

Introduction

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THE ESSAYS PRESENTED IN THIS VOLUME were first circulated and discussed during a two-day symposium on the concepts of “Beauty and Form,” hosted at Northwestern University in January 2016. They have since been revised and, from a variety of angles, ask us to reconsider two concepts that, while always central to humanistic inquiry, continue to prove both provocative and elusive. Published here in revised form, the five essays in this special issue are meant to stimulate ongoing reflections on these concepts and their fundamental relevance to critical and interpretive work.

To take up questions of “beauty” and (aesthetic) “form” in the twenty-first century is complicated business in more ways than one. One might begin by acknowledging that any efforts in this regard will necessarily be circumscribed by an awareness that at least three paradigms of beauty and form have seemingly been exhausted. The first is the Platonic, idealizing account of beauty as an “open transcendental” (in theologian Colin Gunton’s phrase). The term denotes not some transcendent norm anterior to and wholly transcending human cognition. Rather, “open” here signifies an absolute whose reality discloses itself in virtue of (and in proportion to) our active engagement and participation in it, even as our finitude precludes its definitive comprehension. The Platonic *kallon* is one such transcendental. Thus, in the *Phaedrus* Socrates invokes a “beauty that was ours to see in all its brightness in those days when . . . we beheld with our eyes that blessed vision” and when the beholder proved as yet “whole and unblemished.” Beauty and immediacy appear strongly correlated, which in turn favors sight as the seemingly unfiltered way of accessing and apprehending the divine available to finite, embodied beings: “for sight is the keenest mode of perception vouchsafed us through the body” (250c–d). And yet, even then the

encounter with the beautiful as a transformative, revelatory, and godlike experience is already construed less as a luminous presence than as a fading recollection on the part of the many, “whose vision of the mystery is long past, or whose purity has been sullied” (250e).

Even for Plato, that is, a transformative encounter of the beautiful constitutes a case of moral luck, an epiphanic moment not unlike the one resurfacing in a landmark document of German, fin-de-siècle, linguistic skepticism—Hugo von Hofmannsthal’s Chandos Letter (1902). It is these sudden epiphanies, short-circuited by the barrenness and inutility of all language, invoked in paradoxically luminous prose by Hofmannsthal, and expressly echoed in J. M. Coetzee’s “Postscript” to *Elizabeth Costello* (2003), that are at the heart of Robert Pippin’s essay. “At such moments,” remarks Hofmannsthal’s fictive Lord Chandos, “even a negligible creature, a dog, a rat, a beetle, a stunted apple tree,” “and in some cases inanimate creatures press toward me with such fullness, such presence of love, that there is nothing in range of my rapturous eye that does not have life.”¹ For Plato no less than for Hofmannsthal, beauty, formally instantiated as “visible appearance” (*eidōs*), constitutes an “open transcendental” not because it *guarantees* divine knowledge (it does not) but because it constitutes “a notion in some way basic to the human thinking process, which empowers a continuing and in principle unfinished exploration of the universal marks of being.” Even though the Platonic quest for the beautiful (like that for the good and the true) has a universal dimension to it, the value of open transcendentals “will be found not primarily in their clarity and certainty, but in” their suggestiveness and potentiality for being deepened and enriched, during the continuing process of thought, from a wide range of sources in human life and culture.”²

The first phase of conceiving the beautiful, which still resonates in Stendhal’s famous definition of beauty as *une promesse de bonheur*, thus concerns less its definitive attainment than what the pursuit of beauty unveils about the ontology of human agency—namely, its implication in a numinous order that gives itself to be apprehended at the level of “intuition” (*Anschauung*). Such Platonic striving or *eros* subsequently came to be obscured, or altogether disavowed, by the intellectual habit of ancient and modern skepticism, Stoic self-possession, and Kantian critique. In contrast to the compartmentalized ideal of Baconian and Cartesian *method*, Platonic notions of form and beauty are not isolated objects of some discretionary, epistemic quest. Rather, they name something altogether “essential” (to invoke the bugbear of modernist aesthetics) about human beings as such.

Though not for entirely sound reasons, eighteenth-century aesthetic writings on questions of taste—cultivated by the painstaking calibration of subjective affect and artistic genre—posit that the Platonic framework of *eros* and *eidōs* has been irretrievably lost or, as the case may be, has been definitively overcome. What now shapes and constrains aesthetic inquiry are no longer axioms about a human life holistically conceived and shaped in accordance with inherited norms of wisdom and excellence. Rather, aesthetics is assimilated to a distinctly technical inquiry into the formal structures and principles of human reasoning, a notably abstract and calculative endeavor of “reckoning” (Hobbes) or anxious, proliferating doubt and prevarication (Descartes).³

¹ Hugo von Hofmannsthal, *The Lord Chandos Letter and Other Writings*, trans. Joel Rotenberg (New York: New York Review of Books Classics, 2005), 226.

² Colin E. Gunton, *The One, the Three, and the Many: God, Creation, and the Culture of Modernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 95.

³ On modern calculative reason and its disembedding and atrophying of the human person, see Thomas Pfau, *Minding the Modern: Human Agency, Intellectual Traditions, and Responsible Knowledge* (South Bend, IN:

This second phase in the history of beauty shows the idea of the beautiful to be subsidiary to philosophy's quest for epistemological mastery and, consequently, to have been disaggregated from the now-defunct, premodern conception of philosophy as a quest for wisdom and humility. As philosophy's concerns shift from the "truth of disclosure" to the "truth of correctness," beauty and form are instrumentalized for the purposes of mimetic socialization on the part of essentially anonymous and (economically) competitive individuals. It is a development especially pronounced in England and Scotland during the age of Addison, Hogarth, Hume, Smith, and Reynolds's Royal Academy of Arts. Thus, growing emphasis on the affective yield of aesthetic experience compensates for Enlightenment society's palpable agnosticism (and growing inarticulacy) about transcendent goods and ends capable of reconciling the passions and interests of the finite individual.

The philosophical import of this second phase emerges in the course of what in his *Lectures on Fine Art* (1821–22) Hegel terms the long "period of art" (*Kunstpoche*), said to extend from the High (or later) Middle Ages forward into the early nineteenth century. In the wake of modern rationalism and skepticism, philosophical truth claims about the nature and demands of modern life became increasingly difficult to reconcile with the medial and mediating formal possibilities of art, understood as "the sensuous semblance of the idea" (*das sinnliche Scheinen der Idee*). Hence, in Hegel's enduringly popular, if also problematic, turn of phrase, art—though not necessarily notions of beauty and form—has gradually revealed itself to be "a thing of the past." And thus, at the conclusion of this second phase, for which Hegel's account is often taken to have furnished the definitive philosophical obituary, beauty and form appear increasingly addled and bereft of purpose. Ultimately, both notions undergo a transformation, fueled by growing suspicions of their apparent exhaustion and seeming incommensurability with the conflicting demands of modern existence. Thus regarded as an increasingly specialized pursuit of beauty and form, Romantic art, on Hegel's account, has become increasingly predictable and unexceptional; or, where its philosophical and ideational implications run strong, art is said to have effectively merged with the prosaic order of philosophical reflection. With the patronage system dying out in the era of Beethoven, Turner, and Stendhal (to name just a few), a new logic of production and consumption also begins to affect art, which in turn expunges any remainders of Platonic thought still operative in some eighteenth-century writers (e.g., Shaftesbury, Hemsterhuis, Kant, Goethe) for whom beauty and form remain at least partially indexed to the idea of human flourishing.

As art objects—the material tokens of classical beauty and internally perfected form—shed their liturgical function and complete their migration from sacred to institutional spaces, from churches to museums, commercial exhibitions, anthologies, and an intensely subdivided culture of periodicals, the gap between the sensuous and the intelligible aspects of beauty and form, their experience and their comprehension, begins to widen exponentially. At the same time, a seemingly all-encompassing historicism, whose blueprint can already be found in the second part of Hegel's *Aesthetics*—whence it will metastasize to the emergent academic disciplines of music, art, and literary history—further attenuates beauty's once epiphanic and transformative power by tabulating and classifying the "art objects" thought to contain it. As such, the historicist protocol of art as so much inventory begging detached and encyclopedic comprehension mirrors an increasingly professional model of aesthetic production for which the Realism of Scott, Dickens, Balzac, and Courbet furnishes vivid evidence. Both the formal and material transformations of

the concepts of beauty and form comport with the process of consolidating petit bourgeois and middle-class grammars of aesthetic propriety, a process largely completed by the mid-nineteenth century. Vividly captured in the tawdry provincialism of Flaubert's *Emma*, the empty and distracted gaze of Manet's subjects, and the instrumentalization of *Bildung* for purposes of upward mobility found in German "poetic realism" (Freytag, Keller, Fontane), the response to beautiful forms abides by a mimetic and conformist logic, such that aesthetic experience is no longer credited with transformative powers but, instead, has been repurposed as a catalyst for effective socialization.

It is this attenuation of beauty and form by the encyclopedic, historicizing, and professional *mentalité* of mid-nineteenth-century Western Europe that, according to the present thumbnail sketch, constitutes the third era of beauty, conceptual remnants of which continue to shape our disjointed notions of beauty and form even today. Central to the modernist project is its discontent with what Adorno would later call the "art-industry" of the bourgeois era. To enlist form and beauty in the service of social credentialing is to betray their very essence and to purloin Platonic *mimesis* for the purpose of constructing entirely new (and almost certainly short-lived) forms of "false consciousness" (Adorno). Hence arose early modernism's sharp protest against aesthetics as vicarious, "cultured" conformism, a view so richly and diversely expressed in the works of Manet, Baudelaire, Wagner, and Dostoyevsky, among others. Yet what is repudiated here, and even more stridently in the constructivist aesthetics of high modernism (late Cézanne, Braque, Kandinsky, Picasso, Pound, young Eliot, Joyce, Schoenberg, among others), is not Plato's idea of beauty but, rather, the petit bourgeois disfiguration of Platonic beauty and *aesthesis* perpetrated by eighteenth-century sentimentalism, by early Romantic idealism, and by the paralyzing, epigonal reflexivity of late Romantic and Restoration-era (*Biedermeier*) art.

Yet to the extent that the modernist project must at all times inscribe into its forms some features of the aesthetic program and aesthetic consciousness that it now means to reject as "false," beauty and form are now achievable only at great hermeneutic expense. To this day, then, both the production and the reception of beauty and form compel hyperreflexive, at times neurotically suspicious forms of creative discernment. What Arnold Gehlen has called the "commentary-dependent" (*kommentarbedürftig*) quality of modern art is the price to be paid, it seems, if beauty and form are to be plausibly reconnected with a holistic and authentic conception of human existence.⁴ From here on, that is, any engagement with art will involve a constant and anxious shuttling back and forth between sensuous-intuitive apprehension and philosophical justification. And it is this very predicament that furnishes the prompt for Robert Pippin's essay ("Philosophical Fiction? On J. M. Coetzee's *Elizabeth Costello*") presented in this issue of *Republics of Letters*. In a series of loosely connected chapters, Coetzee's episodic narrative furnishes a number of prisms through which to view the problematic status of fiction in late modernity; as Pippin puts it, Coetzee's overriding concern here is with "embodied thinking, one that can inhabit not just the minds of other beings but their bodies" and that is intensely alert "to the inescapable question of justification." In Pippin's reading, Coetzee, perhaps more than any living writer today, succeeds in balancing fiction as "a distinctive form of thought, even a form of knowledge," with its indisputable bearing—inescapable under conditions of late modernity—on *philosophical* problems to which the technical and discursive practices of modern philosophy seem unable to formulate effective responses.

⁴ Arnold Gehlen, *Zeit-Bilder* (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 2016).

In his contribution to the present issue (“Beauty, Value, and the Aesthetics of Life in Kant and Aristotle”), James Porter seeks to reclaim Kant as pioneering a notion of beauty that refuses to accept, let alone reinforce, the heavily compartmentalized and administered paradigms of modern, middle-class existence. Rather, in ways soon after echoed by Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship*, Kant’s third *Critique* attempts, on Porter’s reading, to “expand our category of the aesthetic so that it activates its radical meanings of sensation, perception, and receptivity to experience and makes this its central business—a democratization of beauty.” In other words, our preconception of aesthetics and “formal contemplation,” taken as a distinctly modern endeavor, should not determine and circumscribe the scope and reach of the beautiful. To the extent that modern aesthetics restricts our conceptions of, and receptivity to, beauty to strictly *formal* considerations, Porter sees beauty in implicit tension with the project of modern aesthetics, a tension crucially addressed by Kant’s claims about the way that the harmonious interplay of our faculties of cognition in aesthetic judgment enhances “our feeling of life” as such, rather than bringing about some compartmentalized insight.

Jonathan Loesberg’s exploration of “the death of art” trope (“The Long Happy Death of Art”) in Hegel and Danto raises the question of how to understand that dictum. Provided the Hegelian pronouncement is not taken literally, we will find competing accounts about the end of art to have furnished “the most vibrant claims about what art has to say to us and why it is important.” Implicit in Hegel’s assertion about art as a thing of the past is a renewed urgency to ponder and determine why art matters/mattered, which in turn allows us to glimpse how art “will always mean most in its dying.” In Devin Buckley’s contribution, “T. S. Eliot’s Aesthetics of Solipsism,” which explores aesthetic experience, solipsism, and immediacy in F. H. Bradley and T. S. Eliot, she draws attention to a quintessentially modernist trait, mentioned above, whereby a recovery of beauty and form as plausible conduits to integral truth claims requires a highly reflexive and constructive presentation. In considered departure from Hugh Kenner’s influential view of Eliot as re-creating Bradley’s “immediate experience” through a variety of stylistic, syntactic, and lexical maneuvers, Buckley reads Eliot’s early poetry as framing the communal or communicative dimensions of aesthetics by exploring the “solipsistic predicament,” one that both Bradley and Eliot found to be of great “moral significance.” Bradley’s attempted navigation between the Scylla of solipsistic, appearance-based models of experience and the Charybdis of disembodied, propositional reflection puts immense pressure on modern aesthetics. What seems imperiled, more than ever, is the possibility of a distinctive kind of experience at once *significant and immediate*, generative of community without being hamstrung by the bland and oppressive sociality that so vividly incapacitates Eliot’s Prufrock.

The simultaneously visceral and reflective sensibility displayed by Eliot’s “Prufrock”—which also informs the contemporaneous modernism of late Cézanne, Picasso, Rilke, Musil, Joyce, Schoenberg, and others—takes us to the “third,” modernist phase (ca. 1860–1945) of beauty. Given the strictly epigonal role that Hegel had accorded to beauty in his aesthetics, it may surprise that in high modernism beauty undergoes a startling revitalization such that, now reframed as an experiential phenomenon rather than as a philosophical concept, it reclaims a strong presence in contemporary life. The price for this revival, however, is also palpable. For under conditions of modernism, accounting for beauty and form is no longer a secondary consideration but an integral component of their very experience. Gehlen’s characterization of modern art as “commentary-dependent” (*kommentarbedürftig*) thus fuses into a new and significantly

changed conception of the beautiful what, as recently as Hegel, had remained the distinct registers of production and reflection. As Robert Pippin has pointed out elsewhere, it is possible to read Hegel's claim about the death of art otherwise—and indeed more consistently with his dialectical mode—namely, as suggesting not so much “that art itself has been transcended [but] . . . that our current self-understanding requires a radically altered form of art.”⁵ Indeed, given the highly reflexive conception of beauty that established itself with the emergence of a modernist aesthetic nearly a century and half ago, and given the pronounced metaliterary tendencies in much contemporary fiction, it is no surprise that several of our essays deal with literary writers acutely responsive to that very fact.

Inheriting Eliot's penchant for reflexivity and compact, finely chiseled phrasing, J. M. Coetzee is the subject of the two final contributions to this issue (by Natalie Carnes and by Robert Pippin), both focused on different aspects of Coetzee's *Elizabeth Costello* (2003). In exploring the novel's remarkable fifth “lesson” (“The Humanities in Africa”), Natalie Carnes, in her essay “Embracing Beauty in a World of Affliction,” recalls for us the long-standing conjunction of beauty with poverty and suffering. As she notes, images of profound suffering such as the crucifixes serially produced by the character of Joseph in Coetzee's *Elizabeth Costello* bewilder and scandalize a modern, liberal-secular sensibility. They do so by confronting us with the incontrovertible reality and dignity of human suffering, something *from which we cannot look away* without sensation of a spiritual and ethical lapse on our part. Insistent and haunting in ways altogether peculiar to images, suffering confronts the modern secular imagination with a *datum* and presence for which no causal warrant can be named, and which consequently seems to elude human control. In capturing fleshly, human life in all its transience, vulnerability, and dependency, images of suffering confound modern society's expectation that suffering can and will eventually be abolished altogether—a near-axiomatic confidence that fuels the ministrations of the liberal-secular state, whose citizenry claims remediation from suffering and disaster, not as a hope but as a right.

To the extent that the post-Enlightenment individual's gaze tends to identify and contain suffering as a legitimate object of *sympathy*, the putatively “premodern” image of Christ dying in contortions disconcerts, even offends. The Christian iconography of suffering compels the beholder to assent to, and thus become ethically entangled in, a community of suffering. To be sure, on practical and theological grounds, there must always be hope for human intervention and remediation of such affliction. Yet for such hope to be warranted, there must first be the terrible beauty of the image as such, compelling our undesigning assent to the real presence of such suffering—rather than to a “representation” or “simulation” of it. And yet, as Hans Urs von Balthasar puts it, the notion of “divinely intended suffering is diametrically opposed to the objectives of technological, progressive culture. The latter is committed, at any price, to overcoming suffering. Every type of suffering, bodily as well as mental, is to be fought . . . even if the human being should end up losing a grandeur and depth, a purity and radiance, that can only be attained through pain.”⁶ Coetzee's postmodern exploration of beauty and suffering alerts us to the shift that, as Carnes has argued elsewhere, between the Reformation and the Enlightenment

⁵ Robert Pippin, *After the Beautiful: Hegel and the Philosophy of Pictorial Modernism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), 45.

⁶ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Das Ganze im Fragment* (Einsiedeln: Benziger, 1963), 239 (my translation).

positioned established art as a seemingly autonomous sphere of human activity.⁷ Not coincidentally, the languages of political economy emerging around the same time began to reappraise poverty and suffering as conditions intrinsically ugly and immoral and hence (as Malthus, Bentham, and Ricardo successively advocate) to be definitively expunged from the surfaces of progressive, wholly man-made modern life.

Carnes sees aesthetics as a distinctly *modern* enterprise; and its variously formalist or historicist framing of the phenomenon of beauty specifically aims to keep at bay beauty's transcendent implications—implications insidiously unveiled by the way that images of human suffering entangle the modern eye. In a similar vein, James Simpson's *Under the Hammer* reads the institutions of modern aesthetics and the museum as attenuated extensions of Reformation iconoclasm.⁸ Preemptively stripping beauty of all transcendent significance, the formally appreciative and historically alert gaze of modern aesthetics trains individuals and communities of "taste" to see suffering as incommensurable with beauty and, thus, not to see it as a reality but as an ugly impediment to some narrative of progress. As Carnes puts it, "poverty and suffering become untouchable" or, at least, ineligible as focal points for art.

As Carnes shows so well, in *Elizabeth Costello* the sisters' dispute is addled by incommensurable assumptions about what it means to be in the world, for which reason they ultimately cannot recognize, as Carnes insists we must, that they share some crucial common ground, an insight compelled above all by Coetzee's shrewd management of narrative, dialogue, and descriptive detail. Carnes goes on to observe that "whereas the two painters [Correggio and Grünewald] are invoked to illustrate the antagonism of competing aesthetic ideals— . . . beauty and ugliness— Christ somehow encompasses both ideals," and Coetzee's narrative "reveals, not the distance between beauty and affliction, but their nearness." Carnes's essay urges some fundamental axioms about beauty: (1) that our response to it requires above all an wholehearted assent to the reality of the beautiful qua appearance; (2) that, regardless of how worldly or otherworldly our respective commitments and sensibility, we can predicate beauty only to the extent that we find ourselves impelled to participate in it; (3) that, consequently, the phenomenological correlate of the beautiful cannot involve passive consumption or the obliquities of "disinterested pleasure"; and, finally, (4) that beauty, as Kant also insists, is never a private experience but the founding condition of all human (and humane) community. A

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⁷ Natalie Carnes, *Beauty: A Theological Engagement with Gregory of Nyssa* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2013).

⁸ James Simpson, *Under the Hammer: Iconoclasm in the Anglo-American Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).