

November 1, 1988 (Vol. 4, no. 5)

Dear Colleague:

My last letter provoked a rebuke from an anonymous writer, who accused me of invading the privacy of street people and, worse, of seeing grace and beauty in their movements when they had much more serious businesses in mind. The Discount Store window-washer might well be an exploited worker; and here I come along admiring his competence as though it were art. I am reminded of something Simone de Beauvoir wrote. She was saddened by the horrors of war. "Beauty yes, beauty remains... But often I loathe it too. The evening after a massacre, I was listening to a Beethoven andante and stopped the record halfway through in anger: all the pain of the world was there, but so magnificently sublimated and controlled that it seemed justified. Almost all beautiful works have been created for the privileged and by privileged people who, even if they have suffered, have always had the possibility of expressing their sufferings; they are disguising the horror of misery in its nakedness" (Force of Circumstance, pp. 653-4).

"Get real!" my critic raps me on the knuckles. He has a point. The modern West has tended to associate the hidden side of life with the real. Is the Good Samaritan real? Yes, but Rembrandt had the genius to include a defecating dog in his painting of the "Good Samaritan." He was even-handed in his appraisal of reality. A genius closer to our time is Freud. He will not allow us to see both shit and charity as real; for him as for most of us, that physiological act, which is also a gesture of contempt, is more real than the doing of a good deed. Yet, why not both? Consider another pair--sweat and grace. If sweat is more real than grace, then we can never enjoy the ballet, since it is built on sweat and aching muscles. By the way, did you go out last Saturday to enjoy the beauty of the fall season? Were you conscious of doing something you shouldn't, namely, invading the privacy of nature? Nature is, after all, physiology and sexual reproduction; it is in the serious business of survival. It is not a show for humans. Now, I hope I have made all of you feel bad!

Best wishes,

