Perspectives In Aesthetics

Plato to Camus

Edited by
Peyton E. Richter

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PREFACE

The purpose of this book is to introduce its readers to some of the most important theories of art and beauty from ancient times to the present through selections from original sources beginning with Plato and ending with Camus. Prefacing each selection or group of selections from a given author is a biographical sketch of that author and a succinct exposition of his aesthetic perspective. Where two or more selections are presented, they are connected by interpretive or transitional passages provided by the editor, thus making it possible to include the cardinal portions of a major work or portions of two works by the same author without losing a sense of continuity. This method of presenting primary material is not new; it has been applied by previous editors to fields other than aesthetics, for example, by Sheldon P. Peterfreund in his *Introduction to American Philosophy*. It seems to me to be a particularly valuable method for introducing newcomers to the literature of aesthetics, a literature which has not usually been noteworthy for its clarity, brevity, and simplicity. By applying this method here, I hope to provide students with a general orientation to aesthetic theories and with a guide through some of their complexities which may promote the study of these theories as they are here presented through selections and also facilitate the later study of some of the complete works in which they are fully expounded.

Although the editorial text preceding each group of selections has for the most part been limited to giving an exposition of the background and the basic tenets of the perspective under consideration, a "Guide to Supplementary Reading," which lists some of the best criticism and discussion, has been included at the end of each chapter to assist the student in making a critical evaluation of the perspective. This "Guide" should also be useful to students pursuing any of the topics suggested for further study which are listed in each chapter after the questions for review

and discussion. The entire book has been planned in such a way that it can have a variety of different uses—as a basic or adjunct text in introductory courses in aesthetics, as a source book in the history of aesthetics and art criticism, and as a means for adding new dimensions to courses in art history, art appreciation, and general education courses in the humanities. It may also be of use to readers who are exploring the field of aesthetics on their own.

But however the book be used, the reader should not expect to find in it more than a fair sampling, a collection of representative types, of aesthetic speculation and analysis. If he will find some of the outstanding figures in the history of aesthetics included here, he will not find others (e.g. Schelling, Shaftesbury, Collingwood). Although a number of the most influential intellectual movements which have affected the development of aesthetics are represented, some, equally important (e.g. Thomism, Marxism, Analytic Philosophy) are only mentioned in passing. Moreover, the book contains no perspectives in Eastern Aesthetics. Had my space, time, energy, and knowledge been unlimited, perhaps I might have been able to produce a far more comprehensive and satisfactory book, Perspectives in World Aesthetics. But for the present I will be content if I have succeeded in presenting some perspectives in Western aesthetics in a way that will make them more accessible and comprehensible to the beginning student. After having put this book to good use, this student should not only find it easier to become better acquainted with the perspectives included in it, but should also find himself better prepared to study other perspectives on his own. I hope that he will want to do both, and that the completion of a book and of a course in aesthetics will mark the beginning rather than the end of a student's inquiry into the field.

Finally, although I assume full responsibility for whatever shortcomings or imperfections this book may have, I want to take this opportunity to express my appreciation to those who have been instrumental, directly or indirectly, in its production. I am grateful to Professor Joseph H. Wellbank of Northeastern University for having read portions of the manuscript and for having made several valuable suggestions for improving it; to Dean Horatio LaFauci, Professors Marx Wartofsky, James Fisher, Joseph Jurich, and Harry Crosby, all of Boston University, for having given me the benefits of their expert advice on several matters pertaining to the form and content of the envisaged work;

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A NOTE ON THE SOURCES

The readings included in the chapters are as follows. Complete references are found in the chapter notes.

PLATO: selections from the *Republic* and the *Symposium*, translated by Benjamin Jowett.

ARISTOTLE: selections from the *Poetics*, translated by S. H. Butcher, and the *Politics*, translated by Benjamin Jowett, revised by W. D. Ross.

PLOTINUS: selections from *The Enneads*, translated by Stephen MacKenna, revised by B. S. Page.

EDMUND BURKE: selections from *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful.*

G. E. LESSING: selections from the *Laocoön*, translated by Ellen Frothingham.

IMMANUEL KANT: selections from the *Critique of Judgment*, translated by J. H. Bernard.

G. W. F. HEGEL: selections from *The Introduction to Hegel's Philosophy of Fine Art*, translated by Bernard Bosanquet; selections from the *Philosophy of Fine Art*, translated by F. P. B. Osmaston.

ARTHUR SCHOPENHAUER: selections from *The World as Will and Idea*, translated by R. B. Haldane and J. Kemp.

EUGÈNE VÉRON: selections from *Aesthetics*, translated by W. H. Armstrong.

JEAN MARIE GUYAU: selections from *L'Art au point de vue sociologique*, translated by Ilona Ricardo.

LEO TOLSTOY: selections from *What Is Art?* translated by Aylmer Maude.

HIPPOLYTE TAINE: selections from *The Philosophy of Art*, translated by J. Durand.

GUSTAV FECHNER: selections from *Vorschule der Aesthetik*, translated by Ilona Ricardo.

VERNON LEE: selections from Vernon Lee and Clementina Anstruther-Thomson's *Beauty and Ugliness.*

MAX DESSOIR: selections from "The Fundamental Questions of Contemporary Aesthetics," translated by Ethel D. Puffer.

GEORGE SANTAYANA: selections from *The Sense of Beauty* and *Reason in Art.*

BENEDETTO CROCE: selections from the article "Aesthetics" in the fourteenth edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica.*

ROGER FRY: selections from *Vision and Design* and *Transformations.*

ERNST CASSIRER: selections from *An Essay on Man.*

JOHN DEWEY: selections from *Experience and Nature*, second edition, and *Art as Experience.*

ALBERT CAMUS: selections from *The Rebel*, translated by Anthony Bower.

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

THE ORIGIN OF AESTHETICS

Aesthetics had a history long before it had a name. It was born in Greece and—more than two thousand years later—it was christened in Germany. But even though aesthetics as a critical inquiry into beauty and art began with the ancient Greeks and as a philosophical "science" began with the eighteenth-century Germans, some degree of aesthetic reflectiveness based upon the appreciation of natural and artistic beauty has been characteristic of human life ever since our earliest ancestors began to appraise the pleasantness or unpleasantness of their perception of various lights, colors, movements, shapes, textures, tastes, and odors and ever since they began to create, to reflect upon, and to judge as good or bad various works of art, from highly polished spears to well-drawn wooly mammoths. Aesthetics from one point of view has prehistoric origins. Later advances in aesthetic reflectiveness went hand in hand with advances in the arts. We can scarcely imagine the astonishing artistic achievements of the ancient Egyptians, Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians, Indians, and Chinese without the presence of some theoreticians possessing high sensitivity to beauty, definite artistic ideals, and discriminating taste. But be that as it may, if by aesthetics we mean the sustained and self-critical inquiry into the meaning and value of our experiences of beauty and art, an inquiry contained within that larger sphere of critical inquiry called philosophy, which is stimulated primarily by intellectual curiosity and consummated in better substantiated beliefs and clearer conceptions, then aesthetics really began with the Greeks.

Why it began with the Greeks is a question which we can leave to the historians of aesthetics to answer in detail.[1] Most of them agree that it was highly appropriate if not inevitable that aesthetics should have had its origin in the land that had already given birth

to its mother, philosophy. There were many factors that contributed to the growth of aesthetic consciousness in Greek thinkers. The long history of philosophical speculation on the nature of reality; the poetic imagination at work in Greek religion; the high premium put on physical beauty and games; the advanced understanding and enjoyment of geometrical forms; the leisure to appreciate and the wealth to accumulate beautiful things; the sheer genius exemplified in Greek art, particularly in its temples, statues, and paintings, its dramatic, lyric, and epic poems; and perhaps even the stark Greek landscape flooded with light—all of these factors helped to make certain questions, aesthetic questions, seem natural and appropriate. How ought beauty to be defined? What kind of knowledge, if any, can be obtained from works of art? What should be the functions of art in an ideal city-state? What is the relationship between the good, the true, and the beautiful? Such questions became subjects for lively controversy and rigorous thinking among Greek philosophers. And in attempting to answer them they unwittingly invented aesthetics. It was, like democracy and epic poetry, a typically Greek invention.

Aesthetics, then, began in Greece; more specifically, it began when the Greek philosopher Socrates—that fascinating, controversial, persistently curious individual who believed there was virtue in knowing—turned his attention in the fifth century B.C. to what was then probably a new and intriguing question, What is Beauty? Fortunately we have several accounts of how Socrates dealt with this question and arrived at tentative answers to it. One was recorded by the Athenian general Xenophon, an admirer of Socrates, who in his *Memorabilia* passed down to us one of the three surviving contemporary literary portraits of Socrates. (The other two are found in Aristophanes' comedy *The Clouds* and in Plato's *Dialogues*.) According to Xenophon's account,[2] Socrates taught that there is no such thing as absolute beauty. Like goodness, beauty is to be defined with reference to the end a thing serves, the purpose it fulfills. Something is properly called beautiful and good, or ugly and bad, to the extent to which it performs, or fails to perform, the function for which it was designed. Even a dung basket, Socrates admitted, should be called beautiful if it is well adapted to be useful in its way, and a golden shield ugly if it is poorly designed to serve its end. Socrates was convinced, Xenophon tells us, that the beautiful is basically the useful.

Plato's account of Socrates' views on beauty, while not always inconsistent with Xenophon's, presents quite a different, more

dramatically interesting picture, perhaps because Plato, artistic genius that he was, understood far better than Socrates' honest but mundane military admirer the complexities of the issue under discussion and its subtle ramifications. But since Plato's account appears in a number of dialogues written at different periods of his life, we can never be quite sure how much of what Socrates is reported to have said actually came from the fertile imagination of Plato in various stages of his development. Nevertheless, in the *Hippias Major,* one of the fullest and possibly the earliest of Plato's accounts, we can get some notion of the searching manner in which Socrates dealt with a problem that was to perplex thinkers for centuries afterwards and that was eventually to become one of the main preoccupations of thinkers called "aestheticians." In this dialogue,[3] Socrates shows up the ignorance of Hippias of Elis, a conceited Sophist windbag. When Socrates asks for a definition of beauty, Hippias in his muddle-headed way thinks that he can define it by giving an example (viz., a beautiful girl) or by referring to a characteristic of something he considers to be beautiful (viz., the gilt on a sword). Guided by Socrates' dialectical maneuvering, Hippias is slowly led toward a more precise definition, which emerges only after a number of preliminary definitions—that beauty is the fitting or the appropriate, that it is the useful, that it is the profitable, that it is the pleasurable—have been proposed, examined, and discredited. The definition given at the end of the discussion—that the beautiful is that which is both profitable and pleasurable—is not completely satisfactory to Socrates, and he is willing to keep on searching for a better one, but at least he has shown Hippias (and us) that the problem of beauty is much more difficult than it might at first seem and that it is important for a person to know precisely what he really means when he calls an object or an action beautiful. If he doesn't know, at least he doesn't have to claim that he knows, as Hippias at first did.

Plato gives us accounts of several occasions on which Socrates discussed the problem of Beauty. In the *Symposium* (or the *Banquet*), one of Plato's finest dialogues, the central issue is love, but the dialogue concludes with Socrates' presentation of a soothsayer's views (actually his own or Plato's) on the relation between love and beauty. Socrates is convinced that beyond the world of appearances there is an ideal Beauty worthy of being loved above everything else. This and this alone is capable of satisfying the philosopher's passion. In another of Plato's dialogues, his most

famous, the *Republic,* Socrates returns to the problem of beauty, which here becomes part of a larger problem, that of envisaging an ideal city-state in which the best men rule and individual and collective justice are achieved. As in the *Symposium,* ideal beauty (or goodness or truth) is still the philosopher's paramount concern, but in his role as legislator the philosopher must deal with the kind of aesthetic environment which will nurture good men. For this reason, Socrates discusses the role art can play in the new social order, and considers its origin, its utility, and its limitations. He eventually proposes sweeping reforms in the domain of the arts. Homer and Hesiod will be discarded as teachers of religion and morality, the Athenian equivalents of our rock-and-roll and sentimental sound-track music will be banned, as will be all those disconcerting tragedies and comedies so popular with the Athenians but which either make men suffer too vicariously or laugh too outrageously. The philosopher-legislator will see to it that the arts, by giving expression to the highest moral and aesthetic standards, promote the public welfare, and if the artist should object that these reforms curtail his freedom of expression and sterilize his imagination, then he will be told that he, being an artist, and a mere imitator of things, is incapable of knowing his own best interests. For only a philosopher, the philosophers Socrates and Plato insist, can know true realities, perfect truth and beauty and goodness.

We will return to Socrates and Plato later, having said enough about them here to indicate to the reader that what we call "aesthetic inquiry" today was already a going concern over two thousand years ago in ancient Greece. These philosophers formulated some of the major aesthetic problems and offered solutions to them; they attempted to clarify the functions of the various arts, to understand artistic creativity, and to reach a satisfactory definition of beauty.

"OUR FOUNDER"

The beginning of aesthetics has now been sketched, but the question still remains, how did aesthetics get its name as a philosophical "science" on which treatises and textbooks could be

written, lectures delivered, and examinations given? The answer to this question may come as a slight disappointment to those whose imaginations have been stirred by the Socratic search for Beauty with which aesthetics began. For aesthetics was named by an eighteenth-century philosopher whose own name would probably be forgotten today, except by rare scholars, had he not thought of a new name for an old subject. ALEXANDER GOTTLIEB BAUMGARTEN was his name, he lived from 1714 to 1762, and during the last twenty years of his life he was a professor of philosophy at the university of Frankfurt-on-the-Oder. Professor Baumgarten was an ambitious system builder, a skillful logician and metaphysician, and, as Immanuel Kant (who used his textbooks) characterized him, an "excellent analyst."

Like his rationalistic predecessors, Descartes, Leibniz, and Wolff,[4] Baumgarten had faith in the primacy of reason, under the guidance of which "clear and distinct ideas" could be attained and rigorous logical deductions could be made. But fortunately for the history of aesthetics, he was also a passionate lover of poetry, and this presented him with a problem. For poetry, which was in his opinion a "perfect sensuous language," expressed ideas that were clear without being distinct. Indeed, the idea or representation presented by a poem must be by its very nature confused (i.e. fused into a unity which could be sensuously experienced but not intellectually conceived), otherwise it would not achieve its poetical effect. Baumgarten's problem, then, was to find a rational explanation for poetry which would fit into his rationalistic *Weltanschauung*. While he was still an advanced graduate student in philosophy, he wrestled with this problem, and in his doctoral dissertation, *Reflections on Poetry*,[5] which was published in Halle in 1735 when Baumgarten was only twenty-one years old, he gave his solution to it. In doing so, he gave aesthetics its proper name. According to his early view, which he never changed essentially, poetry and the other arts differ from philosophy in that they aim at perceptual vividness rather than at conceptual distinctness. But just as we apprehend truth by the use of our higher cognitive faculty of reason, so do we apprehend beauty by the use of our lower cognitive faculty of sensuous perception. In order to make beauty intelligible, however, we need a science of the things we perceive to accompany and supplement the science of the things we know. We need, that is, a science of perception—aesthetics, he called it—as well as a science of logic.[6] This new science, by

providing us with a much needed "analogue of reason," will allow us to bring the arts into the domain of rational philosophy. Such were the conclusions, in brief, of young Baumgarten's doctoral dissertation.

Fifteen years later, after he had become an established professor and had had chance to think further and to lecture on his "new" science, Baumgarten gave an extensive exposition of this "science of sensuous knowledge" or "theory of art." He presented his conclusions in his AESTHETICA (1750), the first book of that title in the history of literature.[7] Aesthetics, according to Baumgarten, has as its object the attainment of beauty, which is the "perfection of sensuous knowledge as such." When there is a defect of sensuous knowledge, when it is imperfect, the result is ugliness. However, since aesthetics is also the "art of thinking beautifully," we may think of ugly things in beautiful ways and beautiful things in ugly ways. The aesthetician must first of all give an explanation of how beautiful thoughts are discovered; he must probe into the subjective processes by means of which the artistically beautiful is created; he must present a logic of the creative imagination in order to account for the "phenomenal perfection," the sensuous vitalization of knowledge, which comes from works of art. Baumgarten has a high opinion of the artistic genius for, in presenting clear and vivid aesthetic perceptions, he is accomplishing something as important in his own domain as the philosopher is accomplishing in his domain of "clear and distinct ideas." Acute sensitivity, powerful imagination, delicate taste, and preoccupation with the texture of sensuous appearance are as essential to the artist as rational appraisal, patient analysis, and preoccupation with the structure of appearance are to the philosopher. But theoretical aesthetics as envisaged by Baumgarten was not only to be a science useful in explaining the nature of artistic discovery; it was also to be a science concerned with the means by which artistic values are presented and communicated. He himself never lived to complete the development of his system of aesthetics, however, nor did he expect to do so. Like Moses, having led others to the promised land, and having glimpsed its outlines, he left to others the tasks of conquering and developing it.

Although scholars still debate the originality and significance of Baumgarten's contributions to aesthetics,[8] they seem to agree that he made an important contribution to the field by giving it a name (even though some claim they could have thought of a

better one) and by bringing the subject to the attention of others. Innumerable volumes dealing with the same subject were to appear in the future, eventually enough to fill whole libraries, but the first on the shelf (and one of the driest and least read), that ponderous Latin tome entitled simply AESTHETICA, was the one that gave the whole section its name. Whether or not he laid the foundations of a new science, as some claim, or merely obfuscated aesthetic ideas, as others claim he did, Baumgarten was undoubtedly the Adam to aesthetics.

AESTHETICS IN REVIEW: BEFORE BAUMGARTEN

From what has been said thus far, it might seem that there is an uneventful gap of over two thousand years in the history of aesthetics, between the Greek initiators of aesthetics, Socrates and Plato, in the fifth century B.C., to the German founding father, Baumgarten, in the middle of the eighteenth century. Even the briefest historical survey will show that this certainly was not the case!

In Greek times, Aristotle, one of Plato's former pupils who had become a great philosopher in his own right, wrote a work that may well have been in part intended as an answer to his master's criticisms of art. An analysis of the nature of tragic and epic poetry, Aristotle's *Poetics* is considered by most critics to be the greatest and certainly the most influential treatise ever written in the entire history of aesthetics. Aristotle's definition of tragedy, his account of the origin of imitative art, his discussion of the elements of a good play, his doctrine of catharsis, his distinction between poetical and historical truth, were to have never ending repercussions on later generations of aestheticians, literary critics, and practicing dramatists; to some, such as the eighteenth-century critic and playwright Lessing, Aristotle's teachings in the *Poetics* were as infallible as the *Elements* of Euclid. Another important ancient Greek contribution to aesthetics was made by the philosopher Plotinus, a mystical Neoplatonist, who, like Aristotle,