeding/gliding thing must be graceful. We can see this in the example
of birds. A hawk soaring or a swallow flying quickly just above the
grass are both beautiful because they are both graceful and fly
seemingly without effort. But pigeons and crows, which work and
flap and beat and row their way through the air, are clearly not so
beautiful. This grace seems to matter even more than simple speed,
for a hawk soaring slowly but gracefully is more beautiful than a crow
flapping quickly but gracelessly along. Another example would be
bears. Over short distances bears are capable of traveling very fast. Yet
they are not beautiful when they run for, no matter how fast they are,
they are still ungainly. If we wanted some positive examples — i.e.,
examples which were both graceful and beautiful — we could point to
skiers or antelopes or sailboats or ice skaters. For I think the beauty of
all these things comes from the clean and easy way in which they glide
along.

A second characteristic of this sort of beauty is that something is
most beautiful when it goes beyond what would seem naturally
possible. Some of the beauty of the soaring hawk comes from this, i.e.,
from the fact that it seems like it should be impossible to stay aloft
without even flapping — and yet the hawk does so. Something similar
is true of pole vaulters who reach a height that seems humanly
impossible, and of ice skaters who move with a speed and grace that
human feet and legs simply were not made for. I think we take such joy
in watching antelopes leap or bound because it seems like an almost
casual flouting of the ordinary laws of gravity and motion.

A third characteristic has to do with what we might call "typical
observer position." By this I mean the point of view from which this
sort of beauty is usually seen or imagined. The interesting thing here
is that the typical point of view is not the point of view of one who is flying him or herself, but, rather, of one who is watching someone or something else fly. We stand on the ground and watch the birds fly overhead, and though we might think “wouldn’t it be nice to fly too,” we don’t usually go so far as to imagine ourselves actually moving at high speed – horizontal and head-first and with arms outstretched – through the air. Or, to take another example, I have watched pole vaulters several times on TV, and at that moment when they are upside down on top of the pole at the very peak of the vault, suspended in a perfect handstand some sixteen feet above the ground, I have said “Ah” and “Oh my” in rapt admiration, but I have never followed this up by going out back, grabbing a wash pole and trying to do a bit of vaulting myself. I realize, of course, that what I am saying here is not universally true, for sometimes we do experience some version of flight for ourselves, by sailing on the weekends or whatever. But I think it is still universally true that the point of view we take on this sort of beauty is the point of view of watching someone or something else fly with a speed and grace that is beyond any thought of imitation.

Let me now summarize (and slightly overstate) these three characteristics. What we have found is that these flying things have an effortlessness and grace which is humanly impossible and which we can only stand and watch in awe. I think this indicates the ideal or value which is embedded in this sort of beauty. For I think these flying things embody the ideal of a freedom beyond our human condition. They are in flight while we are earthbound; they are effortless while we struggle. They represent, if I may be permitted the metaphor, the dream of a transfiguration into something no longer chained to the conditions of our mortality: Mercury with winged sandals, or Christ ascending in his transfigured body into heaven. I think this shows up in how this sort of beauty actually feels. For there is something stirring in this sort of beauty, and an aspect of longing too. This beauty is stirring because the flying thing becomes, as it were, our champion or representative, accomplishing for us the impossible dream of transfiguration. We are left in longing because we wish that it could be us who were so transformed, so high in flight above the world.

In a moment I will provide a couple of poetic quotations, one to illustrate the stirring aspect, and one to illustrate the longing. But first I want to stop and talk a bit more about the point about how the
flying thing functions as our champion or representative. I want, in other words, to try to show that we really do identify with these flying things and that their flight really does symbolize our hopes. This identification might not be so obvious as long as the flight is successful, though even here there is usually something in us that is rooting the flying thing on. But the identification becomes very clear, I think, when the flying thing is in danger. Let’s take, as an example, a skier. As he or she moves smoothly down the slope there is something in us which is already (half secretly perhaps) urging the skier on. If the skier slips and begins to tumble, this something comes out still more clearly as we shout to ourselves “Oh no!” There is even, for a moment, the feeling that this is happening to us. It is as if we had been vicariously skiing with the skier, and so when he or she slips and tumbles, it is as if we are slipping and tumbling too. We might even find ourselves twisting our bodies in a sympathetic effort to keep the skier upright. And, when the skier crashes, we will have not only a feeling of concern for his or her welfare, but also a feeling that it is a great shame that his or her graceful flight down the mountain had to end in this accident. We have, in other words, both a feeling directed to the skier as a person (concern that the person is hurt), and also a feeling directed to him or her as a thing which flies (regret that the flight has failed). It is this latter feeling that I want to focus on, and what I want to say about it is that it shows that our hopes had been somehow identified with the skier. For we usually use this expression “it’s a great shame” when a hope has failed – as in “it’s a great shame he never finished college” or “it’s a great shame that her invention didn’t work.” So when we feel that it’s a great shame the skier crashed, this seems to mean that our hopes had previously been identified with him or her. To put it more simply, we feel regret at the crash only because our hopes had previously been tied up with the flight.

I think this sort of identification is true in other examples besides just the skier, i.e., I think we identify like this with antelopes, sailboats, planes, birds, etc. etc. But instead of plunging into more examples, I would like to just move on now to the two poetic quotations I promised a little while back. The first quotation comes from Gerard Manley Hopkins’s poem, “The Windhover.” In this poem, Hopkins is describing how he feels as he watches a falcon fly, high above him, in the morning sunlight. I have chosen this poem because I think it illustrates the
stirring aspect which this sort of beauty has. Here is a snippet from about one third of the way through

High there, how he rung upon the rein of a wimpbling wing
In his ecstasy! then off, forth on swing,
As a skate's heel sweeps smooth on a bow-bend: the hurl and gliding
Rebuffed the big wind. My heart in hiding
Stirred for a bird, — and the achieve of, the mastery of the thing!

The second quotation comes from "The Wizard of Oz." I have chosen this quotation because I think it illustrates the aspect of longing which this sort of beauty has. The quotation is from the song where Dorothy sings:

Somewhere over the rainbow, blue birds fly.
Birds fly over the rainbow.
Why, oh why can't I?

Since I have been plugging the theme of transfiguration, I should note that, in both of these examples, there does seem to be a dream of

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33 Here's the whole poem:

The Windhover:

to Christ our Lord

I caught this morning morning's minion, king-
dom of daylight's dauphin, dapple-dawn-drawn Falcon, in his riding

Of the rolling level underneath him steady air, and striding
High there, how he rung upon the rein of a wimpbling wing
In his ecstasy! then off, forth on swing,

As a skate's heel sweeps smooth on a bow-bend: the hurl and gliding

Rebuffed the big wind. My heart in hiding
Stirred for a bird, — the achieve of, the mastery of the thing!

Brute beauty and valor and act, oh, air, pride, plume, here
Buckle! AND the fire that breaks from thee then, a billion
Times told lovelier, more dangerous, O my chevalier!

No wonder of it: sheer plod makes plough down sillion
Shine, and blue-bleak embers, ah my dear,
Fall, gall themselves, and gash gold-vermilion.

34 Music by Harold Arlen and lyrics by E.V. Harburg.
transfiguration attached to the symbol of flight. Hopkins dedicates his poem “To Christ the Lord” which makes me suspect that the falcon is actually a symbol of Christ in His glory. Or, if this is stretching a point, it does seem true that the falcon is at least representing some sort of stronger and larger life. An image of some sort of brilliant and fiery transfiguration occurs later in the poem where Hopkins says:

..... And the fire that breaks from thee then, a billion
Times told lovelier, more dangerous, O my chevalier!

When it comes to the example of “The Wizard of Oz,” I think that Dorothy’s wish to fly is also the wish for a sort of transfiguration. As the rest of the song makes clear, what flight symbolizes for Dorothy is the escape from this world and the transportation to a better one, i.e., to a sort of heaven “where troubles melt like lemon drops,” and “where the dreams that you dare to dream really do come true.”

But let me draw this section to a close by talking about the moral and libidinous projections involved in this species of beauty. For I want to show that this species, too, fits into the generic pattern. We have already talked in various ways about the moral projection. The value involved is hope or aspiration or the desire to transcend the limits of our human condition. But since we’ve already talked a lot about this, I won’t go back into it now.

Besides this moral projection, though, I think there is also a second and libidinal projection involved here. In his Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis, Freud tells us that flying dreams always represent sexual intercourse. I think this libidinal aspect shows up in how flight actually feels or appears to us. For flight, like intercourse, has connotations of ecstasy and release and consummation. There is also a feeling of climax at the moment of taking flight: as the ice-skater leaps into the air, as the pole vaulter rises upwards, or as the sail boat catches the wind and begins to move. I have also heard, though I now forget where, those moments of arousal just before orgasm described as “flight” or “pre-orgasmic flight.” It does seem somehow appropriate to describe the sexual experience by saying “I felt like I was flying.” It would also not seem amiss to describe the experience of consummation

35 Lecture 10, “Symbolism in Dreams.”
itself as a sort of "taking off." This same connection between intercourse and flight is also evident in the title of Erica Jong's novel "The Fear of Flying." So it seems to me that this sort of beauty is a symbol both of our aspiration for immortality and of our desire for the joys of sexual release.

Part C: An Exception – An Art-like Beauty In Ordinary Life

23. I have, so far, been trying to show that all the different species of ordinary beauty fit into the same genus, a genus defined by moral and libidinous projections. As I said way back in the introduction, though, there is one species of ordinary beauty which doesn't seem to fit into this genus, but seems to belong to a genus all its own. It is this unusual species of beauty that I want to talk about next. Instead of being moral and libidinous, this species of beauty is what we might want to call revelatory. By "revelatory" I mean that members of this species are beautiful because they reveal a deeper significance or an underlying structure of the world. To use a bit of philosophical terminology, they let some aspect of the Being of the thing "shine forth" and become manifest to the eye. I realize that this isn't terribly clear yet, and I will try to explain more fully (and more concretely) in just a moment. But first there are a couple of preparatory things I want to say. To begin with, I want to provide a list of examples of this species of beauty. The examples I have been able to think of are: an elegant solution to a problem in mathematics, a well played move in chess, a religious ceremony, a pool shot, a split end leaping for the ball, an Olympic diver, a bird stopping in mid-air and alighting gracefully on a branch, and a skillful driver weaving expertly in and out of traffic. What I will try to show in a minute is that these things are beautiful because they all manifest some deep structure of the world. Before I start, though I want to acknowledge my sources. My ideas in this section borrow heavily from the ideas of Martin Heidegger. I have, no doubt, adulterated his ideas, and also put them to my own uses ... but even an adulterator can be grateful. I am also grateful to two friends, Rob Vigliotti36 and Richard Capobianco,37 whose conversation has helped me to understand Heidegger better.

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36 A professor of philosophy at Rockhurst College, in Kansas City.
37 A professor of philosophy at Stonehill College, in Brockton, Mass.
I will begin with the example of religious ceremonies because I think this example is the easiest to understand. What happens here, I think, is that an ordinary action reveals its spiritual significance. For example, in the celebration of the Eucharist, the action of eating together is no longer just the action of eating together. Rather, this action now takes on the deeper significances of joining in Christian fellowship and of commemorating the Last Supper of the Lord. The ceremony is beautiful, it seems to me, because it lets these deeper significances shine through. I think the other examples are revelatory in a way that’s similar to this. I don’t think, of course, that they, too, are religious somehow. But I do think they all reveal or manifest a deeper structure of some sort – even if this deeper structure isn’t a spiritual or religious one.

For a second example, let’s imagine a split end leaping for a ball along the sideline, extending himself in a perfectly balanced way, catching the ball in his outstretched hands, and then dragging his two feet to make sure that he comes down in bounds. Now why is this beautiful? Well, it seems to me that it’s beautiful because it reveals a couple of deeper things. To begin with, it reveals the geometry of space and the laws of motion in a particularly clear way. It has the spare beauty of a problem in physics: there is the speed and arc of the ball and the vertical motion of the end, and then there is the exactly correct solution as the end reaches the ball at the very highest point of his leap. Or, to use another comparison, I think we have a beauty here which is similar to the beauty of a well played shot in pool. For the pool shot, too, reveals the physical laws of moving bodies in a way that is manifest to the eye. In addition to this, the split end catching the ball also reveals the potential of the human body for moving through space. Of course, we move through space all the time. But most of the time we move in such sloppy and herky jerky ways that neither the simple elements nor the true power of human motion are clear or apparent. But at that moment in which he is leaping, poised, for the ball, the split end does reveal human motion in its simplicity and power. I think our responses show this. We might say, for example, “Now that was a leap,” or “How easy he makes it look.” These sentences indicate an admiration both for the end’s strength (his leaping ability) and also for the simplicity of his technique – a simplicity which, wasting no energy on extraneous motions, allows the basic mechanics of
leaping to appear very clearly. In some sense, then, I think the beauty of the end is actually similar to that of a ballerina, for she too is beautiful because she reveals the human body's potential for motion in a particularly strong and simple – in a particularly graceful – way.

Finally, I think that an elegant solution to a problem in mathematics is also beautiful in this same revelatory way. For the elegant solution is not messy or wandering, but picks its way neatly through the underlying structure of the problem. As it does this it allows that underlying structure to reveal itself in such a simple way that it becomes clear and obvious. "Oh, I see how it works now," we might say. And it is the revelation of this underlying structure – this vision of "how it works" – which makes the elegant solution so beautiful.

That's all I have to say by way of explanation and analysis. I know that I haven't said enough to really prove anything, but I hope I have at least made plausible the idea that these things are beautiful because they reveal something deeper: a spiritual significance, the laws of physics, the body's capacity for motion, the underlying structure of the problem, etc. etc. In a sense, we might want to say that this sort of beauty is not only revelatory but also ontological, for the underlying somethings that are being revealed seem to be aspects of what a philosopher might call the Being of a thing. It is the underlying structure which lets the problem be the problem that it is; it is the capacity for motion which (among other things) lets us be an animal; it is the laws of physics which let the end be a thing that moves. The one exception to this ontological interpretation seems to be the example of the Eucharist, though maybe a theologian would want to argue that Christian fellowship was somehow the true Being of our ordinary acts of eating together.

In any case, though, I want to tack on one last speculation or suggestion before I close. This is a suggestion which I suspect is only partly accurate and which I can not prove, but which I want to make anyway. The suggestion is this: that this revelatory species of beauty is actually a version – though a limited and simplified version – of that beauty which we find in a fuller and richer form in the fine arts. For although I do not understand art very well, I think it might make some sense to think of it as also being in some way (don't ask me just how) revelatory.
Conclusion

24. I wish I knew what it all meant. I think I have found out that (save for this last exceptional type) ordinary beauty is a combination of morality and libido. This looks like it should be interesting enough to mean something. It is also crying out for an explanation. For why should morality plus libido equal, of all things, beauty?

But I must confess that I have no idea at all about these further questions, i.e., about what it means or why it's true. So it seems that I have worked and worked only to find out a fact I can make no sense of...