

KANT'S CRITIQUE OF JUDGEMENT A Biased Aesthetics

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THE WHOLE thrust of Kant's analytical effort in *The Critique of Judgement* is to determine in what ways the aesthetic experience is unique. Thus he divorces it from that which is sensuously agreeable, from the participation in it of ideas of moral purpose, from definite concepts, and from any determination by individual experience. As a result the phenomenon deduced by Kant as properly *aesthetic* is so attenuated, so lacking in any substantial cognitive material, as to seem a kind of ghost among the various other faculties of thought. It is difficult to imagine how such a fugitive experience as Kant describes could ever have been felt important or worthy of attention. However, the Critique exhibits a rather curious dichotomy, in that with his long series of informal remarks contained in the Second Analytic, nominally on the Sublime, and including those on the nature of genius, Kant is able to convey a quite different, much more substantial, impression of how art appears to him. Here Kant is able to express feelings about art which are absent from the strictly logical attempt to deduce its *a priori* characteristics in the First Analytic, on Beauty. In this Kant brings to bear the categories of thought already worked out in the two previous Critiques, and, as I shall suggest, succeeds only in producing a seriously distorted view of art. *The Critique of Judgement* thus presents the odd picture of a philosopher able to offer important and penetrating thoughts about the nature of art only when he puts aside his philosophical apparatus.

In seeking to discover that special *state* of thought, possessing its own characteristics, which represents the aesthetic, Kant illustrates a type of endeavour frequent among philosophers since Baumgarten—an endeavour notably marked by many disputes and unresolved contradictions. The usual instruments of philosophical inquiry seem ill-adapted to adjudicate the nature of art. This, I would claim, is because the essential function of art is to effect a transformation in the thought of the individual responding to it. The general laws of thought propounded by philosophers such as Kant are deficient in this area both because they attribute the same cognitive powers to all individuals alike, hence arriving at a wholly impersonal view of the meaning of art, and because these laws treat only of various states and levels of thought—that is to say, essentially static entities. Only an interpretation in terms of the thought peculiar to the individual will ever account for the

power and virtue of art—that part of an individual's thought, moreover, in which concepts and judgements unique to him are in the process of formulation and development. It is in the power of art to focus and organize such transformational thought that the aesthetic is to be identified—in those strategies which art alone possesses to initiate and direct thought in the individual responding to it. Only by reversing some of the judgements which Kant's system obliged him to reach—especially those regarding the absence of concepts and purpose in art—will the way be cleared for a fresh approach along these lines.

My purpose in this article is a mainly critical one. I shall be concerned to demonstrate that Kant's pre-existing system, being applied to aesthetic experience, issues in a number of untenable conclusions about the nature of art. But I shall also suggest in what ways Kant's views ought to be transcended for a more productive approach to aesthetic problems. I review some of the salient points in the *Analytic of Beauty* and the *Analytic of the Sublime*, and the remarks Kant makes on genius, and conclude with some general comments on the difficulties of Kant's aesthetic theory and its influence on his followers.

I

As Kant reminds us, in the Introduction to the third Critique, he had already divided thought into two distinct realms: Reason and Understanding, which are directed to the worlds of ethics and nature respectively. Judgement had already been assigned the general function of assimilating the materials of perception to the concepts of the Understanding. But now Kant discovers that he has yet to assign a place to that power of judgement or taste exercised in aesthetic matters—to what he will, more specifically, call the *reflective judgement*. Kant's aim has been to deduce *a priori* principles for the faculties he discerns, and he now questions whether judgement is amenable to the same process and, if so, where it belongs. As Kant summarizes his purpose: 'now comes *judgement*, which in the order of our cognitive faculties forms a middle term between understanding and reason. Has *it* also got independent *a priori* principles? If so, are they constitutive, or are they merely regulative, thus indicating no special realm?' (4)¹ Kant's analysis will deduce that such judgement operates in no special realm—it is regulative, furnishing *rules* to the cognitive faculties. This, as we shall see, puts the aesthetic into a kind of conceptual vacuum, and gives rise to the main difficulty of Kant's theory. As he puts it later in the Critique: 'Taste is . . . merely a critical, not a productive faculty . . .' (174). Kant's concern is with the mode of aesthetic cognition, rather than its matter—he will, as a result, find no knowledge special to art.

The judgement of Beauty in the First Analytic is analysed in four 'Moments', which are logical stages in Kant's argument rather than psycho-

logical processes. In the 'First Moment' Kant declares the judgement of beauty to be disinterested, and he contrasts it to our pleasure in what is agreeable, which involves pleasure in sensation, as well as to our interest in what is good, which implies an aim or purpose—hence we would have an interest in the *existence* of an object or action. Aesthetic judgement, on the contrary, is a purely contemplative state. It is 'a judgement which is indifferent as to the existence of an object, and only decides how its character stands with the feeling of pleasure and displeasure' (48). Thus Kant emphasizes the freedom of such a judgement, which no aim or want calls forth.

This disinterested response, involving feeling but not sensation, and contemplation without evaluation, also requires an impersonality in the judgement which would make it valid for all men. This is what Kant deduces in the 'Second Moment'. He argues that the beautiful must be an object of *universal* delight, that the responder 'can find as reason for his delight no personal conditions to which his own subjective self might alone be party' (51). Thus in Kant's view the individual makes no contribution *as an individual* to aesthetic experience. What such universality means psychologically is contained in Kant's description of aesthetic response as the free play of the cognitive powers, in which 'no definite concept restricts them to a particular rule of cognition'. Hence the response is both subjective and aconceptual.

This absence of concepts is central to Kant's system, but only one rather specific argument is devoted to it, since it follows from all his other deductions: the powers of cognition referred to (following the first Critique) are '*imagination* for bringing together the manifold of intuition, and *understanding* for the unity of the concept uniting the representations'. But Kant then subtracts from this the participation of a concept in aesthetic phenomena: since judgement of beauty subsists 'apart from the presupposition of any definite concept, it can be nothing else than the mental state present in the free play of imagination and understanding . . .' (58). A definite concept can only be involved when a purpose is in view—either that of understanding or of reason, a perception of something in nature, or of an ethical goal. This follows from Kant's fundamental division of thought into two realms. Aesthetic judgement has no realm, therefore it has no concepts. This doctrine allows Kant to proceed to the deduction offered in the 'Third Moment'.

Here Kant offers the well-known and paradoxical formula that beauty exhibits purposiveness without purpose. Since an aesthetic object has no aim, being detached from any purposes inherent in either understanding or morality, it appears to be purposeless; but it manifests an adaptation to the powers of understanding and imagination, and in this respect can be felt to possess a certain purposiveness of form—we can 'trace it in objects—though by reflection only—without resting it on an end (as the material of the *nexus finalis*)' (62). An important corollary to this deduction is Kant's argument,

against thinkers such as Baumgarten, that beauty cannot involve any concept of the object's *perfection*. Once again he appeals to the absence of concepts: a concept of an object's end or purpose is present in the idea of perfection, and this is just what is lacking in the experience of beauty. We would have to possess, he says, 'a concept of *what sort of a thing it is to be*' (69), but since the reflective judgement is subjective, residing only in the free play of the cognitive powers, any objective concept of perfection at work in response must be ruled out.

In the 'Fourth Moment' Kant raises the impersonality of response again, since he asserts that the beautiful constitutes a judgement that we *necessarily* impute to all. This is so because all possess a common sense for beauty, this being 'the free play of our powers of cognition' (82-3). Such judgement is exemplary since no demonstration can enforce it—Kant thus subscribes to the maxim that there is no disputing taste. As he explains in detail later, 'there is no empirical *ground of proof* that can coerce any one's judgement of taste' (140)—a conclusion of some significance, since it seems to permit no entrance to the teacher or critic of the arts. It is no use, Kant is saying, to point to any *evidence* in a work of art to demonstrate its beauty; no rules or principles can be laid down.

Under the influence of his determining categories of reason and understanding Kant thus constructs an aesthetics of extreme formalism. A beautiful object is being judged only in relation to the purposiveness it shows (merely its adaptation to the cognitive faculties), apart from any considerations of its use, purpose, perfection, or agreeableness, and in the absence of any concept. Its purpose can in fact only be to display a certain form, and the only form of judgement possible in such a case is that of contemplation. Kant's aesthetic obligates an entirely passive attitude on the part of the beholder.

It is not particularly clear how wide Kant intended the scope of his First Analytic to be: actual works of art, oddly, are hardly mentioned, and certainly not painting or literature. Apart from a reference to music (without words), Kant's main allusions are to flowers, certain birds, and crustacea, which 'please freely and on their own account', and to 'designs *à la grecque*, foliage for framework or on wall-papers, &c.,' which are devoid of intrinsic meaning. They 'represent nothing—no Object under a definite concept—and are free beauties' (72). Here, two critics observe with some justice, 'was a system which conceived Homer and Shakespeare as less aesthetically pure than wallpaper.'² It is a serious criticism of Kant that, in terms of his formal system (as opposed to his remarks on genius), it is impossible to see how Shakespeare can be accommodated at all. Yet the deductions of the First Analytic must be carefully considered; they have tended to pass into the general currency of aesthetic debate, and have been held to apply to works of art as well as to wallpaper.

In order to dispute Kant's account of the beautiful, one could (among other things) attribute at least a part of the pleasure in beauty to a type of *good* overlooked by him—that is, the enhancing of the power of judgement about the world and self which works of art may confer on the individual. We could be said to be 'interested' in the work of art, in a sense forbidden by Kant: an object or aim is involved, even though this may often be hidden from us, operating in the less conscious contributions of thought during aesthetic experience. Art has no object in any external sense; to that extent Kant's position is arguably right. But Kant overlooks an object or purpose that is internal to the response art invokes, that object being the self of the responder. The purpose of art lies in the transformation of the thought that constitutes the self. To attribute a common sense for beauty to all is therefore to miss the *raison d'être* of art, and is bound to issue in an aesthetics which is partial and distorted. Reinstating the individual in aesthetic response, moreover, will also necessitate seeing concepts as intrinsic to works of art, as I shall suggest they are.

II

In Kant's Second Analytic, on the Sublime, the relevance of his argument to works of art is once again problematic. The whole division of matters of aesthetic interest into the beautiful and the sublime is, of course, in a long tradition from Longinus to Burke; but in Kant's case it arises quite specifically out of his categories of understanding and reason. The beautiful is confined to the faculties of understanding and imagination, while reason, in the form of the good, is explicitly excluded. The sublime takes its character, on the other hand, from two types of ideas of the reason, the mathematically sublime, and the dynamically sublime. These seem to have nothing to do with art—at least so far as Kant's formal discussion goes.

In contrast to beauty the sublime is found in objects devoid of form. It is a 'representation of limitlessness', which appears 'to contravene the ends of our power of judgement . . . to be, as it were, an outrage on the imagination . . .' (90-1). But, as with beauty, Kant locates the sublime in the cognitive powers involved: no object of nature, strictly speaking, is sublime. When we speak of the sublime appearance of a mountain, or a stormy sea, this is properly a reference to our own faculties. According to Kant 'the object lends itself to the presentation of a sublimity discoverable in the mind'. The sublime is concerned ultimately with the ideas of reason which are invoked, which 'although no adequate presentation of them is possible, may be excited and called into mind by that very inadequacy which does admit of sensuous presentation' (92). What Kant means here is that an activity of the mind is initiated by the very inadequacy of the lower powers of imagination and understanding to comprehend the sight presented, so that by a kind of recoil

thought transcends the immediate response, discovering a grandeur in the human mind in its superiority to nature, being in possession of ideas of reason. The ideas are those of infinite magnitude and unbounded power. Both are beyond the grasp of the understanding, so that the feeling involved in the sublime, as Kant puts it, 'renders as it were intuitable the supremacy of our cognitive faculties on the rational side over the greatest faculty of sensibility' (106).

But Kant is somewhat less interested in the sublime than in the beautiful. It is, he says, 'far less important and rich in consequences' (92-3); and he tends to take for granted some of the attributes which it shares with beauty, such as its subjective and aconceptual nature. This is odd, since this section and the one on genius which follows (still nominally part of the Second Analytic) contain some of Kant's most productive and interesting observations. But these are put forward informally, and although they contain further insights into the sublime, as Kant identifies it, in many areas (the 'strenuous' emotions, the predilection for solitude, war, etc.) their connection with the two categories of the sublime delimited earlier is at best extremely tenuous. Also no connected remarks are made regarding art until the section on genius, where Kant does discuss painting and literature.

It is in these remarks on genius that Kant shows the most penetration regarding the nature of art; and this only comes about, it seems, because he allows himself to retreat from the strictness of some of his earlier distinctions, in particular that concerning concepts. Certain of the passages here were those most immediately influential in aesthetics, as I shall mention.

Kant begins by ostensibly maintaining the aconceptual character of the aesthetic product. This is evident in his doctrine of 'aesthetic ideas', the power of the genius being his ability to produce such ideas. By an aesthetic idea, says Kant, 'I mean that representation of the imagination which induces much thought, yet without the possibility of any definite thought whatever, i.e. *concept*, being adequate to it, and which language, consequently, can never get quite on level terms with or render completely intelligible' (175-6). *Representation*, in this passage, admits the possibility of *contributing* concepts, however, and in the ensuing discussion it becomes increasingly clear that what Kant has in mind is that the work of art is constructed dynamically *through* concepts *to* 'ideas', a view which culminates in a theory of symbolism.

Thus Kant observes that the concepts in art induce 'a wealth of thought', putting the 'faculty of intellectual ideas (reason) into motion—a motion, at the instance of a representation, towards an extension of thought . . .' (177). Representation must be a set of concepts furnished by the understanding, that 'material supplied to it by actual nature' as Kant puts it, which art uses 'to remodel experience . . .' (176). We have now travelled beyond the empty formalism of wallpaper and foliage *à la grecque*, or the sheer power and magni-

tude, as such, of natural phenomena: understanding and reason appear to be involved in their own right, substantially, and not merely formally, as a free play of the cognitive powers.

Kant now outlines what one is entitled to take as a theory of symbolism. In accounting for that stimulus to thought in art, he describes the presentation of an *attribute* of the idea to be invoked. Thus 'Jupiter's eagle, with the lightning in its claws, is an attribute of the mighty king of heaven, and the peacock of its stately queen.' Such attributes

do not, like *logical attributes*, represent what lies in our concepts of the sublimity and majesty of creation, but rather something else—something that gives the imagination an incentive to spread its flight over a whole host of kindred representations that provoke more thought than admits of expression in a concept determined by words. They furnish an *aesthetic idea*. . . . (177).

The eagle, the lightning, the peacock—these are, of course, concepts in themselves, apart from their suggestiveness in the direction indicated by Kant. It is difficult to see how they can function aesthetically unless their qualities, their connotations, *as* concepts, are admitted.

But there is a more serious objection to be made against Kant's account than the equivocation over concepts. In speaking of attributes that carry with them the suggestive power of symbols, such as Jupiter's eagle, Kant requires the chosen concept to be already invested with symbolic meaning. The artist would be obliged to work with material of established significance. Aesthetically, the genius does not create that 'wealth of thought'; he merely employs as agent something that brings such context with it. Kant's 'attribute' is a preformed aesthetic component, and must presumably draw its meaning from previous works of art, religion, mythology, or history. This mode of explaining meaning in art is not confined to visual representations; Kant adds, 'poetry and rhetoric also derive the soul that animates their works wholly from the aesthetic attributes of objects . . .' (178). In Kant's view, then, genius consists in finding out existing symbolic values and putting them to appropriate use to suggest aesthetic ideas.

Kant goes on to speak of the unifying power of the imagination exercised in genius, in that it lays hold of 'the rapid and transient play of the imagination . . . unifying it in a concept', and thus communicates 'without any constraint of rules' (180). The new work of genius rather 'reveals a new rule which could not have been inferred from any preceding principles or examples'. Beyond the innate power of the symbols, as such, however, Kant is unable to say how the *new rule* in the work manifests itself, or how such unity is achieved. All he is able to offer is the indefinite thought presented by an aesthetic idea, which is in itself neither a rule nor unity. This points to a crucial gap in Kant's theory of art: how it is that attributes lead to unity, what rules may be involved. It is to be suspected that it is because Kant precludes the serious consideration of concepts *as* concepts in the aesthetic

realm, and will allow only the 'wealth of undeveloped material', that he is disabled from either arriving at a more coherent aesthetics, or deducing the thought processes of creative genius.

III

Kant's general view of art, then, being determined by his pre-existing categories, fails to discover anything of the transformational aspects of thought in art. The essential passivity of the subject who contemplates pure beauty, in Kant's theory, seems to rule out that imaginative participation in art which makes aesthetic experience matter to us as individuals, which makes us 'interested' in the sense excluded by Kant. Even where the sublime calls on a certain activity in thought, this is directed not to the personal, but is an elevation to the strictly abstract senses of infinity and moral power inhering (according to Kant) in every individual. In its subjective universal validity, Kant's reflective judgement borrows aspects from the worlds of both understanding and reason without substantially inhabiting either of them. It is, as I would claim, a kind of cognitive ghost, with form but no content.

The universality of the judgement demands that we have no concern for the existence of the object of a given representation; all that matters is that our cognitive powers form an impression of it. This involves not only the impersonal response to art, but also the requirement that the concepts forming the material of the aesthetic object should be detached from their usual contextual significance; this is a condition of the aesthetic. We 'perceive the contents', as one commentator has put it, 'without projecting into them the meanings which they have in everyday experience'.³ This is done not for the purpose of imbuing them with any new meaning (which might be of importance to us as individuals), but in order to isolate their formal properties. It is this indifference to the concepts of art, as concepts, which in Kant's aesthetics divorces form from content (perhaps the fundamental illegitimacy in the philosopher's misconception of aesthetic experience and the most damaging to the value and function of art). There is thus no possibility of developing the meaning of any concept, and accordingly there can be no transformation in thought; this is cut off at the root.

If concepts are restored to functioning in the aesthetic response, so must be the faculty of judgement. Despite the title of his treatise, and his sustained effort to relate aesthetic experience to the category of judgement, this faculty—remarkably enough—is effectively eliminated from participation in the central movements of the response to art. It is imagination and understanding that are the important faculties, as Barrows Dunham has pointed out: 'Judgement, as a faculty, constantly diminishes in importance. It simply has nothing to do—nothing, at least, that cannot be better accounted for by the two faculties . . .'.⁴ This point will also be of significance in showing why

Kant's aesthetics is deficient—since the structure of an individual's judgements, as well as his concepts, is necessarily implicated in the response to art. The judgement that Kant fails to deploy here is essentially a cognitive one, albeit partially unconscious, not the abstract, formal judgements isolated in the Four Moments of the Analytic of Beauty. Kant is quite emphatic, on the contrary, that there is nothing for the responder to do in aesthetic experience: 'we are not dealing with a judgement of cognition', he says; 'we are not called upon to justify *a priori* the validity of a judgement which represents either what a thing is, or that there is something which I ought to do in order to produce it' (135). This may follow from his Analytic of Beauty, but it is at odds with the intuitive sense of most responders to art that such response is an *active* process, a bending of thought upon the art object that requires concentration and imaginative effort. This would not be surprising if it were a question of the responder's existing judgements being unsettled and developed in some way under the directing influence of the work of art.

A further extension of the aconceptual nature of the aesthetic response is, as I noted, the absence of the concept of perfection. When in the account of genius Kant restores concepts, at least as the material of art, the concept of perfection is still by implication excluded. As Kant observes, no rule from without can be given for the productions of genius. If Kant leaves the processes of creativity more or less inexplicable, this is perhaps partly because he leaves behind the concept of perfection and does not feel the need to raise it here. But how, it may be asked, does an artist work towards the final shape of the work he is creating without some such concept as its perfection? How would he know otherwise when his labours were completed? As long as the artist senses a gap between how the work *is* and how it *ought* to be, he will presumably continue to improve and revise it. It seems unavoidable to pose some concept of perfection—in creativity if not in aesthetic response; it is a vital part of the creative artist's facility, the concept behind his critical judgements on the work in progress. The concept may be present more in the guise of a feeling or intuition than a distinct idea, but this only suggests its presence at a level below full consciousness; as an active principle in thought it still remains to be explained if one would hope to understand creativity. This would appear to be one place to seek that 'rule' which Kant rather mysteriously attributes to the internal functioning of the power of genius in a given work.

Kant's formal analytic denies both concepts and purpose to works of art: the aesthetic response is in this way cut off from the substance of an individual's thought and precluded from exercising any influence within it. In his informal remarks, however, Kant offers with his doctrine of aesthetic ideas a more productive and interesting view of the nature of thought in art. His own explanation for it, in the theory of symbolism, is clearly inadequate and

would account for only a fraction of the meaning in works of art generally. Nevertheless, while reversing the conclusions of Kant's formal Analytic, as I suggested must be done, a reinterpretation of aesthetic ideas might show that what Kant excluded in terms of concepts and value judgements, and the interests of the individual responding, probably lies in the unconscious, supporting that 'wealth of thought' in such ideas, which Kant described as being beyond what could be 'definitely formulated in language' (178). Kant's categories may have prevented him from discovering the principles in art productive of such ideas (besides the symbolic), but his insight that there is in art a wealth of thought beyond language must be incorporated into any future aesthetics.

Kant's doctrine of aesthetic ideas offers a vision of the power of thought in art. Unfortunately Kant's immediate followers could find no way of accounting for it other than along the lines Kant himself laid down. In his *Dialogue on Poetry*, for example, Friedrich Schlegel advocated a new 'mythology' for the poet. The modern poet, he says, writes in isolation: he has no accepted system of sustaining ideas such as was enjoyed by classical authors. This mythology is to be grounded in contemporary idealism: that achievement of thought which, with Kant and Fichte, Schlegel regarded as irreversible, and necessarily positing further development. Schlegel envisaged a new objective idealism in which art would express the unity of man and nature, nature constituting a kind of symbolic book wherein we may read the truths about ourselves. What else, he asks, 'is any wonderful mythology but hieroglyphic expression of surrounding nature in this transfigured form of imagination and love?'⁵ In later editions of this work, it should be noted, Schlegel replaces 'mythology' with the term 'symbolic view of nature'. Similarly, Schelling claims a 'pre-established harmony' of the two worlds, that of the real and the ideal, and this belief in the harmony of man and nature leads him to speak of nature in his *System of Transcendental Idealism* as an open book of symbolism for art. As theories of art these views are vulnerable to the same criticism as was made of Kant; in addition, apart from expressing an idealism which is no longer tenable, both take their origin from a proposition regarding the spiritual significance of nature for man, and so do not give us an intrinsically aesthetic view of art. In this way both authors continue the tendency shown by Kant of arbitrating the nature of meaning in art by external criteria.

The intuition of these authors, and of Kant also, that the thought manifested in art exhibits a power to restructure experience is fatally hampered in its expression, therefore, by the philosophical concepts available to it. Such aesthetic theories come to birth at a time when only static models of the structure of thought are being developed; and the symbol, in Kant's account, is essentially a pre-packaged, static component. Philosophy, moreover, consistently undervalues the individual as a focus for sustained attention.

Any individual is contemplated only as an example of various universally operating laws, the nature of which it is of more moment to establish objectively. Thus the individual tends to dissolve once it is agreed that the laws that operate within him are understood. This may have been of little or no consequence in many areas, but it does seem to have led to a consistent misinterpretation of the nature of art. The distortions evident in Kant's aesthetics are a warning that the individual must be restored to the centre of aesthetic theory, together with the concepts, judgements and purposes within his thought which make art a meaningful experience; and a new model of thought is required which is able to comprehend the transformational dimension in the response to art. As an added bonus this might also go some way to giving a grasp of the processes of creativity, which Kant's account left wrapped in mystery.

REFERENCES

- ¹ Page references in brackets are to *The Critique of Judgement*, trans. J. C. Meredith (Oxford, 1973).
- ² William K. Wimsatt Jr., and Cleanth Brooks, *Romantic Criticism* (London, 1970), 372.
- ³ Robert L. Zimmerman, 'Kant: The Aesthetic Judgement', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, vol. 21 (1963), 334.
- ⁴ Barrows Dunham, *A Study of Kant's Aesthetics* (Lancaster, Pa., 1934), 101.
- ⁵ F. Schlegel, *Dialogue on Poetry and Literary Aphorisms*, trans. Ernst Behler and Roman Strue (Pennsylvania, 1968), 81.