

Towards an aesthetic hermeneutics

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Barnett Newman famously claimed that "the impulse of modern art was the desire to destroy beauty". For some of the artistic projects of the twentieth Century, the term "beauty" seemed too bland, anodyne and certainly too theoretically burdened with the weight of centuries; one could no longer use it to describe the new subversive art, as well as the art from non-Western cultures, that were being added to museum collections. The past was visualized as being a receptacle for beauty as defined and understood by the West; thus in order to develop a new form of art, it was seen to be necessary to separate art and beauty. Hence the call to destroy museums and similar proclamations.

Perhaps we can understand Ortega's idea in this sense: "*past art is not art; it was art*", so that we must conjugate the word 'art'. In the present tense it means one thing, and quite another in the past tense" (Ortega y Gasset, 1962, pp. 427-428). This view supposes a certain historical narrative of art that assumes that *ars facit saltus* (art makes jumps) and it is somehow close to a kind of extreme historicism, according to which it is not possible to find common elements in art throughout history. Beauty, that in many accounts happens to be the binding element, is one of those transcendental terms that raises immediate defence or rejection, probably because of its metaphysical remnants, which lack many other elements that have been proposed as constitutive of art (significant form, design, and so on).

The collapse of metaphysics has much to do with the end of beauty in art. It is a fact that in recent times art has become independent of this aesthetic property and beauty has fled to other regions less committed and less metaphysically burdened, like advertising, fashion, design, surgery, gardening, and even science.

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The relationship between these two events can be seen if we establish a parallel with another major term to which the metaphysical tradition devoted much of its energies: the notion of substance. As metaphysics gave ground to the scientific method, substance lost its privilege in favour of accidents, which are the objects of empirical observation. Substance is then reduced to a dispensable support for accidents, and ultimately to an “I don't know what”.

This brings to mind the persistent description of beauty throughout the history of art as a “*nescio quid*”, something indefinable, but at the same time, something that one may say is the substance of art. When substance disappears, accidents remain. Once substantial beauty is missing, that place is filled by the accidents of art: delighting, creating a worldview, conveying a political message, educating or whatever. Beauty, understood by medieval thinkers as a transcendental property, present in every being just by the fact of being, disappears from the critical vocabulary and is replaced with one of these categorical properties that applies just to the realm of art, which is thereby separated from other areas of life (despite the avant-garde proclamations to reunite art and life), and thus, enters under the judgement of those who can recognize significant form, the sublime, the abject, and much more theory-laden concepts than beauty.

The work of the formalists (Clive Bell, Roger Fry) is an example of this. To them, the question is no longer whether something is beautiful (and therefore art). They seek a more direct method to determine this, namely, whether or not it has the property *x* (significant form, design, etc...) which is necessary and sufficient for something to be art. In this way, this art achieves total autonomy from other areas of life and it can become something completely uninspiring, doomed to death, not theoretical anymore but practical.

The end of beauty in art can be seen as the last episode of the end of metaphysics. Yet, metaphysics has been come to life again, raising a number of issues that affect all philosophical disciplines. One of these particularly interests us specifically, for it regards the question of realism versus idealism and objectivism versus subjectivism with respect to beauty.

We must distinguish between realism and objectivism. Realism is opposed to idealism, arguing that beauty is a feature of reality that may or may not be independent of the beholder. So, one can be realist and either objectivist or subjectivist. Under this general rubric of realism Hilary Putnam considers several closely associated philosophical ideas about the relationship between language and reality, and between truth and knowledge or justifiable belief. Putnam characterizes metaphysical realism in terms of three other theses, of which he takes this feature to be a consequence: that 'the world consists of a fixed totality of mind independent objects', that 'there is exactly one true description of the way the world is' and that 'truth involves some sort of correspondence between words or thought, signs and external things, and sets of things'. Putnam attacks this kind of realism, advocating instead what he terms 'internal realism', that admits that to some extent the data of the realist is interpretatively polluted. But

even in this sense we can maintain that beauty is a property of reality, or, to be more precise, beauty is real.

Objectivism, on the other hand, claims that beauty is a fact that does not depend on the subject. Our aesthetic responses would be responses to objective features, and so the judgement "this is beautiful" would be true if the object actually possessed objective beauty (described in terms of proportions, colours, form or whatever), and something will be beautiful regardless of the ability of any subject to perceive its beauty (something might be objectively beautiful even though no one perceived it as such, which seems absurd). If beauty is an objective feature, aesthetic experience is seen as something conceptually later than the aesthetic object. This approach ruled the thinking about beauty until the eighteenth century in general, although there were major exceptions in Greek thought already.

By contrast, subjectivism holds that beauty is "in the eyes of the beholder". Beauty is a fact that depends entirely on the subject, and in the end, there is nothing in the object that determines our judgement. Aesthetic experience depends on the subject adopting a special kind of attitude. Holding that something is beautiful would be equivalent to saying that the sound of a river is relaxing: it is difficult to say that things are relaxing in themselves, except if we find them relaxing. Obviously, for the sake of the argument, we make reference to pure types. Usually theorists advocate for a more nuanced thesis...

Ideal objectivism can explain spatial and temporal agreements on certain aesthetic judgments, but it cannot explain the differences. Ideal subjectivism cannot give an account of the concurrences, only of the differences. However, objectivism cannot definitively determine the qualities that are considered beautiful or –if one maintains a subvenient base– how we move or do not move from this to the aesthetic properties.

Clearly, not everyone, in their different times and different places, considers the same things to be beautiful. About this there is not much more to say. We could prove this thesis just by means of a poll of this room. To address this diversity of tastes, Hume's explanatory model is the ideal judge, a theoretical device that involves removing from the actual individuals all flaws or adding to them anything missing, to turn them into "pure human natures". We thus create the inerrant judge, a splendid *ens rationis* that justifies our aesthetic preferences. Ideal judges are counterfactual realities: if this and that were the case, then we would give a "natural" judgement of beauty. As other "natural" realities, so popular in the Enlightenment (natural religion, natural knowledge, etc...), this natural judgement ends up in the most artificial reality. Like in the Newtonian universe, or in the Cartesian world, in which God must constantly intervene to correct or guarantee, in the Modern world, the subject must constantly correct the natural to make it be really natural.

But along with these differences that the subject should explain in order to correct them, there are surprising coincidences that seem to support the

objectivist thesis as defended by evolutionary aesthetics, as in the case of Denis Dutton. There would be a kind of "natural beauty" behind which there are a set of basic preferences related to survival, but that is so general that it can easily be overturned, as illustrated, for example, by the golden ratio.

As outlined, both approaches, take beauty as a datum that depends only on either the subject or on the object, without paying attention to historicity. Thus, beauty becomes vulnerable to contemporary criticism. To a large extent, the collapse of the great metaphysical concepts, the end of metaphysics, is due to the consciousness of historicity. Some realists tend to cover beauty with a univocal or fundamental conceptual status, with some Platonic remnants: beauty is an *eidos* of which beautiful things participate. And so it is easy to criticize it, precisely because it is a term that has no historicity. If the history of art is the art of history and beauty has no history, it is easy to conclude that one cannot associate both lines. But, actually, beauty (and surely any of the other properties called transcendental) has never been considered in such a way at any point in aesthetic reflection. Instead, the exception is fixism. Different authors have remarked the mutable and evolving nature of beauty. One of the clearest statements in this regard is that of Baudelaire, whom, following Madame de Staël's lead, sustained that the love of beauty is the generator of artwork, and whom, in his work *The Painter of Modern Life*, holds that "beauty is made up of an eternal, invariable element whose quantity is expressively difficult to determine, and of a relative, circumstantial element, which will be, if you like, whether severally or all at once, the age, its fashions, its morals, its emotions" (Baudelaire, 1995, p. 3).

There is something that links all beautiful things together, and there is also a specific element of every age, place, or passion. Beauty, then, is not a metaphysical absolute, and it certainly is not a purely contingent element: it has a kind of medial or analogue character. If it were fully determined by occasional time and place, could we recognize another form of beauty? Its being something not immutable is demonstrated by the work of discovery and expansion that art has made with regard to beauty over the centuries.

From the phenomenological point of view, we can say that beauty is present in things, whether in their form, structure, texture, their internal relations, etc. But we are the ones who feel and perceive beauty in an object and in the fact of judging something as beautiful, we recognize that favourable judgement is deserved and necessary. This characterization of beauty, beyond the objective and eternal, and the contingent and subjective, has been developed by hermeneutics, while also paying attention to something that cannot be included by these other approaches: the role of mood.

For hermeneutics, interpretation is not a process in which a given subject faces a closed object, but a *tertium quid* that gives rise to reality, that is, the interpretive process changes the nature of that which is being interpreted, however, not in the sense of forcing a nature to become what the performer wants it to be. This view would involve thinking about independent subjects and objects, both from an

objectivist point of view, in which beauty exists even though no one judges it as such, or from a subjectivist one, in which the beholder determines what is beautiful in virtue of his own originating power. Beauty is not a physical object, but a cultural construction, whose being changes as it is interpreted. How else could we understand the different paradigms of beauty that have appeared all throughout the history of art? The hermeneutic proposal is neither objectivist nor subjectivist, but realistic. Beauty is something real, as real as mathematical entities can be.

Just by referencing classical authors, we see that it is a kind of eon that recurs again and again in history of thought. A paradigmatic case is found in pre-critical Kant. In his *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime*, Kant delves into the hermeneutics of beauty. Although he links beauty to morality, his thesis is perfectly applicable to any perceiver's experience: "One finds that those forms that on first glance do not have a marked effect because they are not pretty in any decided way usually are far more engaging and seem to grow in beauty as soon as they begin to please on closer acquaintance, while in contrast the beautiful appearance that announces itself all at once is subsequently perceived more coldly, presumably because moral charms, when they become visible, are more arresting, also because they become effective only on the occasion of moral sentiments and as it were let themselves be discovered, each discovery of a new charm, however, giving rise to a suspicion of even more"(Kant, 2011, p. 45). The experience of beauty, then, is essentially interpretive, and this is the reason for disagreements in judgments of taste.

This idea seems to disappear from the vocabulary of Kant's *Critique of Judgment*, where beauty is understood in terms of necessity, subjective universality and so on. To say "beautiful" and to say universal, necessary and without concept, is to make an analytical statement..., but that happens only in the Kantian world, as shown by Quine through his critique of the analytic/synthetic distinction. It is the same case as with the categorical imperative, that is rational, but only under Kantian rules so to say. Outside the Kantian structures, a person can be highly rational and defend that the categorical imperative is, in fact, a hypothetical imperative: if you are a subject of the kind outlined by Kant, you will act in such and such a way... Kant has hidden the protasis of the imperative. The same occurs in the aesthetic realm, where Kantian universalism declares something beautiful by virtue of the Kantian system, that is, only under all the constraints required by Kant.

Was, then, this interpretive reading missing in the critical Kant? Joseph Margolis is very critical of the *Critique of Judgement* and of Kant in general, for imposing any sort of ahistorical constraints upon the field of knowledge and aesthetic judgement. Notwithstanding, I think we can glean the essential elements for this hermeneutic reading in the *Critique of Judgement*, especially in his repeated insistence on the resistance of beauty to the conceptualization. The free play of imagination and understanding is a kind of hermeneutic circle in which subject and

object come together to bring out the very conditions of possibility of knowledge, to show how the cognitive capacities, by means of the pleasure their free play produces, establishes a continuity between the subject and the world that is impossible to guarantee in the realm of pure reason, namely, the awareness that the world is not indifferent for the subject, that the individual cannot really see the world from a third person point of view.

For this reason, Kant is forced to play with contradictory pairs of concepts in the *Critique of Pure Reason* (subjective and universal aesthetic judgments, subjection to law (judgment) depending on a feeling, etc.), and to establish the distinction between free and dependent beauty based on the presence of a concept (something totally subject to interpretation). To make an aesthetic judgment is to implicitly declare that everyone should necessarily experience a certain subjective response, a response that should bring about the spontaneous agreement of all. It seems that certain subjective responses *are* invested with the strength of universally necessary propositions. But this statement involves overcoming the subject-object dualism, since the universal quality of taste cannot come from the object, which is purely contingent, or from some particular desire or interest in the subject, because these are limited as well. It must then arise from the subject's own cognitive structure, which, in the pleasure underlying the aesthetic judgment, shows its accommodation in the lifeworld.

The same is true of what is humorous. If we apply to humour the four characteristics Kant assigns to the judgment of taste that discerns the beautiful, it fits: it is universal according to the quantity (we think everyone should laugh), it is disinterested according to the quality, necessary according to the modality and a finality without an end according to the relation. We can thus talk of laughter (to which Kant devotes so little space in the *Critique*) as the underside of beauty. As the judgment of taste does not give rise to concepts, neither does the "gelastic judgment", whose equivalent to pleasure is laughter, and which also plays with all the cognitive mechanisms, without reaching a concept. One can maintain that laughter gives us a new understanding of reality (we laugh when we understand), but it does not follow from this that laughter provides us with a concept; rather we should speak of what Kant calls an aesthetic idea.

Hermeneutics interprets the lifeworld. An important part of the lifeworld is beauty, and "the beautiful is what makes happy" (Wittgenstein, 1998b, p. 86) something we find "natural" (Wittgenstein, 1998a, p. 20), something that belongs to the human world, beyond cultural distinctions. That is one of the reasons why the concept of beauty is being built as we interpret it, insofar as the aesthetic experience is, in terms of Dewey, a relationship between the individual and his or her environment.

Conclusion

The hermeneutic approach comes to our defence when we try to grasp what beauty is: beauty is not a measurable fact, but the very nature of beauty changes with being interpreted. We cannot even imagine what will be considered beautiful in 1000 years time. Nietzsche noted that the eighteenth century despised Gothic architecture, because the century had created its own taste. That's the reason, he thought, why our century must recover those feelings which led to the building of those churches. Only the interpretation of (and in) that lifeworld makes them beautiful. We may or may not consider them as such, but it does not depend only on subjects or on objects. It depends on interpretation.

We may remember Susan Sontag's famous thesis that "in place of a hermeneutics we need an erotics of art", a recovery of our senses. We must learn to see more, to hear more, to feel more. The function of criticism should be to show how it is what it is, even that it is what it is, rather than to show what it means. But this only makes sense if we accept that erotics (eros and love of beauty) itself is already hermeneutics (Sontag, 1967, p. 14).

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