

PHILOSOPHICAL OUTLOOKS UPON THE BEAUTIFUL

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Abstract: *Constitutive interrogation of aesthetics is whether the beautiful stands for the universal object of aesthetics, in the way that the good stands for the universal object of ethics. The reason for this issue being raised to debate is that objections may arise upon the central position of the beautiful. In the first place, we dare say art not always achieves the beautiful. There are artistic oeuvres that are not necessarily beautiful. The reply is generally that beauty asserts itself on another plan, as it pertains not to the field of the object, but to its representation.*

Key words: *the beautiful, idea, transcendent, modernity, rule.*

1. Plato and Aristotle

The first noteworthy author interested in the philosophical significance of the beautiful was **Plato**. The importance of its reflection upon the beautiful consists in the idea that the beautiful must be searched for its own purpose, therefore autonomously, without considering other values. In line with this, there has been remarked, in the specialized literature, that Plato was himself an artist preoccupied with music, painting. As a matter of fact, a few of his dialogues have remained in the history of culture as oeuvres of outstanding literary value, such as the *Banquet*, *Phaidon* or *Phaidros*; there is about the dialogues that the historians of philosophy have deemed characteristic for the period of maturity. The issue of the beautiful was dealt with by Plato in *Hippias Minor*, *Phaidros* and *The Banquet*. In *Hippias Minor*, Plato discusses with Hippias the sophist, the issue of the beautiful, on the line of its being defined in relation to beautiful

things. There is a constant of Plato's youthful dialogues, the attempt to define the general of an idea (such as beauty, goodness, rightfulness, virtue etc.); making reference to particular things (that we call beauteous, good, rightful, virtuous etc.). Each and every time Socrates, Plato's character, opposes a sophist, the latter having fallen under the illusion of believing that the particular things below the idea may be confounded with the idea itself. There goes the same way Hippias, too, claiming that the beautiful may be confounded with any beauteous thing (a beauteous woman), or with the most beautiful thing (such as gold), or that it resides in our relation with beauteous things or in the feelings we experience towards these ones (convenience, utility, pleasure etc.). Socrates rejects the idea that the supreme beautiful might be the convenient, the useful or the agreeable. The idea standing out from the Plato's text is that absolute beauty is transcendent in relation to all beauteous sensitive things,

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either considered individually, or in mutual relation. Nonetheless, the dialogue *Hippias Minor* is one of those bearing the name *aporetic*, in the sense it does not reach to a positive result, it only formulates the negative condition of defining the beautiful. However, starting with this dialogue, there has taken shape the idea that the beautiful is related to the good, an idea that will become fundamental in his later writings. There is well known the fact that Plato, elaborating his theory of the ideas, especially within the dialogue *Republic* will deem that the idea of Good stands for the supreme idea, which organizes the entire order of the intelligible. [5]. Consequently, the idea of the beautiful is closely connected to the idea of the good, the latter one not only in the moral sense, but also in the metaphysical sense (the good as principle of the being). This way, in the *Banquet*, Plato identifies the beautiful with the good, and in *Philebos*, he states that *the good must be comprehended within beauty, proportion and truth*.

Aristotle's theory must be related to his metaphysical outlook. Unlike Plato, Aristotle considers that forms are not transcendental in relation to the material things they inform, but that they are immanent to these latter ones. Consequently, his theory upon the beautiful conveys upon it a more concrete significance than Plato's. This way, he defines the beautiful in accordance with three elements: the order (the coordination of the parts within the assembly), the determination (the proportion of the beautiful object) and the symmetry (the submission of the variety within unity). In accordance with the antique outlooks which confound the beautiful with the truth and with the moral good, Aristotle distinguishes among several species of the beautiful: the natural, artistic and moral beautiful, to which he likewise adds the

mathematical beautiful. As in Plato's case, to this „confusion” there corresponds the lack of distinction between arts and sciences [3]. This means that, as a matter of fact, antique authors make no connection between the art and the beautiful, considering the beautiful under its general aspect, and without concrete determinations in relation to the idea of artistic creation. This explains why, later on, there appeared the notion of *fine arts*, meant to distinguish between the „artistic” art and the mere trade or profession.

2. French Classicism

There are many authors who placed the beginning of modernity in the Cartesian preoccupation for doubt, certainty and method. Descartes' century bears in France the name of *âge classique*; beside Descartes' concern upon introducing the mathematicians' method in philosophy (*Rules for the Direction of Mind*), the compliance with rule and rigor was also felt in art, through Boileau, Corneille and Racine, authors who introduced in the discourse upon art „vain lucidity, analytical clarity and method awareness”[4]. An important characteristic of the classical aesthetical outlook is the diminished proportion of imagination and fantasy. Descartes wrote a *Compendium of Music* wherein he introduced as a fundamental aesthetic standard, the mathematical ideal of the mean and of the equilibrium. He doubled the mathematical analysis with the physiology of the passions, claiming that sound was good for the nerves. Beside this commonsense observation, he also claimed that musical beauty might be mathematically proved. The satisfaction brought about by music is in the first place intellectual, and imagination is deemed inferior. Arithmetic in music is superior to the auditory sense.

If Descartes dealt with music, Hobbes took as his object of „interest” poetry; drawing up a foreword to the translation he had performed from Homer. Much as Descartes, he rejected the importance of fantasy within creation, and also the theories on passions that were known during the epoch. His theory ended in bringing a new explanation to poetic fancy, starting from the idea that that everything in the world is matter in motion, inclusively the play of passions, the memory function and the perceptions. Imagination depends on the motion of the body organs and the spirit is the result of the motion of certain body parts. As with the morals, poetry is „mechanics of the passions and of the emotions”, and the painting is a „physical philosophy”. Within poetic production, imagination and reasoning must concur, the poet must organize his work much as a philosopher, the fancy being “architectural and philosophical” at the same time [3].

The art critics of the epoch abode by Descartes and Hobbes’ ideas, when they stated fancy must comply with rational order. Within his outstanding *Poetic Art*, Boileau defined the aesthetic canon of classicism, introducing within poetry the Cartesian ideal of the „love for reasoning” and of the „pleasure abiding by the rules”. Among these rules: setting beforehand the moral purpose, modeling characters, assuming the poet’s kind-hearted nature, the piousness etc. The rule of submitting imagination to reason stands for a precautionary measure that art will not alter nature itself „tying and untying matrimonial knots among things” as Bacon said. Among the philosophers of the 17th century, there incurred upon the empiric Locke the task of developing a theory upon the engendering idea, which should lead to a new aesthetic outlook. The theory upon the association of the ideas favours particular psychological events, searching

for their source in the contingency of the sensitive impressions, and not in the rules of reasoning or in the predictable mechanics of the perceptions undergoing intellectual control. Locke likewise speaks of an „intern sensory organ” whose function consists in representing one’s own mental processes, as compared to perceiving the state of things. The aesthetics historians consider Locke’s importance and the one of English empirics not to be on the line of the results – after all the aesthetic theory roughly reaches the same conclusion as the rationalist theory, due to Boileau’s influence upon the aesthetic environments throughout Great Britain – but rather on the line of the discovery of a new departure point (the emotion, the feeling, the passion the internal intuition).

In the framework of the artistic practise, the French canon was more influential than the theory of the internal sense. Even the „outstanding Hume”, as Kant names him, endorsed conventionalism in art, although he asserted in rough terms that the genius must resort to his own imagination and not to the rule of the art. The first philosopher to apply the idea of the internal sense within aesthetic judgment was Shaftesbury, however he opposed Locke’s doctrine: „his internal sense was much like Leibniz’ sympathy” [3], being the harmony between soul and God; consequently, the sense of beauty is rather an intuition of the whole than a sense in itself (Shaftesbury being influenced by Plotin and by Marc Aurelius). As a matter of fact, the one who applied the term of „sense” to aesthetic experience was Hutcheson, who claimed that the perception of beauty is neither intellectual function, nor related to desire. He would say „where the uniformity of the bodies is equal, the beauty results in direct proportion with variety” [3] (the law of the compound relation between uniformity and variety). The perception of this

mathematical relation is a „sense”, as beauty is felt without sensing its reason. The most important idea circulating during the epoch is that taste may be analyzed and educated: internal sense must be endorsed towards taking shape with the help of the intellect. As a matter of fact, the taste stands for the fusion between this sense and reasoning. This idea was contested by Burke, who refused to admit that the perception of beauty needs help from reasoning or from the will; it is connected to social instinct. As far as he is concerned, the beautiful stands for a social quality, and the sense of beauty is divided into sympathy, imitation and ambition. This way, tragedy thrills through sympathy; sculpture, painting and poetry through imitation and ambition is connected to the feeling of the sublime. On Burke's line, there subsequently developed an emotionalist line of thinking. The result will be a theory of the artistic production that will admit that art may correct nature (even if through itself) and that genius places itself above rules. As an aesthete (English) would say at the end of the 18th century „if we taught taste and genius according to the rules, they would be neither genius, nor taste” [3].

This idea was further backed up by the aestheticians of the second half of the 17th century, from France and Italy. G. Vico was perhaps one of the first authors to endorse the importance of the imagination: as far as he was concerned, „fiction and myth are the own natural language of ingenious spirit” [3]. He was not the only one to endorse the idea of the aesthetic importance of importance, given that, during his epoch, rejecting Aristotle's politics and adapting Cartesianism to the exigencies of imagination stood for a new intellectual trend. But, for Vico, imagination has value “in itself and for itself” and this is pleaded and taught by the history of man and mankind (therefore the

birth of civilization). The author of the *New Science* discovered the *genetic method*: considering knowledge according to its historical genesis. Imagination is therefore specifically human behavior, and poetic function equals the function of the intellect.

In France, Condillac (*Essay upon Human Knowledge Origin*) asserted that art and language (communication) have common origin and we may convince ourselves of this fact studying the primitive people's social behavior. In his turn, Du Bos considered that art consisted in rendering visible the nature's individuality, having as main function the stimulation of human emotions (he would talk of a sixth sense). He insisted upon the moderate aspect of emotion: art is adventure without danger. Art is at the same time artificial and natural, and achieving this synthesis requires the creator's genius. This idea of the turn to nature (du Bos even talks of the importance of the physical environment upon artistic creation) constitutes a constant element of aesthetic reflection in France. They deem that imitating nature must mould the feeling, must thrill and also stir. As a matter of fact, this is the idea standing out from his article *the Beautiful (Beau)* written by Diderot for the *Encyclopedia*: arts become natural through their effect upon our feelings. Diderot strives against the English Estheticians' ideas, who separated the internal sense from reflexive reason: „the poet must be a philosopher” [3] „The poet who simulates and the philosopher who ratiocinates are to the same extent and in the same sense logical and illogical.” he claimed, trying thereby to place beauty and truth under the same roof. Art is genuine, for Diderot, as the beautiful is a *relation*: relation between pleasure and admiration (between the observer and the object), mathematical relation of proportion, relation between the purpose and the mean,

relation between the sign and its significance, moral relation etc. A relation stands for a „mental operation through whose intermediary a being or a quality implies another being or quality” [3], and the taste is „perceiving and complicating the relations” being separated from knowledge through its emotional component. As regards the artist, Diderot states he would rather learnt from nature than from the rules of the art, against which he manifested an unreserved aversion. The distance from the rules and the solicitation of nature, are for Diderot, the assurance that art will not depend on morals and manners. We encounter a similar position in Rousseau, for whom nature meant feeling; therefore he utters the urge towards the expression of the natural feeling in art. The supremacy of nature in art is the measure against shallowness and against the corruption of the morals and manners; in his dispute with Rameau upon French music, he backed up the cause of Italian music, wherein he sees the expression of innocent passions.

3. German Classicism

At the end of the 18th century, aesthetics made extraordinary strides in Germany. Baumgarten invented the term „aesthetics” in order to designate a science (theory) of imagination. He was one of the first authors to convey upon imagination, the dignity of constituting an independent object and of functioning (producing) without the control of reason (similar ideas were endorsed during the epoch by Vico, Burke and Du Bos). Baumgarten said that the poet is endowed with the faculty of intuiting eternity. According to Baumgarten, the substance of the arts is non-intellectual and is invested with perfection (value) that can no longer be reduced to another perfection. He

prefigures the idea of the purposeless finality of aesthetic reason, defended by Kant. An important aspect of his theory consists in the separation of the superior faculty (of the rational knowledge) from the inferior faculty (of imaginative production). The arts pertain to inferior knowledge, which operates with the individual. As most of the authors from his epoch, Baumgarten asserts that art must imitate the model provided by nature itself, associated with the perfection and the richness of its forms. An adept of Leibniz; and an inheritor of Wolff's, he thinks this world is better than all possible worlds; consequently, imitating this world is the safest path leading towards the reach of the ideal. Depicting perfection implies grasping unity within society, and the poet achieves this distinctly from the philosopher; the beautiful is the phenomenal perfection and does not imply the correspondence with things and the accuracy, but rather a certain measure (division into doses) of the images and of the passionate elements.

Another important author for developing the modern concept of the beautiful is Winckelmann, who wrote a *History of the Art during Antiquity* (1764). This author interpreted the aesthetic slogan of the epoch („Return to nature”) in the sense of returning to Greek art. This theoretical option is the direct result of the contact with classical sculpture. He had taken as guide mark especially the works brought forth during the peak period of Greek art, and introduced within aesthetics the concept of evolution of the styles, influencing thereby Goethe, Schiller and Hegel. For Winckelmann, the history of art is focused on the coming to light, development, substitution and dying away of the art, of the styles and of the artists (he identified several stages in Greek art). His definition of the beautiful takes into consideration the issue of expression: the

excess of expression has been deforming, while the lack of expression calls off the beautiful. The artist must obtain the beautiful through controlling characteristic and individual features; and the expression of the feelings; at the same time, the ideal of the beautiful integrates the highest state of the soul: the equilibrium and the greatness.

It is very likely that before Goethe, the most authoritative aesthetic outlook in Germany was Lessing's (1729-1781), defended in his outstanding essay *Laocoon*. The essay was worked out and drawn up as a reply to Winckelmann who had stated in his own way why in the statuary complex *Laocoon*, Laocoon does not cry with pain, as it actually happens in Virgil. According to Winckelmann, the Greek genius opposes the violent expression of emotion. Lessing asseverates however something else, that the „master wanted to depict supreme beauty in the given conditions of physical pain”[3]. More specifically, it pertains to sculpture's own means of expression, to represent only a moment of the action, and that moment needs not be the extreme moment. Starting from this case, Lessing discusses the distinction between poetry and sculpture, considering the type of signs everyone works with (in time, respectively in space). Poetry is more adequate so as to represent actions, and sculpture to represent bodies. However, each and every art may express an object which does not make up its very specialty: sculpture may represent in its turn actions, as in *Laocoon*, however it

must choose what Lessing calls *pregnant moment* (and poetry must proceed this very same way, when describing bodies). Through his conception of *Laocoon*, Lessing announces a vast aesthetic program wherefrom we enumerate a few points: to distinguish among the arts according to a philosophic principle, to defend the dignity of poetry, proving it is not inferior to painting, to argument that arts may represent the beautiful resorting to objects which are not naturally beautiful (for instance death, blood, sweat). Lessing's aesthetic outlook is important especially through submitting an outlook upon art wherefrom modernity has kept a number of important aspects, even though it has modified them. *The issues* discussed by Lessing have turned out essential coordinates for modern modality of defining art and the work of art.

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