AESTHETICISM

R. V. Johnson

THE CRITICAL IDIOM
REISSUED

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THE CRITICAL IDIOM REISSUED

Volume 3

AESTHETICISM

Aestheticism / *R. V. Johnson*

General Editor's Preface

This volume is one of a series of short studies, each dealing with a single key item, or a group of two or three key items, in our critical vocabulary. The purpose of the series differs from that served by the standard glossaries of literary terms. Many terms are adequately defined for the needs of students by the brief entries in these glossaries, and such terms will not be the subjects of studies in the present series. But there are other terms which cannot be made familiar by means of compact definitions. Students need to grow accustomed to them through simple and straightforward but reasonably full discussions of them. The purpose of this series is to provide such discussions.

Some of the terms in question refer to literary movements (e.g. 'Romanticism', 'Aestheticism', etc.), others to literary kinds (e.g. 'Comedy', 'Epic', etc.), and still others to stylistic features (e.g. 'Irony', 'The Conceit', etc.). Because of this diversity of subject-matter, no attempt has been made to impose a uniform pattern upon the studies. But all authors have tried to provide as full illustrative quotation as possible, to make reference whenever appropriate to more than one literature, and to compose their studies in such a way as to guide readers towards the short bibliographies in which they have made suggestions for further reading.

John D. Jump

University of Manchester

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Introductory

'Aestheticism' means, broadly, a devotion to beauty, and to beauty primarily as found in the arts and in whatever is attractive in the world around us. (People talk of 'beauty' in other contexts – 'the beauty of holiness', for example, or the beauty of a geometrical theorem.) It might be thought that aestheticism, in this broad sense, has existed throughout civilized history. The word 'aestheticism' first appeared, however, in the nineteenth century, and it denoted something new: not merely a devotion to beauty, but a new conviction of the importance of beauty as compared with – and even in opposition to – other values. 'Aestheticism' came to stand for certain ideas about life and art – ideas which then assumed a distinct form, and presented a new and serious challenge to more traditional and conventional ideas. In England, they became recognizable in the mid-to-late Victorian period – certainly from the eighteen-sixties onwards – and in France somewhat earlier.

Aestheticism appears in different but interrelated aspects: as a view of life – the idea of treating life 'in the spirit of art'; as a view of art – 'art for art's sake'; and as a characteristic of actual works of art and literature. It was in the nineteenth century that these ideas and tendencies first clearly defined themselves, and they did so in confrontation with other ideas about life and art – a confrontation sharper, more obviously pervasive in the society and culture of the time than it is today. However, some of the ideas of nineteenth-century aestheticism are still with us; and it played an important part in the development of modern attitudes to the arts and their place in society. Thus we are partly indebted to the

nineteenth-century aesthetes for the relaxation, during the present century, of literary censorship and other restrictions on literary and artistic expression.

Like other contributors to the present series, I shall be trying to explain and elucidate a term in literary criticism. Consequently, the emphasis will be on literature. Aestheticism was not, however, an exclusively literary phenomenon, although, understandably, 'aesthetic' ideas were expounded, more often than not, by men of letters, and although the implications of those ideas were, arguably, most drastic for literature. It had, however, implications for the graphic arts though not, as far as I can see, for music. (One strand in aestheticism was the desire to bring literature to a condition of 'pure art' which music was already believed to enjoy.) Also, the exponents of literary aestheticism, such as Théophile Gautier in France or Oscar Wilde in England, were interested in the other arts, and commonly spoke of 'art' and 'the artist', rather than specifically of literature.

I shall be writing for English-speaking readers and shall be mainly concerned with English literature. But any consideration of aestheticism must obviously take account of its French exponents. Aestheticism was a Western European and (if we include the important figure of Edgar Allan Poe) an American phenomenon. Writers important in the development of English aestheticism were deeply influenced by Continental writers such as Baudelaire and Gautier in France, and Hegel, as an aesthetic philosopher, in Germany. At the same time, I should hold that, notwithstanding these Continental influences, English aestheticism can still be seen as a natural development from English Romantic literature and from Romantic ideas about the creative imagination. I shall therefore stress the continuity, in England, between English Romanticism and aestheticism.

One problem, in a relatively brief treatment, is to know how far to go into the analysis of terms. 'Beauty' itself is a term that, with-

out ungainly and futile circumlocution, cannot be avoided. In the nineteenth century the term acquired new life. 'Beauty is truth, truth beauty,' said John Keats; and the aesthetes either repeated the formula or elevated beauty above truth. But what did Keats mean?

Attempts to define or describe beauty abound. The great medieval Christian philosopher, Thomas Aquinas, defined beauty, common-sensically enough, as that which, being seen, pleases – pleases, that is, simply as an object of contemplation, whether *via* the senses or within the mind itself. The nineteenth-century French novelist, Stendhal, described beauty, in more elusive terms, as the promise of happiness (*la promesse de bonheur*) – and perhaps showed deeper insight into the feelings excited by the beautiful. Walter Pater, the foremost exponent of the aesthetic view of life, virtually refused, in the preface to *The Renaissance* (1873), to define beauty at all:

> Beauty, like all other qualities presented to human experience, is relative; and the definition of it becomes unmeaning and useless in proportion to its abstractness. To define beauty, not in the most abstract but in the most concrete terms possible, to find not its universal formula, but the formula which expresses most adequately this or that special manifestation of it, is the aim of the true student of aesthetics.

For Pater, beauty is something immediately experienced, felt upon the pulses – not a bloodless abstraction. In effect, he makes 'beauty' a blanket term covering the impressions we receive and enjoy from literature and the arts and from Wordsworth's 'mighty world of eye and ear'. This use of the word will be adopted here. While admittedly evading the philosophical issue, we shall at least be recognizing the lowest common denominator of what nineteenth-century aesthetes understood by 'beauty'; and be able at least to say where they looked for beauty and what they considered hostile to it.

Another problem arises with the word, 'aesthetic'. Here there is a danger of ambiguity. 'Aesthetic' (or 'esthetic') commonly refers simply to the beautiful (as in 'aesthetic experience' – experience of whatever strikes us as beautiful) or to aesthetics, the philosophical study of beauty and the arts. (A variant of 'aesthetics' is 'aesthetic', used as a noun, as in 'Hegel's aesthetic' – that is, Hegel's philosophy of beauty.) Aesthetics is the study of questions like: What is beauty? What is the relation of form to matter in literature and art? What do the different arts have in common? These, then, are aesthetic questions. But 'aesthetic' here has a meaning quite distinct from 'aesthetic' when it refers to the subject of this study.

When the word refers to aestheticism, it refers not merely to the beautiful, not merely to the philosophical study of the beautiful (from whatever point of view and with whatever results), but to a particular set of convictions about art and beauty and their place in life. Examples are: 'Oscar Wilde now entered his aesthetic phase'; 'Oscar Wilde is satirized, in Gilbert and Sullivan's *Patience*, as an example of the aesthetic type.' Different uses of the word are, however, very closely related and shade into each other, as in: 'He judges everything by an aesthetic standard.' There, 'aesthetic' refers to beauty as such, but also implies aestheticism, the very attitude which makes the beautiful a universal standard. To avoid ambiguity, I shall sometimes supply 'aesthetic' with inverted commas, to indicate that I am referring to the particular set of convictions known as aestheticism. Otherwise, I shall trust to the context to make the meaning clear.

Aestheticism presents questions on both the logical and historical planes. Logically, we ask about the meaning of ideas: what, for example, are we to understand by 'art for art's sake'? From a historical standpoint, we ask when ideas emerged, and under what conditions; how they resemble or differ from the ideas of earlier and later times; what motives and influences were at work in the

people who conceived them; what relation they bore to life and to literary and artistic practice.

However, the two planes, logical and historical, are not completely separate. The ideas themselves are matters of historical record; they develop and change; they relate to life and to the practice of art and letters. They cannot usefully be treated completely in the abstract, like mathematical formulæ. We find that when we consider the meaning of an idea, we are concerned, not with sheer logical analysis but largely with what the idea meant to particular people – writers, artists, critics, aesthetic theorists – at particular points in history. In the case of 'art for art's sake', the idea is, logically, somewhat elusive; but we can still answer questions about its meaning for the people who defended and attacked it. We have to consider the phrase in the light of their writings or recorded utterances and of the relevant contemporary conditions. The ideas, then, must be considered in their historical context, as issuing from – and in turn influencing – the life, the inherited and contemporary culture of their time.

Some may object to the very concept of aestheticism itself: aestheticism, it may be said, is a myth, an abstraction masquerading as a concrete entity. This objection does highlight the danger of over-simplification, of imposing too tidy a pattern on the complex facts. It might be said that, in speaking of aestheticism, we are selecting writers, artists and their works, lumping them – regardless of differences – into one category, and then treating that category as if it were an entity existing apart from the individuals to whom it refers. Aestheticism would then be a 'reified abstraction', a mental concept treated as an objectively existing thing. To this objection I should reply that, as a matter of historical fact, there did exist, in the nineteenth century, a recognizable body of broadly consistent opinion to which the term, 'aestheticism' applies; that individuals did resemble each other in what they thought and said and wrote, and did make common cause together;

that with such coherence of thought and action, there did come into being a force in nineteenth-century life as recognizable as other forces – Nonconformity, for instance, Utilitarianism, Darwinism or early Socialism. In fact, without the use of such general concepts as 'aestheticism', we cannot give an adequate account of the culture of any age. Such concepts are valid in so far as they denote alignments and antagonisms formed among individuals and operating as observable forces in society and producing observable effects. There is, however, this much truth in the possible objection I have cited: we shall be considering individual writers, artists and aesthetic theorists as examples of the 'aesthetic' point of view; but the individual is likely to be more than merely an example. His achievement will present other aspects; he may not even be consistently 'aesthetic'. Even if this point cannot always be explicitly noted, it should always be remembered.

Sooner or later, in considering aestheticism, we must come to the question of its validity as an outlook on life, literature and art: we cannot maintain neutrality indefinitely. A fair assessment of the subject must evidently involve respect for facts, where facts are relevant, and, in matters of opinion, a recognition that different opinions are tenable. However, if we admit that aestheticism stands for a broadly coherent body of attitudes, both to life and art, that are still possible today, we are faced with a choice: accept or reject – or stop thinking about the relation of art and life at all. Either we accept 'aesthetic' criteria as paramount in the conduct of life, or we do not. Either we admit that art – *as* art – has its value as part of some wider scheme of values, of a total life-process that includes extra-aesthetic interests, or we do not. It is only fair, therefore, that the present writer's attitude should be made clear.

I sympathize with the nineteenth-century aesthetes' insistence, against the cruder moralists and utilitarians of the time, that art is indeed art and not something else – that the value of art is to be found in our immediate experience of it, not in its alleged effects

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