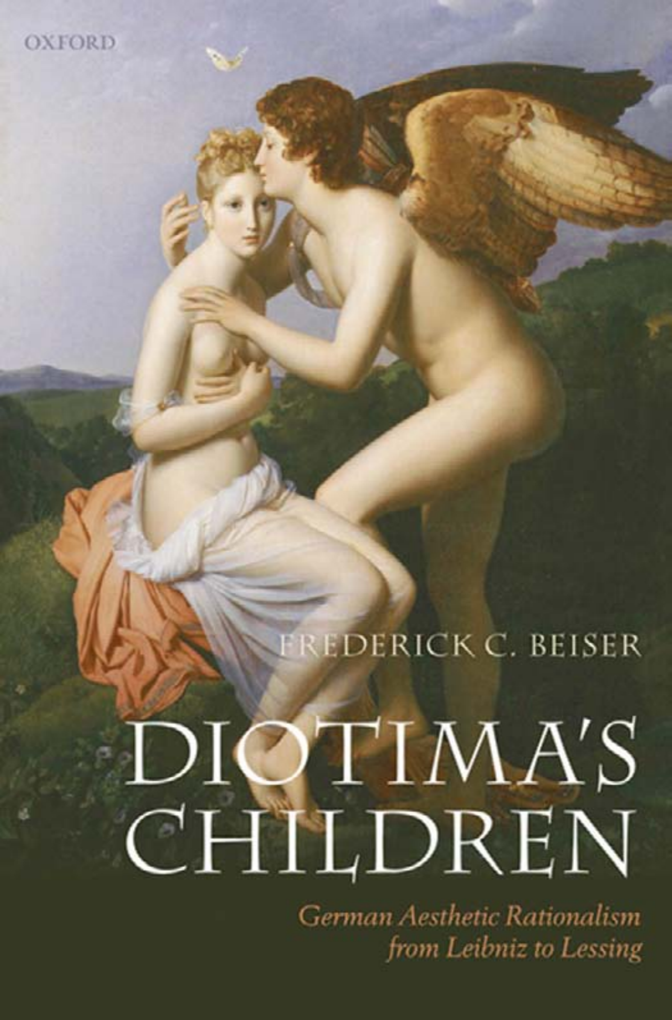
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FREDERICK C. BEISER
DIOTIMA'S CHILDREN
German Aesthetic Rationalism from Leibniz to Lessing

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Frederick C. Beiser

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In Memoriam
Theo Eichheim
(1936–2008)

Preface

This study grew out of the conviction that the only way forward in aesthetics is to go backwards. To avoid the aporias of the present, we must recover the aesthetic tradition before Kant, especially the tradition of aesthetic rationalism from Leibniz to Lessing, which links the early modern era with the classical past. A proper study of that tradition teaches us the importance of beauty in life, the intimate connection of beauty with truth and goodness, the necessity of rules, the importance of taste, and the cognitive dimension of aesthetic experience. All these doctrines were rejected by Kant, but on the basis of a hasty polemic and limited taste. Contemporary aesthetics has rested on Kant's polemic, but the cost has been great: aesthetics no longer has a content. Anything, even soup cans and urinals, are works of art.

I advocate not the wholesale rehabilitation of rationalist aesthetics, only the re-examination of its central themes. While the neo-classical age is gone forever, many of its fundamental ideas are of lasting importance. Even if one rejects them, it is at least important to know why. This means we need to reconstruct the intellectual foundations of the rationalist tradition. Those foundations are much stronger than many suspect. In the final analysis, they rest on two unshakable pillars: the principle of sufficient reason and the authority of Diotima.

While this study touches upon contemporary aesthetics, it is chiefly meant as a contribution to historical scholarship. I have attempted to sketch the broad contours of the rationalist tradition in Germany from Leibniz to Lessing. While there have been many studies focused on individual thinkers, there has been none devoted to the tradition as a whole. Hopefully, taking this broader view will help us see the forest as well as the trees.

This study does not pretend to be a complete history of aesthetic rationalism in Germany. It aims to cover only its central figures, those who had the greatest influence. A complete history would have to include many so-called 'minor' players whom I have not treated here. Among them would be Christoph Martin Wieland, Friedrich Nicolai, Karl Phillip Moritz, Johann Georg Sulzer, and J. J. Bodmer and J. J. Breitinger. I originally intended to include short chapters on these thinkers but eventually found I had no space for them in a single volume.

No parts of this work have been published before. Early versions of the Introduction were given as the O'Neil lectures at the University of New

Mexico; parts of other chapters were the basis for lectures at Vassar, Brown, and Boston University. I am very grateful to the participants at those colloquia for their comments.

My debts to past scholarship will be plain from the footnotes. Many are to scholars long dead and books long forgotten; but I also have great debts to the living, especially to my many undergraduate and graduate students at Syracuse University, where I have taught aesthetics for the past seven years. The comments of several anonymous external reviewers were helpful in revising the manuscript. Andrew Chignell's detailed commentary on the entire manuscript proved invaluable. This project was encouraged in its early stages by my friend and ex-colleague at Indiana University, Michael Morgan, to whom I have, as usual, special debts.

F.B.

Syracuse, New York

February 2009

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Introduction: Reappraising Aesthetic Rationalism

1. A Glorious Relic?

Few traditions of aesthetic thought, whether in ancient or modern times, were as long and glorious as that of aesthetic rationalism in Germany. This movement included some of the leading thinkers of the eighteenth century, among them Christian Wolff (1679–1754), Johann Christoph Gottsched (1700–66), Alexander Baumgarten (1714–62), Johann Joachim Winckelmann (1717–68), Moses Mendelssohn (1729–86), and Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1729–81). It lasted some sixty years, beginning with Wolff's early works in the 1720s and ending with Lessing's death in 1781. The cultural achievements of this movement were immense: it raised the standards of literary criticism; it founded modern art history; it created the very discipline of aesthetics; and it inspired the formation of a national literary tradition, such that Germany could vie with France and England as one of the great intellectual cultures of Europe. Rarely in history has aesthetic thought been so central to philosophy, and rarely has it been so vital to a culture as a whole. If only on these historical grounds, we have strong reasons to study aesthetic rationalism.

Nevertheless, interest in aesthetic rationalism nowadays is bound to seem strictly antiquarian. Although we have good *historical* reasons to study it, it seems we do not have good *philosophical* reasons. For rationalist aesthetics no longer speaks to our "post-modern age"; it seems entirely obsolete, as musty and fusty as the perukes that once crowned the rationalists' heads. We can no longer share their self-confident rationalism, their narrow aesthetics of beauty, their belief in classical authority, their faith in aesthetic rules, their neo-classical taste. They seem to belong to an altogether more naive and innocent age, now gone forever. And, to be sure, there can be no going back to the age of aesthetic rationalism, no revival of its grand ideals or central doctrines. We

are no more likely to reinstate aesthetic rationalism than we are to wear wigs, stockings, and breechcoats.

Nowadays we measure our intellectual sophistication almost by our distance from the rationalists; and, understandably so, because so much modern and post-modern aesthetics grew out of a reaction against aesthetic rationalism. Most contemporary aestheticians would reject, or at the very least question, all the central doctrines of aesthetic rationalism. Very crudely and provisionally, we could summarize these doctrines in five propositions:

1. The central concept, and subject matter, of aesthetics is beauty.
2. Beauty consists in the perception of perfection.
3. Perfection consists in harmony, which is unity in variety.
4. Aesthetic criticism and production is governed by rules, which it is the aim of the philosopher to discover, systematize, and reduce to first principles.
5. Truth, beauty, and goodness are one, different facets of one basic value, which is perfection.

One major reason these propositions seem so moribund today is that, more than two centuries ago, Kant assaulted them in his *Kritik der Urteilskraft*. They have not survived his withering critique, which brought aesthetic rationalism to an abrupt and untimely end. Kant flatly and firmly denied all but one of these propositions. He disputes (2) when he claims that a judgment of taste is completely independent of the concept of perfection (§15; V, 226–9).[1] He questions (3) when he maintains that beauty cannot consist entirely in regularity alone (V, 240–1). He attacks (4) when he contends that there cannot be an objective principle of taste (§§8, 17, 34; V, 215–16, 231, 285–6). And he rejects (5) when he separates aesthetic judgment from cognitive and moral judgments, i.e., beauty from truth and goodness (§4, 207–9). In the third *Kritik* Kant made himself—more by implication than intention—the spokesman for the autonomy of the arts; and since then the classical trinitarian tradition, which affirmed the unity of truth, beauty, and goodness, has never recovered. Only with regard to (1) does Kant share some ground with aesthetic rationalism. True to his eighteenth-century heritage, he holds that beauty has a central place in aesthetics. Nevertheless, Kant's pairing of the sublime with the beautiful—his insistence that they are independent and equal concepts—shows his distance from the tradition of aesthetic rationalism.

[1] All references to Kant's works are to *Kants gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Prussian Academy of Sciences (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1902). '§' designates a paragraph number; a roman numeral a volume number; and an arabic numeral a page number.

Another reason these propositions seem so antiquated today has been the decline in stature of beauty. Although this concept has recently been showing signs of recovery after more than a century of neglect,[2] it still remains suspect to some,[3] and it certainly does not have the central place it enjoyed in the middle of the eighteenth century. For reasons too involved to explain here, toward the end of the nineteenth century, the queen of the science of aesthetics was dethroned and disgraced, banished from the very discipline that she once defined. From its very birth, aesthetics was conceived as a science of beauty. It was defined as "*die Wissenschaft des Schönen*", to use Baumgarten's concise phrase.[4] For the rationalists, the very idea that there could be aesthetics without beauty would have been a *contradictio in adiecto*. But then the unthinkable happened. We now have aesthetics without beauty—for the rationalist something like music without sound.

Still another reason for that obsolescence of the rationalist tradition comes from one defining doctrine of contemporary aesthetics: that the concept of art is distinct from perceptual content. Under the influence of the avant-garde, aestheticians like Arthur Danto, George Dickie, and Noël Carroll have claimed that the identity of a work of art cannot lie in its perceptual qualities because something can be a work of art—Warhol's *Brillo Box* or Duchamp's *Fountain*—and have no distinguishing perceptual qualities from an ordinary object (the Brillo box on the supermarket shelf, the urinal in the men's room). Since perceptual qualities are irrelevant, the identity of the work has to be found in either the theory that inspires it (Danto), the institutions that support it (Dickie), or the cultural traditions that transmit it (Carroll).[5] This doctrine reveals the vast distance between contemporary aesthetics and the rationalist tradition, which begins from the opposing principle: that if two objects are alike in all sensible qualities, then that is prima facie reason to regard both or neither as works of art.

The authority of Kant's third *Kritik*, the loss of stature of beauty, and the defining principle of post-modern aesthetics, all seem to conspire together to make aesthetic rationalism seem utterly obsolete, the relic of a glorious past.

[2] See, for example, Mary Mothersill, *Beauty Restored* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984); Elaine Scarry, *On Beauty* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999); John Lane, *Timeless Beauty* (Totnes: Green Books, 2003); and Alexander Nehemas, *Only a Promise of Happiness: The Place of Beauty in a World of Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007).

[3] Arthur Danto has reacted against the trend to restore beauty in his *The Abuse of Beauty* (Chicago: Open Court, 2003).

[4] Baumgarten, *Metaphysica* (Magdeburg: Hemmererde, 1779), Editio VII, §533.

[5] The *loci classici* for this view are Arthur Danto, 'The Artworld', *The Journal of Philosophy* 61 (1964), 571–84; George Dickie, *Art and the Aesthetic* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1974); and Noël Carroll, *Beyond Aesthetics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pts. I and II.

Should we not, then, pronounce it dead, handing over its corpse to those undertakers of the past, the historians? It is a central thesis of this book that any such pronouncement would be premature. It intends to show that the tradition of aesthetic rationalism deserves re-examination not only for historical but also for philosophical reasons. Although it forswears any attempt to revive aesthetic rationalism as a whole, it does invite us to reconsider some of its central doctrines: specifically, its theory of aesthetic judgment, its conception of rules, and the place it gives to beauty in the arts and life. When we go back in history and reconstruct the reasoning behind these doctrines, we often find that they were based on solid grounds. Indeed, the more we re-examine the objections made against the rationalist tradition by its two most powerful critics—Kant and Nietzsche—the more we see that they are groundless.

Our chief task in this introduction will be to state, if only in a summary and sketchy manner, the essence of, and case for, aesthetic rationalism. This involves the following tasks: reconstructing the foundations of its theory of aesthetic judgment (sec 2); reappraising Kant's and Nietzsche's criticisms of aesthetic rationalism (secs. 5 and 6); correcting some of the misinterpretations of aesthetic rationalism, especially its theory of rules (sec. 4); and providing a general summary of its aesthetic theory (sec. 3). We shall find that aesthetic rationalism did not rest upon a naive confidence in the powers of reason, but that the aesthetic rationalists were, from the very beginning, deeply concerned with the question of the limits of reason (sec. 7). Finally, we will see that the basic inspiration of rationalist aesthetics lives on in the work of one important recent philosopher, Hans-Georg Gadamer.

2. Theory of Aesthetic Judgment

The foundation of aesthetic rationalism rests upon a single fundamental principle, one basic to the exercise of rationality itself. This principle plays a pivotal role in rationalist epistemology and metaphysics, and the rationalists, with good reason, gave it no less stature than the principle of non-contradiction itself. What is this principle? Nothing less than the principle of sufficient reason. As first formulated by Leibniz, it states simply "that nothing is without reason" (*nihil esse sine ratione*).[6] Its chief application is to events in the natural world, in which case it means "no effect is without a cause" (*nullum effectum esse absque*

[6] Leibniz, 'Primae Veritates', *Opuscles et fragments inédits*, ed. Louis Couturat (Hildesheim: Olms, 1966), p. 519.

causa). But it is also applied to true beliefs or propositions, in which case it means that there is or should be sufficient evidence for their truth.[7] It is in this latter sense that the principle is generally used in aesthetic rationalism. The rationalists understood it in a normative sense: that we *ought to* seek or have sufficient evidence for all our beliefs, even aesthetic ones.

The rationalist theory of aesthetic judgment has four major tenets, all of them based upon the principle of sufficient reason:

1. Aesthetic judgment must be rational, i.e., we must be able to give reasons for it.
2. These reasons consist (in part) in the perceptual features of the object itself.
3. These features consist (in part) in the object's perfection or beauty, i.e., its unity-in-variety.
4. The pleasure of aesthetic experience consists in a cognitive state, namely, the intuition of perfection (*intuitio perfectionis*).

Let us now explain the rationale behind these tenets and the connections between them. All these tenets come together in the rationalist's thesis that aesthetic judgment is *cognitive*, i.e., that it can be true or false. The rationalist insists that the pleasure of aesthetic experience consists in some intentional state, i.e., it refers to some features of the object itself. This means that there must be some reason for an aesthetic judgment, some evidence which makes it true or false. The judgment is true or false according to whether the object has or does not have the intended features, viz., its harmony or unity in variety. The competing empiricist theory of aesthetic judgment states that aesthetic judgment is *non-cognitive*, i.e., that the pleasure involved in aesthetic judgment is not intentional but only consists in feeling or sensation. For the rationalists, the great strength of their cognitive theory is that it satisfies the principle of sufficient reason, whereas the great weakness of the empiricist theory is that it violates this principle. The rationalists complain that, on empiricist premises, no reason other than feeling could be given for an aesthetic judgment, so that one cannot justify one's preferences over those of someone else.

Why, though, must aesthetic judgments conform to the principle of sufficient reason? Why must we give reasons for matters of taste? Against the rationalist's invocation of the principle of sufficient reason, the empiricist has two possible

[7] Leibniz sometimes formulates the principle so that it means "*tout verité a sa preuve a priori*". See Leibniz to Arnauld, July 1686, in *Die philosophischen Schriften von Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz*, ed. C. I. Gerhardt, II (Berlin: Wiedmann, 1879), 62.

responses. First, that this principle is inapplicable to matters of taste because taste is based simply on personal liking, which need not have a reason. Second, assuming that this principle is applicable, it is completely satisfiable by my feelings alone; in other words, my feelings of pleasure alone are sufficient reason for my judgment. There was, however, a standard rationalist rejoinder to both these responses: that, even if he or she is unaware of them, there must be, or at least should be, reasons why a person prefers one thing rather than another. A completely arbitrary taste, which could like one thing rather than another for no reason at all, is an impossibility. Although a person might not be conscious of these reasons, they are still there influencing his or her judgment all the same; the task is then to become aware of these reasons, to articulate them, and indeed to evaluate them. For the rationalist, the statement that an aesthetic judgment is purely arbitrary, a matter of personal taste, is a premature confession of ignorance. A purely personal taste is something like an arbitrary act of will, an act for which we can give no reason at all. Just as such acts of will are impossible, so are purely personal preferences.

In the classical dispute between rationalists and empiricists, Kant stood closer to the empiricist than the rationalist tradition in at least one crucial respect: he denies the cognitive status of aesthetic judgment. Aesthetic judgments are entirely subjective, in his view, because they concern the feelings of pleasure we have from contemplating an object; and such feelings have for him no cognitive status whatsoever; in no respect do they give us knowledge of an object. Of such feelings Kant writes in the most explicit and emphatic terms: "nothing whatsoever is designated in the object" (*gar nichts im Objekt bezeichnet wird*) (§1; 204).[8] When I claim that an object is beautiful, he argues, I do not refer to any property of the object itself; rather, I must proceed only *as if* there were some property in it (§§6, 7; 211, 212). In the first introduction to the *Kritik der Urteilskraft* Kant singles out pleasure among sensations for its non-cognitive status: "Now there is only a single so-called sensation (*Empfindung*) that can never give a concept of an object, and this is the feeling of pleasure or displeasure" (VIII; XX, 225). There are indeed passages in the third *Kritik* where Kant appears to deny that aesthetic judgments must conform to the principle of sufficient reason (§§8, 33; V, 215–16, 284). That principle would apply, he suggests, only if aesthetic judgments were objective or cognitive, describing or referring to some property of objects themselves. The net effect of Kant's analysis of aesthetic judgments is to deprive them of all objective

[8] Cf. KU §8; 214, where Kant again claims that aesthetic judgments "do not concern an object at all" (*gar nicht auf das Objekt geht*).

content, so that they concern only the subject's feelings about the object rather than the object itself. The only reason for them is entirely within the subject's feeling, Kant concludes, because "what matters is only what I do with this representation within myself" (§2; 205).[9]

There are, however, several notorious difficulties to stripping aesthetic judgments of all cognitive content.[10] First, any object can be beautiful. Since the same state of feeling is compatible with any object whatsoever, ordinary objects (viz., paper clips) can have the same aesthetic qualities as the best works of art (viz., the Mona Lisa). Second, it becomes impossible to justify aesthetic judgments, and groundless to universalize them, because I can refer only to the special qualities of my feeling as the reason for the judgment. Third, criticism becomes pointless, because there is no mechanism to resolve disagreements in taste. If someone disagrees with my judgment, then I have no reason to refer to features of the object itself to ground my aesthetic response. All I can do is refer to the quality of my feelings and hope that others agree with me. Arguably, though, the whole point of aesthetic appreciation and criticism is to make us more sensitive to features of the object itself.

To avoid just these kinds of problems, the rationalists assume that the sufficient reason for an aesthetic judgment ultimately lies in some qualities of the object itself. Hence the cognitive dimension of aesthetic judgment—its reference to some properties of an object—is for the rationalist an aspect of its rationality. The rationalist does not deny that aesthetic judgments are about pleasure; no less than Kant and the empiricist, he makes pleasure a touchstone of aesthetic experience. But he insists, unlike Kant and the empiricist, that pleasure is a cognitive state, the perception or intuition of a perfection. This cognitive dimension of aesthetic experience gives a reason why we take pleasure in some objects rather than others, a reason that ultimately lies in some features of the object itself. The rationalist does not pretend to provide a proof or demonstration of the aesthetic quality of the object, as Kant suggests (§§31, 33; V, 281, 284); all that he wants to do instead is to draw our attention

[9] It is impossible to do justice here to the intricacies of Kant's concept of pleasure, which has been the focus of much recent scholarship. See Rachel Zuckert, 'A New Look at Kant's Theory of Pleasure', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 60 (2002), 239–52; and Hannah Ginsborg, 'On the Key to Kant's Critique of Taste', *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 72 (1991), 290–313, and 'Aesthetic Judging and the Intentionality of Pleasure', *Inquiry* 46 (2003), 164–81.

[10] These kinds of difficulties have forced some Kant scholars to provide revisionary accounts of Kant's aesthetics that bring it closer to the rationalist tradition. Karl Ameriks has argued that a Kantian ought to acknowledge the objectivity of taste by admitting that aesthetic judgments refer to perceptual features of objects. See his 'Kant and the Objectivity of Taste', *British Journal of Aesthetics* 23 (1983), 3–17. More recently, Rachel Zuckert has contended that Kant's principle of "purposiveness without a purpose" is really a reformulation of the rationalist concept of perfection. See her 'Kant's Rationalist Aesthetic', *Kant-Studien* 98 (2007), 443–63.

to specific features of the object, to make us more aware of them, so that we are properly sensitive to them. Attending to and appreciating them is for the rationalist a condition of our taking pleasure in them. Hence aesthetic appreciation and criticism has its point.

Once we admit that there must be some objective component of aesthetic experience, it is necessary to ask in what this component consists. What are the qualities in the object itself that make us take pleasure in it? What, if anything, do these qualities have in common? The purpose of the rationalist theory of beauty is to answer just these questions. This theory plays an essentially *epistemological* role in aesthetic rationalism; its purpose is to specify the kinds of objective features that justify an aesthetic judgment. The central thesis of the rationalist theory is that beauty consists in *inter alia* unity-in-variety. For the rationalist, this is only a necessary, but also very basic, condition of beauty. An aesthetic judgment that claims a work of art is beautiful, although no unity-in-variety can be found in it, is simply false.

Why, though, must we accept the rationalist theory of beauty? Why should beauty consist in unity-in-variety? Here again the rationalist invokes the principle of sufficient reason. The rationalists applied this principle not only to aesthetic judgments but also to works of art. When applied to a work of art, this principle means that there must be a reason for everything within it; there must be a single plan or conception behind it that explains every part within it. If the work satisfies this requirement, then it is an organic whole, i.e., it shows unity-in-variety. But if it is such a whole, if it has such unity-in-variety, then it has one necessary condition for beauty itself. The rationalist concept of beauty is therefore based upon the principle of sufficient reason itself. The sufficient reason for a work is the concept of the whole from which we grasp the necessity of all its parts. Rather than being narrow or dispensable, the mere demand for "prettiness",[11] the concept of beauty proves to be a fundamental principle of criticism itself. We can no more dispense with beauty than the demand that a work should have unity or be an organic whole. Beauty is simply the perception, intuition, or awareness of this unity on the part of the spectator. The justification of an aesthetic judgment therefore will involve showing that the work really does have such unity, that all its parts form a coherent whole. Though contemporary critics might scoff at the concept of beauty, they rarely drop the demand that its parts form a coherent whole; to just that extent, whether they admit it or not, they apply the concept of beauty; they are willy-nilly aesthetic rationalists.

[11] As Danto describes it. See his 'The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art', in *The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), p. 13.

3. The Rationalist Aesthetic

It is one of the great ironies of the rationalist tradition that it stressed the value of systematic thought yet never produced a complete aesthetic theory, a single work encompassing all its aesthetic teaching. The most systematic thinker for the aesthetics of the rationalist school was Baumgarten; but his central work, his 1750 *Aesthetica*, is incomplete, a large fragment. Gottsched's 1733 *Erste Gründe der Weltweisheit* and Baumgarten's 1738 *Metaphysica* are systematic metaphysical works that assign a definite place to aesthetic experience in the world as a whole; but they do not explain that experience itself in detail. In their analysis of beauty the rationalists stress different factors in different works; nowhere do they weld them together into a single cohesive theory. So, to understand their aesthetics, we have no choice but to reconstruct it; we must bring together its various parts and see how, and indeed whether, they form a whole.

One of the most salient features of aesthetic rationalism is its attempt to strike a middle path between an objective and subjective understanding of beauty. The rationalists were careful to formulate a concept of beauty that avoids these extremes, that is neither completely subjective nor objective. They insist that beauty is not simply in the mind of the beholder, nor an objective quality that exists in things whether we perceive them or not. Rather, they maintain that beauty consists in a *relation* between subject and object, more specifically in the power of a thing to produce pleasure within us. Hence Wolff, whose views were formative for the entire school, defined beauty as "that in an object which has the power of producing pleasure in us".[12] Following Wolff, Baumgarten would define beauty as "the perfection of a phenomenon",[13] where a phenomenon is an object *insofar as* it appears to the senses. No less than Kant, the rationalists stress that beauty involves the feeling of pleasure; however, unlike Kant, they deny that feeling is simply subjective, a mere psychological state having no reference to the object. They insist instead that pleasure is a cognitive state, a form of representation, namely the intuition of perfection (*intuitio perfectionis*).[14] Here intuition is the subjective, perfection the objective, component of aesthetic experience. Perfection does not simply qualify the perceiving state of the subject because it is a quality in the object itself, namely, unity in variety, the unity of all its qualities in a single whole. We must not confuse, the rationalists teach, the perception of perfection with perfection of perception.[15]

[12] Wolff, *Psychologia empirica*, §545; II/5, 421.

[13] Baumgarten, *Metaphysica*, §662.

[14] Ibid., §655.

[15] Baumgarten, Mendelssohn, and Lessing warn against this confusion, though it has been made an objection against the neo-classical tradition and the whole concept of beauty by Danto. See

Seen from a contemporary perspective, the rationalist aesthetic is eclectic or syncretic, combining the best elements of rival theories. Contemporary aesthetics has inherited three competing theories of aesthetic quality: formalism, expressivism, and imitation. The rationalist aesthetic combines elements of each theory. The rationalists held that a beautiful work of art should have a specific form, express emotion, and imitate reality. Given that each theory is one-sided, exaggerating one aspect of aesthetic experience at the expense of others, this eclecticism proves more a strength than weakness.

The rationalist aesthetic is formalist insofar as it insists that beauty consists in the perception of perfection, where perfection consists in certain basic structural or formal features, namely, harmony or unity-in-variety. Formally speaking, the best work of art combines the greatest possible unity amid the greatest possible variety. There has to be unity for a work to be a comprehensible whole, for it has to be grasped in one act of the mind; and there has to be multiplicity so that the mind is entertained and stimulated. Unity without multiplicity is mere uniformity, which is boring; and multiplicity without unity is sheer complexity, which is only bewildering. Aesthetic pleasure for the rationalists therefore consists in the harmony of two powers: uniting the different and varying the same.

Apart from form, the rationalists stress the importance of imitation or representation as a necessary condition of a good work of art. Following Aristotle, they all regard works of art as imitations of nature, which are good according to the degree that they successfully imitate nature. There are two dimensions of imitation in the rationalist aesthetic: one formal, another material. The *formal* dimension consists in compliance with the principles of reason, the principles of non-contradiction and sufficient reason, which hold for all possible worlds. The *material* dimension consists in what the rationalists called ''*verisimilitude*'' (*verisimilitas*) or ''*probability*'' (*Wahrscheinlichkeit*). The principle of verisimilitude demands that a work of art resemble this world or reality itself. It does not require, however, that the poet or writer should simply copy appearances or what happens. The rationalists stress the importance of fiction and imagination, and warn that art should never be mere history. However, they also insist that a poem or painting should have some moral lesson or bearing, which we should be able to apply to this world. With reference to poetry, they usually formulate the principle of verisimilitude in Aristotelian fashion: to resemble reality means that such a character would indeed act in such a manner under such circumstances in the real world. They were fond

his 'The Appreciation and Interpretation of Works of Art', in *Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art*, p. 28.

of citing Aristotle's dictum that poetry is sometimes more philosophical than history because it deals with universal truths about "what such or such a kind of man will probably or necessarily say or do".[16]

It is noteworthy that, in attempting to combine formalism with imitation, the rationalist tradition differs from modern versions of formalism. The formalist aesthetics of Clive Bell and Roger Fry, for example, separates form from the representative function of art. Bell insists that form should be significant on its own, the sole object of attention, and never a mere means or instrument for representation.[17] Though representation is compatible with aesthetic value, it is irrelevant to it. Arguably, it is another strength of the rationalist tradition that it attempts to combine formalism with representation or imitation. The problem with modern formalism is that, by depriving art of its claim to truth, it tends to make form insignificant, vapid, or empty. Notoriously, Bell had a difficult time explaining why his significant form is significant; and in the end he contrived a "metaphysical hypothesis", which holds that its significance resides in giving us insight into reality in itself.[18] In resorting to such an hypothesis Bell virtually smuggles back into his theory the representative function he wished to banish. The rationalists avoid such embarrassment in the first place because they stress from the outset that form is significant both in itself and for its representative function.

The rationalist tradition also lays emphasis upon the emotive or expressive power of art as well as its representative and formal aspects. But the relation of the rationalist tradition to modern theories of expression is complex, not least because these theories themselves vary so much. There are several variables to expression: the revelation of the artist's feelings, individuality, or personality; the expressiveness of the work, i.e., its power to embody or portray emotion; and finally, the power of the work to affect the spectator or audience. The rationalists gave great importance to the expressiveness of a work, and its power to affect the feelings of the audience; but they gave none to the expression of the feelings of the artist, which they regarded as a private or individual matter irrelevant to the universal themes of a work of art.[19]

It has always been one of the stock objections against the rationalist aesthetic that, since it exaggerates the role of reason in art, it demands the inhibition or repression of passion. It is notable, however, that some rationalists stressed that the best work of art is one that most affects the passions. Baumgarten stated

[16] Aristotle, *Poetics*, ch. 9, 1451^{b}.

[17] Clive Bell, *Art* (New York: Capricorn, 1958), pp. 22, 24.

[18] Ibid., pp. 43–55.

[19] Hence Lessing writes that a true masterpiece makes us forget its author, because it is the product of universal nature and not a single person. See *Hamburgische Dramaturgie*, Stück 36, September 1, 1767, in Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Werke und Briefe*, VI (Frankfurt: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1985), 361.

expressly and emphatically that "it is highly poetic to excite the most powerful affects" (*affectus vehementissimos*).[20] It was the task of poetry to arouse the most vivid and clear impressions, and the most vivid and clear impressions were the passions. Arousing passions was no less important to Lessing, who claimed that the quality of a tragedy should be measured by the quantities of tears it evinces in the spectator.[21] No rationalist was more opposed to emotional excess than Winckelmann; yet even he never doubted that a work of art should have an emotional impact on the spectator. When he describes the statue of Apollo in the Belvedere museum he stresses how it transports and inspires him.[22]

However intense the emotional effect on the spectator, the rationalists insist that the expression of passion in a work should be moderated and that there is danger of it becoming too excessive. This is only in keeping with their demand for harmony and form, which involves the need for balance and proportion. The rationalist demand for balance and proportion does not amount to an embargo or prohibition against the expression of intense feeling; but it insists that such expression cannot dominate a work or stand unbalanced for too long. The problem here is one of sensibility: that too much stimulus overpowers the senses and feelings, so that we cease to react at all. It is paradoxical but true: works that arouse the most intense passions in the spectator will have to be those that moderate and restrain passion. In stressing the importance of moderation, of retaining formal structure in the expression of emotion, the rationalists wisely avoided the excesses of some theories of expression, which so emphasize the need to communicate feeling, and so underrate the importance of form, that they allow art to degenerate into sentimentality. Though they had no conception of *Kitsch*, the rationalists represent the basic neo-classical aesthetic values that are the best antidote to it: simplicity, balance, restraint.

4. The Meaning of Rules

Perhaps no aspect of the rationalist tradition has more discredited it in the eyes of posterity than its emphasis on rules. The rationalists were indeed preoccupied with rules, which they saw as essential to both the creation and the criticism of works of art. The task of the aesthetician was to formulate these rules, to

[20] See Baumgarten, *Meditationes philosophicae de nonnullis ad poema pertinentibus* (Halle: Grunert, 1735), §27.

[21] See Lessing to Nicolai, November 1756, in Lessing, *Werke*, III, 668–9.

[22] See his 'Beschreibung des Apollo im Belvedere', and its earlier drafts, in Johann Joachim Winckelmann, *Kleine Schriften, Vorreden, Entwürfe*, ed. Walther Rehm, 2nd edn. (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2002), pp. 267–79.

systematize them, and to reduce them to a few fundamental first principles. The more the arts and criticism were governed by rules, the more they would be rational, since rules were simply the general precepts for directing intelligent activity. The artist would achieve his end more efficiently, and the critic would judge a work more accurately, if they understood the rules governing the arts. This conception of art as an intelligent activity governed by rules was by no means unique to the rationalist tradition; it had been fundamental to the very conception of the arts since antiquity. It surfaces clearly, for example, in the medieval formulation of Galen's definition of art: "*Ars est systema praeceptorum universalium*."[23]

Despite its great historical importance, there is no more neglected topic in contemporary aesthetics than the concept of an aesthetic rule. It is hard to imagine another concept more fateful for the history of aesthetics but also so little understood. Now that the traditions that once invoked the concept have disappeared into the mists of history, its very purpose and meaning have been lost to us. All the more reason, then, to return to the rationalist tradition to recover its original meaning.

What did the rationalist mean by rules? And what was the rationale for them? The basis for the rationalist's faith in rules was, again, his fundamental principle, the principle of sufficient reason. The connection of rules with this principle is made explicit in the foundational work of the rationalist tradition, Christian Wolff's *Ontologia*. Here a rule is defined as "a proposition specifying the determination conforming to reason" (*propositio enuncians determinationem rationi conformem*).[24] There were in the rationalist tradition different kinds of rules; just how a rule is to be understood depends on the specific context. What all rules have in common, however, is that they prescribe a certain practice and give a reason for it; in Wolff's terms, they specify the reason why something is done.

There were two chief conceptions of a rule in the rationalist tradition. First, the *instrumental* conception. According to this conception, the rule specifies the necessary, or most effective, means toward the end of the artist. If, for example, the tragedian intends to arouse fear and pity in the spectator, his hero should be of average virtue and suffer misfortune from an error of judgment. The argument for this rule appears in Aristotle's *Poetics*, chapter 6, a *locus classicus* for the rationalists. Second, the *holistic* conception. According to this conception, the rule is based on the idea behind the work, the idea of the

[23] As cited in Wladyslaw Tatarkiewicz, *A History of Six Ideas* (Warsaw: Polish Scientific Publishers, 1980), pp. 13, 50, 58.

[24] *Ontologia*, §520, in Christian Wolff, *Gesammelte Werke*, ed. Jean École, J. E. Hofmann, and H. W. Arndt, vol. II/3 (Hildesheim: Olms, 1968), p. 406 (roman numerals before the slash designate the 'Abteilung', arabic numerals after it the volume).

whole which determines all its necessary parts. The rule states that everything within a work should conform to the idea of the whole, or that there should be a sufficient reason for everything within it, so that every part plays a necessary role in the whole and there is nothing superfluous. In other words, a work of art should form an organic whole, where the whole determines each part and each part serves the whole; the work must therefore have unity-in-variety. Both conceptions are illustrations of Wolff's account of a rule as a proposition laying down the reason for a practice. But they differ in their conception of the reason: the first concerns the purpose or end of the artist, the second the structure of the work itself.

From this brief explanation, it should be clear that both types of rule are indispensable. The instrumental conception is inescapable as long as the artist pursues ends, and as long as there are only so many means of realizing them. Since the means are necessary to the end, and since the artist chooses the end, he must also choose the means. Whatever their ends, all artists find themselves confronted with limited means of achieving them, which are imposed by media and circumstances. The intelligent artist makes the best use of his limited means to serve his ends; and in doing so, whether he is aware of it or not, he is following rules, which simply dictate the most effective means to his ends. The holistic conception is inevitable as long as a work of art should be a coherent whole. There are many reasons for demanding unity: that it is the only means of creating meaning; that it is the only means of effectively communicating with the audience; that it is the only means of giving them pleasure. What reason applies would vary from case to case.

Now that we have some basic idea of the rationalist conception of rules and the arguments for them, we are in a position to reconsider some of the standard objections against rules. Since the middle of the eighteenth century, there have been at least three objections. First, they are so many artificial and arbitrary fetters on creativity and the imagination. The good artist is a genius, who does not need rules, let alone follow them. This objection first appears in the *Sturm und Drang* movement of the 1760s, which defended the claims of genius against neo-classical rules; and it has resurfaced frequently ever since, whenever it has been necessary to defend the avant-garde. Second, rules make works of art stereotypical and mechanical when they should be original and individual, an expression of the personality of the artist. This objection, already implicit in the *Sturm und Drang*, appears most explicitly in the expression theory of art of Croce and Collingwood.[25] Third, rules, if they

[25] See Croce, *Aesthetic*, trans. Douglas Ainslie (Boston: Nonpareil, 1978), pp. 35–8, 68–9; and Collingwood, *The Principles of Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1938), pp. 15–41.

are to provide criteria of judgment, involve concepts of what an object ought to be; but there are no such concepts for works of art, whose meaning is not reducible to definite concepts. This objection is made by Kant in the *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, where it plays a prominent role in his critique of the rationalist tradition.[26]

What should we make of these objections? We will discuss the third when we deal with Kant's critique of the rationalist tradition. It should now be clear, however, what is wrong with the first two objections. Rules, as such, pose no danger to the creativity, originality, or self-expression of the artist. Instrumental rules specify only that the artist should choose an effective means to his end, *whatever his end might be*. Holistic rules specify only how the artist should form an organic whole, *whatever his theme might be*. Here it is left to the choice of the artist which end he chooses, or which general theme he pursues. Rules about how to achieve just *this* specific end, or how to create organic unity with just *this* theme, will be in each case very specific. They will depend on the precise end and the precise means. They have to be discovered by the artist as he creates the work, and they cannot be determined a priori or by consulting some general guidebook. Still, this is not to exclude the possibility of some general rules, which are capable of formulation insofar as there are *similar* ends and themes and *similar* means of achieving them.

If rules pose dangers to creativity, originality, or self-expression, this comes less from the rules themselves than from their misapplication. Rules can be misapplied in two ways. First, they are too general, because the present case is unique or dissimilar to other cases from which the rule has been generalized. Second, one attempts to lay down restrictions on the end of the artist, when all a rule should do is determine means to his ends. It is assumed that the artist should write a specific kind of work, or follow a definite genre, even if his aim were to create a different kind of work. Most of the rebellions against rules in history arose from these kinds of cases; the rebellion had its value and point because it was directed against the *misapplication* of rules. But, the rationalist would contend, the rebellion goes too far when it overthrows all rules whatsoever.[27] Anarchy is no solution to the problem of bad criticism, just as it is no solution to the problem of bad government. Just as rebels find it necessary to create their own governments, so avant-garde artists find it necessary to make their own rules. When they establish themselves and misapply their rules, they will find themselves the target of a new rebellion.

[26] *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, §4, V, 207; §8, V, 215–16; §34, 285.

[27] See below, Chapter 8.2.

5. Kant's Paltry Polemic

No reassessment of aesthetic rationalism can circumvent Kant's critique of this tradition in his *Kritik der Urteilskraft*. In later chapters we will have occasion to re-examine in detail various aspects of Kant's polemic.[28] But it is worthwhile here to give a summary of some of its main shortcomings.

For two centuries it has been the nearly unanimous verdict of Kant scholars that Kant's critique of aesthetic rationalism has been decisive. And so it has been, at least if we consider its historical influence alone. But we must not confuse history with philosophy. The *effect* of Kant's critique is one thing, its *validity* quite another. On the whole, Kant scholars have been willing to accept at face value Kant's interpretation and critique of aesthetic rationalism. But Kant's interpretation is often problematic; and, as a consequence, his critique often groundless. Where Kant's critique is effective, it attacks a straw man; and where it aims at a real target, it misses its mark.

It was a central premise of Kant's critique of rationalism that feelings of pleasure are non-cognitive. Kant based some very weighty conclusions upon this premise: that aesthetic judgment is only subjective; that beauty is not an attribute of objects; that the rationalist search for principles of taste is pointless; that the concept of perfection plays no role in pure aesthetic judgments. Yet, remarkably, Kant's premise is question-begging. For Kant knew all too well that the rationalist began from an opposing theory: that aesthetic pleasure is cognitive, the intuition of perfection. According to the rationalist tradition, the mind is essentially a power of representation, a *vis representativa*, so that all mental states, including feelings, are representations of something in the world. It is often claimed that Kant's triple-faculty theory, which analyzes the mind into cognition, desire, and feeling, is an advance on the Wolffian single-faculty theory, which sees all these powers as variants of the faculty of representation.[29] But why is it an advance at all? Given Kant's failure to argue for this premise, the reason for progress remains obscure.

A central target of Kant's polemic is the rationalist's faith in objective standards or principles of taste. One of the characteristic features of Kant's own aesthetics is that it affirms the universality and necessity of aesthetic judgments but denies that there are general rules or principles for taste. The standard eighteenth-century view, whether in the empiricist or rationalist tradition, is

[28] See Chapters 2.5, 5.3, 5.5.

[29] This is one of the main themes of L. W. Beck's *Early German Philosophy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1969), which measures progress in German philosophy according to its approximation toward the Kantian triple-faculty theory. See, for example, pp. 287–8, 328–9.

that the universality and necessity of judgments of taste must be based upon such standards or principles. The inspiration behind the new science of aesthetics was to discover these principles, so that aesthetic judgment could finally be put on a solid foundation. But Kant throws cold water on such ambitions, which he dismisses as illusory, equivalent to the search for the philosopher's stone. For this controversial claim Kant put forward two arguments. First, that we cannot prove by reasoning, or by a work's conformity to rules, that it is beautiful; the ultimate test of the value of a work of art is rather that we take pleasure in it (§§31, 33, 34; 281, 285–6). Second, that we do not judge works of art according to whether they conform to definite concepts, but according to whether they give rise to a free play between imagination and understanding, where we are free to apply an indefinite range of concepts to them (§§8, 17; 215–16, 231).

Both arguments are non sequiturs. The first is perhaps correct in making pleasure the ultimate test of aesthetic value; but it does not entail that objective principles of taste are impossible, or even that they are superfluous. For, as any rationalist would insist, the purpose of such principles is not to replace pleasure but to explain it. The rationalist too made pleasure the final test of the merit of a piece; the purpose of his rules was only to account for pleasure or aid the attempt to create it. A rule would guide the judgment of a critic and the production of an artist; but it would be derived inductively from the examples of all those works that have produced pleasure in the past. There could be several reasons why a work that conforms to the rules does not produce pleasure: the rules are incomplete, wrongly formulated, incorrectly applied or insufficient by themselves. But in no case does making pleasure the final test imply that there are no rules at all.[30] The second argument is perhaps correct in claiming that aesthetic pleasure is indescribable according to definite concepts; but it does not follow from this that there are no rules to produce it, still less no standards by which to judge it. An impressionist painter, for example, might have definite rules and techniques by which he gives his paintings their shimmering, evanescent qualities; it scarcely matters that these qualities are indescribable. Similarly, a critic might have definite rules to judge the quality of a horror film—whether it is coherent, entertaining, and arouses suspense—even though he cannot analyze the reasons for, or the elements of, the feelings to which it gives rise.

The heart of Kant's polemic is his attack on the concept of perfection, the very cornerstone of aesthetic rationalism. In several sections of Book I, Part I, of the *Kritik der Urteilskraft* he made this concept his specific target. Without

[30] This point will be further explored below, 5.3.

mentioning names, he remarked that some "notable philosophers"—most probably Baumgarten, Meier, or Mendelssohn—had identified beauty with perfection. Kant acknowledged the examination of their theory to be "of the utmost importance in a critique of taste" (§15; 227). His polemic against perfection is partly motivated by his general critique of metaphysics. Kant thinks that the concept of perfection involves an Aristotelian metaphysics of final causes, which transcends the limits of possible experience. Part of his strategy to discredit rationalist aesthetics is to saddle it with an old scholastic metaphysics, a defunct form of Aristotelian teleology. In Part II of the *Kritik der Urteilskraft* he subjects this metaphysics to withering criticism, so that all the arguments against it would apply to aesthetics as well.

To understand and appraise Kant's critique, it is first necessary to have a firm and full grasp of the systematic context in which he locates the concept of perfection. He regards perfection as "*intrinsic objective purposiveness*" (§15; 227). Each term needs explanation. *Purposiveness* (*Zweckmäßigkeit*) means simply the conformity of an object to an end. More technically, a *purpose* (*Zweck*) is "the object of a concept insofar as the concept is seen as the cause of the object"; and "purposiveness" is the "causality of a concept with respect to its object" (§10; 229–30). *Subjective* purposiveness is when the purpose involves some interest of the perceiving subject alone, so that is not a ground of the possibility of the object itself; *objective* purposiveness is when the purpose belongs to the object itself and is a ground of its possibility (§11; 221). *Extrinsic* objective purposiveness is utility, when an end is imposed upon an object, so that it is a means to the ends of some agent other than itself. *Intrinsic* objective purposiveness is when the object acts for its own ends, so that it is the agent realizing its ends. Now perfection is *intrinsic* purposiveness, because we are concerned with the ends inherent in the object itself, apart from its utility for someone else. It is also *objective* purposiveness because the purpose or concept "contains the basis for the object's inner possibility" (§15; 227). More precisely, perfection is "the harmony of a thing's manifold with its concept", where this concept means "what a thing should be" or "what it is meant to be" (§15; 227). We can now see clearly how Kant attempts to line perfection with Aristotelian teleology: his description of the concept mirrors Aristotle's account of a formal-final cause.

Having explained perfection in these terms, Kant has an easy time making it irrelevant to aesthetic judgment. For he argues that pure judgments of taste do not involve any concept of purpose, or any assumptions of what an object is meant to be. We regard flowers, free designs, foliage, and fantasias as beautiful, he points out, even though we have no concept of their purpose (§§ 4, 16; 207,

229). The aesthetic pleasure that we get from such objects consists in the free play of our faculties, which would be curbed and curtailed were we to attribute specific concepts to them. Kant is forced to admit that some judgments of taste do involve attributing definite concepts to a thing; for example, the beauty of a human being, horse, or building; yet he insists that the inclusion of such concepts mean that they are not *pure* judgments of taste (§16; 230). Accordingly, Kant distinguishes between free beauties, which are the subjects of pure aesthetic judgments, and merely adherent or accessory beauties, which are the subjects of impure judgments. What seems to make judgments about adherent beauty less pure, or less perfect instances of aesthetic judgment, is that their concepts restrict the free play of our imagination, and so diminish aesthetic pleasure (§16; 229–30).

What are we to make of this criticism? Two comments are in order. First, Kant's account of the concept of perfection is false. It is of the first importance to see that when Baumgarten and Wolff explain perfection it need not involve objective purposiveness at all. Their account of perfection states simply that it consists in harmony, unity in variety.[31] Although the unity behind variety is expressible as a concept, this concept need not be a purpose. The concept gives the sufficient reason for the thing, which explains why it exists or acts as it does; but this reason might be a formal, efficient, material, or final cause.[32] It is indeed noteworthy that, flatly contrary to Kant's strategy, Baumgarten and Wolff had banished teleology from their cosmology.[33] Although they gave it an important role in natural theology, they did not think that it had any explanatory value in their cosmology, which is strictly mechanistic. Hence the concept of perfection implies only that there is still some order or harmony behind the aesthetic experience, and it need not involve the implication of objective purposiveness. Kant is so far from questioning this point that he virtually affirms it himself when he insists upon the importance of design as the object of aesthetic judgment (§14; 225). When the issue of teleology is cast aside, Kant's position is not as far from the rationalists as he would like to admit.[34] Second, strictly speaking and to remain consistent, Kant should not

[31] See Wolff, *Ontologia*, §§503, 505; and Baumgarten, *Metaphysica*, §§94, 101.

[32] See below, Chapters 2.5 and 5.5.

[33] Wolff, *Discursus praeliminarius*, §§99–102; II/1.1, 45–6; and *Cosmologia generalis*, 'Praefatio', II/4, 14.

[34] These problems with Kant's account of the rationalist position, and his ultimate affinity with it, were pointed out long ago by Salomon Maimon in his article 'Ueber den Geschmack', *Deutsche Monatsschrift* 1 (1792), 204–26; and 'Ueber den Geschmack. Fortsetzung', *Deutsche Monatsschrift* 1 (1792), 296–315. See especially pp. 208–9. See also his 'Schreiben des Herrn Salomon Maimon an den Herausgeber', in Salomon Maimon, *Gesammelte Werke*, ed. Valerio Verra, 5 vols. (Hildesheim: Olms, 1965–76), III, 332–9.

even admit accessory or adherent beauty. Since aesthetic quality is "wholly independent of the concept of perfection", and since adherent beauty does involve the concept of perfection, it is hard to see how there can be adherent beauty. It should be not a lesser kind of beauty but simply no beauty at all. The inconsistencies of Kant's aesthetic become even more embarrassing when he makes the concept of human perfection into his "ideal of beauty" (§17; V, 231–6). In this case it seems that some forms of perfection are not even lesser forms of beauty. If, however, Kant were to be consistent and to exclude all forms of perfection, he would be left with a very narrow aesthetic, one whose paradigm of beauty is the arabesque.[35]

6. Diotima versus Dionysus

After Kant, the most powerful critic of aesthetic rationalism was Nietzsche. With the single exception of the *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, no work contributed more to the demise of this tradition than *Die Geburt der Tragödie*. Nowhere in this work does Nietzsche explicitly criticize any of the rationalists; nowhere does he target the rationalist tradition as a whole; he mentions Winckelmann and Lessing *en passant*, though only to praise them.[36] Nevertheless, virtually all of *Die Geburt der Tragödie* can be read as an attack on aesthetic rationalism. For Nietzsche formulates his tragic philosophy in opposition to "*aesthetic Socratism*", which he characterizes in terms that perfectly fit aesthetic rationalism.[37] Aesthetic Socratism holds that the beautiful must be intelligible, that the key to happiness lies in virtue, and that we acquire virtue through knowledge. All these doctrines were explicitly affirmed by the rationalists.

Nietzsche's critique of aesthetic Socratism boils down to one fundamental point: that it ignores the Dionysian, the irrational energies and instinctive forces behind life. The rationalist aesthetic is decidedly—and one-sidedly—Apollonian, in his view, because it finds aesthetic pleasure in the perception of order or perfection alone. It therefore fails to see that there is another

[35] The narrowness of the Kantian aesthetic is an old complaint. Some of the first to voice it were the Schlegel brothers. See A. W. Schlegel's *Vorlesungen über schöne Literatur und Kunst*, in *Vorlesungen über Ästhetik*, ed. Ernst Behler (Paderborn: Schöningh, 1989), I, 228–51.

[36] In section 15 he calls Lessing "the most honest theoretical man" because he cared more for the search for truth than truth itself. In section 20 he praises the intellectual efforts of Winckelmann, Schiller, and Goethe to unlock the secrets of the Greeks. See *Die Geburt der Tragödie*, in Nietzsche, *Sämtliche Werke, Kritische Studienausgabe*, ed. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari, 15 vols. (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1980), I, 99, 129. In *Götzen-Dämmerung* Nietzsche explicitly criticizes Winckelmann for failing to recognize the Dionysian. See *Werke*, VI, 159. We will discuss Nietzsche's criticism with respect to Winckelmann below, Chapter 6.9.

[37] Ibid., I, 85, 94.

powerful source of aesthetic pleasure: our feelings of oneness with the powers of nature, which express themselves in birth and death, order and chaos, consonance and dissonance. Hailed as a great step forward in aesthetics, Nietzsche's discovery of the Dionysian has made aesthetic rationalism seem naive and innocent, as if it rested upon a childlike blindness to the irrational forces of life.

Upon reflection, the charge of naiveté is better made against Nietzsche than the rationalists. For Nietzsche writes as if the category of the Dionysian were a basic fact, an indisputable datum, which all philosophical standpoints should acknowledge; but the truth of the matter is that it rests upon some questionable philosophical presuppositions all its own. Nietzsche's concept of the Dionysian makes no sense outside the context of Schopenhauer's dualism between things-in-themselves and appearances, according to which the will rules over the realm of things-in-themselves and the intellect governs appearances. Since Schopenhauer limits the intellect and principle of sufficient reason to appearances, his will has to be an *irrational* power, a blind instinctive force behind appearances. But no rationalist would accept Schopenhauer's distinctions, and all would question the very existence of the Dionysian as Nietzsche defines it. The rationalists deny that there is a qualitative distinction between things-in-themselves and appearances; and they stress that we cannot separate the will from the intellect. Furthermore, it is a myth that the rationalists do not acknowledge the existence of the subconscious, impulsive, and instinctual; the very opposite is the case. They broke with Cartesian and Lockean psychology precisely because it made the possibility of self-awareness necessary for all representations; and, following Leibniz, they hold that there are many perceptions hidden in the subconscious, the so-called *petites perceptions*, which have a powerful impact on all our actions and beliefs. Where they differ from Kant and Schopenhauer is in denying that these subconscious perceptions are distinct in kind from those of our self-conscious intellect; they hold instead that there is a continuum between all perceptions, which are distinguished from one another solely in the degree of their clarity and distinctness.

The naiveté of Nietzsche's critique becomes all the more apparent once we recognize that aesthetic rationalism proceeds from a very different source of inspiration than Dionysus and Greek tragedy. Rather than appreciating this source, Nietzsche was forced to turn a blind eye to it. This source is as Greek as Dionysus and no less intoxicating. It is not Socrates, as Nietzsche would have it, but the teacher of Socrates: Diotima. In Greek philosophy there was no more powerful and persuasive a teacher than she, a veritable philosophical dominatrix! As Friedrich Schlegel pointed out long ago, she is the only interlocutor in all the Platonic dialogues to teach Socrates, the only

person before whom he lays aside all his dialectical arts.[38] It was the very heart of Diotima's teaching in the *Symposium* that all desire is a form of love, that love is directed toward the eternal, and that it is drawn to the eternal by means of beauty. So, in her view, the erotic is not a subrational or irrational but a proto-rational and pro-rational drive whose goal is to achieve unity with the eternal forms. This teaching was the teat that nourished the aesthetic rationalists; the young Leibniz, Winckelmann, Lessing, and Mendelssohn would suckle from it and grow. We do best to imagine all the rationalists as Diotima's children, to see them sitting before her and listening raptly to her golden words of wisdom. Once we recognize fully her maternal inspiration, we can turn the tables on Nietzsche. For it is necessary to ask: Did Nietzsche appreciate the erotic? Given the terms of Schopenhauer's dualism, *could* he have understood it? Arguably, the great strength of aesthetic Socratism over Nietzsche's Dionysian philosophy is that it recognizes the profound importance of the erotic. The opposition between aesthetic rationalism and Nietzsche's tragic philosophy is not that between Dionysus and Socrates, as Nietzsche thought, but that between Dionysus and Eros.[39] Once we see Diotima's role as the fount of aesthetic rationalism, we can begin to appreciate why aesthetic rationalism gave such importance to beauty, and why contemporary aesthetics is so blind to dismiss it. By making beauty the object of love, Diotima shows us that it is integral to life, that it is behind our strongest drives, the goal of our deepest aspirations. If she is right, beauty must be central to aesthetics, and we can no more eliminate it than love itself. The central and vital role of beauty in all volition was fully appreciated by all the rationalists, who made perfection, the order behind beauty, the object of all desire.

We are now also in a position to grasp the reason for the decline in beauty. Its source lies in Kant's fateful separation of the beautiful from the good in the first paragraphs of the *Kritik der Urteilskraft*. By making beauty the object of *disinterested* contemplation, Kant deprived it of its living connection with the erotic. It is no wonder, then, that contemporary aesthetics, which follows Kant, has declared the death of beauty. Once beauty is severed from the energies of life itself, its irrelevance is ensured.

From Nietzsche's account in *Die Geburt der Tragödie* one might think that the rationalists gave little importance to art. After all, he writes that aesthetic Socratism was the murderer of Attic tragedy, and that it reduced art to a

[38] See his 'Über die Diotima', in *Kritische Friedrich Schlegel Ausgabe*, ed. Ernst Behler, Jean Jacques Anstett, and Hans Eichner (Munich: Schöningh, 1958—), I, 70–115.

[39] Nietzsche, *Werke*, I, 83. Only once in *Die Geburt der Tragödie* does Nietzsche refer to the erotic. He calls Socrates the "true erotic" (*dem wahrhaften Erotiker*, ibid., I, 91.).

mere *ancilla* of philosophy.[40] Yet the irony is that no philosophical movement in history gave more importance to art than the aesthetic rationalists. They would have completely endorsed Nietzsche's famous dictum that "existence is justified only from an aesthetic standpoint".[41] They too think that art is crucial to affirming the value of life. Yet they give art a very different role than Nietzsche, one altogether fitting for their opposing optimistic worldview: it should not conceal the horror of existence but reveal its perfection. Following Leibniz, the rationalists held that this is the best of all possible worlds, and they assigned to art a very important role in upholding such optimism. The importance of the aesthetic for their general worldview follows immediately from their analysis of pleasure. According to that analysis, all pleasure is aesthetic because it consists in the perception of perfection, which is the objective correlate of beauty itself. The role of aesthetics is therefore to confirm the perfection of existence, the wisdom of god who has created everything in the best possible order. Aesthetics thus became a crucial part of the rationalist theodicy: through the experience of beauty we affirm the wisdom and goodness of god, who has created everything in the most perfect order. However, we do not have to accept the rationalist theodicy to see the merits of its aesthetics. Even if we reject that theodicy, we can still accept the wisdom of Diotima's account of beauty, the chief source of inspiration for aesthetic rationalism.

7. The Challenge of Irrationalism

We misunderstand aesthetic rationalism—indeed we beg the question against it—if we regard it as 'dogmatism', i.e., uncritical confidence in the powers of reason. This is the stereotype of rationalism that we find in Kant's *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*.[42] Yet Kant's historical sketch was as misleading as it was self-serving. Almost from the very beginning, the rationalists were acutely self-conscious of, and deeply troubled by, the question of the limits of reason with regard to aesthetic phenomena.[43] Most of the history of aesthetic rationalism was an attempt to defend the borders of reason against the challenges of irrationalism.

[40] Ibid., I, 87, 94. [41] Ibid., I, 47, 152. [42] *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, B 789, 880–3.

[43] This point was a central theme of one of the most brilliant works on eighteenth-century aesthetics, Alfred Baeumler's *Das Irrationalitatsproblem in der Aesthetik und Logik des 18. Jahrhundert bis zur Kritik der Urteilskraft*, the first (and, as it happened, only) volume of his *Kants Kritik der Urteilskraft: Ihre Geschichte und Systematik* (Halle: Niemeyer, 1923). Though a rabid national-socialist, Baeumler deserves credit for stressing the importance of the irrationality problem, and for recognizing its formative role in the development of rationalism. It is remarkable, however, how narrowly he conceives the problem. He equates it with the problem of the ineffable individual, the "Je ne sais quoi"; he neglects all the important issues arising from genius, the sublime, and tragedy.

What were these challenges? And how did the rationalists attempt to meet them? We will examine these issues in detail in later chapters. Here, as a summary and preview, we consider the highlights.

Seen from a broad historical perspective, aesthetic rationalism was a chapter within the longer story of the Enlightenment. The fundamental principle of the Enlightenment was the sovereignty of reason, i.e., that all human beliefs and activities should submit to the criticism of reason.[44] The Enlightenment was therefore committed to expanding the dominion of reason over every aspect of life. Art, no less than religion, morality, and politics, was to be subject to the criticism and control of reason.

The rationalists' support for the cause of Enlightenment appears in their theory of aesthetic judgment. The fundamental intent behind that theory was to justify the sovereignty of reason in the realm of art. If that theory were correct, then aesthetic experience and production would be subject to rational criticism and explanation. For the rationalists understood perfection, the objective component of aesthetic experience, to be *the* form of rational order. Rational order consists in harmony, unity-in-variety, because it is formulable in a concept or rule, which grasps many things as one.

Well before 1750, the high noon of the Enlightenment, the aesthetics of perfection had been under attack from many quarters. The *Aufklärer* took these attacks very seriously, not least because they saw them as threats to the sovereignty of reason. To claim that aesthetic experience consists in more than the perception of perfection is to hold that something else lies within it that transcends the comprehension, and therefore the criticism, of reason. Not the least reason for the enormous interest in aesthetics in the eighteenth century was the deep-rooted belief—among *Aufklärer* and their opponents alike—that the sovereignty of reason was at stake. Aesthetics posed a more serious threat to the Enlightenment than religious mysticism or orthodoxy; for here within the realm of natural human experience itself, and not in any supposed supernatural realm beyond it, there lurked irrational forces. We can classify the criticisms of the aesthetics of perfection under the following heads:

"Je ne sais quoi"

It was held that the characteristic quality of aesthetic experience consists in something essentially indefinable and inexplicable, something that we cannot identify or formulate in words, what became known as the "Je ne sais quoi".

[44] On the full meaning and significance of this principle, see my *The Sovereignty of Reason: The Defense of Rationality in the Early English Enlightenment* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), pp. 3–5, 20–4.

This point was much discussed in France in the late seventeenth century by Boileau, Bouhours, and Crousaz; and it was a central theme in Leibniz's analysis of sense qualities. While Leibniz never resolved this issue, it was later taken up by Baumgarten, who understood it as "extensive clarity".[45]

Sublime

The sublime had always been a challenge for the aesthetics of perfection. We take pleasure in certain objects—raging torrents, the infinite expanse of the desert, the skies and ocean—apart from any perceived harmony. While perfection is something that we grasp as a whole or unity, the sublime transcends any power to perceive it as a whole or unity, and we take pleasure in it just for this reason. Hence it seems necessary to make a distinction between the sublime and the beautiful, and to limit the aesthetics of perfection to the beautiful alone.

Since they are sometimes confused, it is important to distinguish the problem of the "je ne sais quoi" from that of the sublime. Although both transcend conceptual formulation, the "je ne sais quoi" is an ineffable quality attaching to beauty, and therefore to something that is comprehensible within definite limits; the sublime goes beyond the limits of beauty entirely. Alternatively, the "je ne sais quoi" is an intangible quality arising from, but not reducible to, order and proportion, whereas the sublime transcends all order and proportion.

The challenge that the sublime posed to the aesthetics of perfection first emerged in the 1740s in Germany during the dispute between Gottsched and the Swiss aestheticians, J. J. Bodmer and J. J. Breitinger.[46] It became more apparent and urgent with the publication in the 1750s of Edmund Burke's *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*. The issue was first taken up by Mendelssohn, who interpreted the sublime not as the absence of perfection but as an extraordinary degree of perfection.[47]

The New and Surprising

Sometimes we take pleasure in perceiving events because they are new and surprising, because they disrupt and overturn our sense of order, harmony, and proportion. Since it need not be unlimited or measureless, the new and surprising need not be the sublime. But we seem to take pleasure in it precisely because it is irrational, upsetting our normal sense of order.

[45] See below, Chapters 1.3 and 5.2.
[46] See below, Chapter 4.3.
[47] See below, Chapter 7.5.

The claims of the new and surprising to equal treatment with the beautiful were first made by Bodmer and Breitinger during their dispute with Gottsched.

Tragedy

We also take pleasure in seeing tragic events—whether fictional or actual—even though we disapprove of their happening. We would like to witness a shipwreck, the fire of London, or the Lisbon earthquake from afar, although we deplore these events and would even give up our lives to prevent them. Such events are not, however, perfections but the very opposite. The problem of tragic pleasure was first taken up by Mendelssohn who, in his 1755 *Briefe über die Empfindungen*, attempted to explain it according to the concept of a mixed pleasure.[48]

Genius

The problems of the aesthetic of perfection are apparent not only from the standpoint of the spectator but also from that of the creator. This aesthetic claims that all aesthetic production and perception must conform to rules; but we seem to value genius precisely because it *breaks* or *transcends* the rules, or because it creates its own rules. The claims of genius became especially strident in the 1760s with the *Sturm und Drang*. They were resisted by Lessing and Mendelssohn, who stressed the genius's dependence on rules, and who interpreted inspiration as a form of intuitive rationality.[49]

No one was more aware of these challenges to the authority of reason than Kant himself. One of the best ways of approaching his *Kritik der Urteilskraft* is to understand it as a response to them. Kant's response is complex, moving in two opposing directions: it both extends and limits the powers of reason. He limits its powers in the face of the "Je ne sais quoi", which he understands as the indeterminate interplay between imagination and understanding; and he extends them in the face of the sublime, which he explains in terms of the ideas of practical reason. Kant's response differs greatly from the rationalist tradition, which attempted to deal with these problems by reformulating the aesthetics of perfection.

We will have to leave to another occasion the discussion of the relative merits of the Kantian versus rationalist response to these issues. The only point to be made here is that it should be apparent that Kant's concern with these issues was by no means unique to him. The difference between Kant and the rationalists is not between criticism and dogmatism but between opposing critical approaches to the problem of irrationalism.

[48] See below, Chapter 7.3–4. [49] See below, Chapters 7.7 and 8.3.

8. Gadamer and the Rationalist Tradition

That at least some of the central doctrines of aesthetic rationalism are not hopelessly archaic, that at least some of them still have a contemporary resonance, becomes apparent from one of the defining works of twentieth-century aesthetics, Hans-Georg Gadamer's *Wahrheit und Methode*. Gadamer deserves credit for being one of the few twentieth-century thinkers to revive the concept of aesthetic truth, and to react against Kant's disastrous subjectivization of aesthetic experience. No one else has provided such a powerful critique of Kantian aesthetic autonomy, or given such a strong case for the cognitive dimension of aesthetic experience. In reacting against Kant's subjectivism and in reviving the concept of aesthetic truth, Gadamer has done much to prepare the way for a reconsideration of the rationalist tradition.

This is not to say, however, that Gadamer himself would have recommended such a re-examination. In the final chapter of *Wahrheit und Methode* he acknowledges the affinity between his own views and those of the rationalist tradition.[50] The rationalist tradition was "the last embodiment" of the "metaphysics of the beautiful" of ancient Greek philosophy, a metaphysics which he intends to revive, if only in part. Nevertheless, Gadamer regards the rationalist tradition as beyond redemption. The fatal flaw of this tradition, in his view, is that its aesthetics is based on a hopelessly antiquated metaphysics. Crucial to the rationalists' metaphysics was its concept of substance and its teleological worldview. Kant's critique of these doctrines was so effective, however, that no one should now hope to revive aesthetic rationalism. Though Gadamer finds something of value in the Greek metaphysics of the beautiful, it does not consist in those doctrines retained by the eighteenth-century rationalists.

We have already found reasons to question Kant's critique of aesthetic rationalism, especially his claims that its doctrines were dependent on a teleological metaphysics. So, on these grounds Gadamer has less reason than he thinks for distancing himself from the rationalist tradition. But quite apart from metaphysics, there are strong reasons for thinking that Gadamer's affinity with the rationalist tradition is much greater than he realizes. It is noteworthy that in his efforts to revive the concept of aesthetic knowledge he falls back,

[50] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, in *Gesammelte Werke* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1990), I, 484.

time and again, on the same inspiration as the rationalists themselves: the Platonic doctrine of the *Phaedrus* that beauty is the sensible appearance of the intelligible.[51] Like the rationalists, Gadamer sees aesthetic experience as the recognition of essential truth. A work of art gives us insight into truth not by imitating particular appearances but by revealing universal aspects of experience. While sometimes critical of the notion of imitation, which continued to play an important role in the rationalist tradition, Gadamer also suggests that the notion can be redeemed and reformulated to do justice to the true cognitive dimension of works of art.[52] When reinterpreted, imitation is not the replication or copy of appearances but it is the revelation of essential or universal aspects of experience. Such a reinterpretation would have been very congenial to the rationalists themselves.

Despite their common Platonic inspiration, Gadamer was troubled by another aspect of the rationalist legacy: its preoccupation with rules. Though he makes only passing remarks about it,[53] Gadamer finds this preoccupation especially problematic, for it shows that the rationalist tradition failed to make a proper distinction between aesthetic and scientific truth. Nothing is more important for Gadamer than a sharp separation between these forms of truth, because it alone ensures a proper domain of truth for aesthetic experience. If science is the sole form of truth and inquiry, then aesthetic experience is subjective, just as Kant taught. The deeper problem for him with the rationalist tradition is that, with all its emphasis on rules, it jeopardizes this distinction. What is especially characteristic of scientific truth for Gadamer is adherence to methodological rules.[54] He sees the epitome of the modern scientific spirit in Descartes' *Regulae*, where the inquirer is advised to pursue truth according to specific rules.[55] He contrasts the scientific pursuit of truth according to rules of method with the Platonic dialectic, whose constant questioning is never limited to definite rules or a specific agenda. The spirit of dialectic is to open the boundaries of inquiry, to ask questions where none have been raised before; and such a spirit is squelched by adherence to rules, which limit inquiry a priori and constrain it according to definite procedures and goals. The same dialectical spirit is characteristic of the arts, Gadamer believes, because they attempt to extend constantly the boundaries of experience and the dimensions of truth.

[51] Hans-Georg Gadamer, 131, 485. Cf. 119, where Gadamer refers to the Platonic doctrine of anamnesis, which would have been equally congenial to the rationalists.

[52] Ibid., 120–1.

[53] Ibid., 484, where Gadamer refers slightingly to the "*der klassizistische Schein der rationalistischen Regelästhetik*". Gadamer seems to accept Kant's critique of the "*Regelästhetik*", ibid., 47.

[54] Ibid., 243, 275, 282.

[55] Ibid., 464.

We will leave aside here the broad question of the merits of Gadamer's sharp distinction between aesthetic and scientific truth. It is the obvious residue of the Kantian concept of autonomy, and the romantic notion of genius, two doctrines which continue to play a strong role in Gadamer's thinking despite his insistence on overcoming them. Suffice it to note now that Gadamer's own analysis of a work of art presupposes the existence of aesthetic rules. When, for example, he analyzes the notion of a work of art as an objective structure which transcends the consciousness of its creators and spectators, he assumes that the objective aspect of that structure is somehow normative, i.e., governed by rules.[56] It is this normative dimension of a work of art that ensures that it is not reducible simply to the experiences of the subjects who create or enjoy it. And when Gadamer insists that a work of art be a complete self-sufficient whole whose meaning imposes constraints on creator and spectator alike, he also assumes that a work of art has a sufficient reason or underlying idea, the reason or idea that serves as a rule for its creation and criticism.[57] What troubles Gadamer about the concept of an aesthetic rule—the constraint upon inquiry and inspiration—is perhaps legitimate; but it scarcely warrants throwing out the concept of an aesthetic rule entirely. The indispensability of rules to the creation and criticism of art raises questions, though, about Gadamer's sharp distinction between aesthetic and scientific truth.

It is the great merit of Gadamer's revival of aesthetic truth that he returns to its classical sources in Plato. It is really the spirit of Plato's dialectic that inspires Gadamer's hermeneutics and philosophy of art. Gadamer goes seriously astray, however, when he regards his own philosophy of art as an overcoming of aesthetics. In returning to Plato Gadamer is not going beyond aesthetics but returning to its original inspiration. For it was the spirit of the *Phaedrus* and *Symposium* that stood behind the creation of aesthetics in the mid-eighteenth century. It is a great error to see Kant as the essence of modern aesthetics, as Gadamer does. A stranger to eros, Kant was never in a position to understand Diotima's teaching, which is the true guiding spirit behind modern aesthetics.

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So much by way of anticipation. The ensuring chapters will elaborate and vindicate many of the preliminary conclusions stated here. All that we have

[56] Ibid., 107–16. See esp. p. 112: "*Die Regeln und Ordnungen, die die Ausfüllung des Spielraums vorschreiben, machen das Wesen des Spieles aus.*"

[57] Ibid., 99–100.

attempted to do here is sketch and summarize the main outlines and rationale behind a forgotten philosophical tradition. That tradition is like a buried treasure chest, whose contents we should now unearth and explore. We do well to heed Diotima's children, much as Socrates once listened to Diotima herself millennia ago.

1

Leibniz and the Roots of Aesthetic Rationalism

1. The Grandfather's Strange Case

Leibniz is the grandfather of German aesthetics. The claim to paternity itself is generally reserved for Baumgarten, whose *Aesthetica* gave the modern discipline its name. We will soon find good reasons to contest this claim and to award the title of paternity to Wolff. But whether Baumgarten or Wolff is the father of aesthetics, Leibniz is its grandfather. For it was Leibniz who formulated so much of the terminology, the psychology, and epistemology that lay behind Wolff's and Baumgarten's aesthetics, and indeed that of aesthetic rationalism as a whole. The entire tradition of aesthetic rationalism prior to Kant, it is fair to say, takes place on a Leibnizian foundation. It would be a mistake to assume that Leibniz's influence ceases with Kant, as if Kant had once and for all buried it. For, well into the post-Kantian era, Leibniz's legacy lived on. The aesthetic conception of the world—the view of the world as a work of art or organism—that was so essential for *Frühromantik* and the *Goethezeit* has its deepest roots in Leibniz's metaphysics. It was no accident that Herder and the young Schelling, in the central writings where they lay the foundation of that aesthetic conception, appeal time and again to Leibniz.[1] The very spirit that Kant wanted to inter was resurrected by the generation after him.

Yet there is something of a paradox to Leibniz's case for grand-paternity. While his influence on German aesthetics was immense, Leibniz himself devoted scant attention to the subject. He had little interest in the problems of aesthetics, and he had no explicit theory of taste. Hence Ernst Cassirer has written: "The aesthetic motive plays no decisive role in the construction of

[1] See Herder's *Gott, Einige Gespräche*, in *Sämtliche Werke*, ed. B. Suphan, 33 vols. (Berlin: Weidmann, 1881–1913), XVI, 458–64; and Schelling's *Ideen zu einer Philosophie der Natur*, in *Sämtliche Werke*, ed. K. F. A. Schelling, 14 vols. (Stuttgart: Cotta, 1856), II, 20.

Leibniz's philosophy."[2] Taken at its face value, Cassirer's assessment is entirely correct. Leibniz's participation in the aesthetic discussions and disputes of his day was negligible; and it played little or no role in the development of his thought. His few remarks about aesthetic issues are scattered and occasional.[3]

How do we resolve this paradox? What explains the discrepancy between Leibniz's extraordinary influence and his scant interest in aesthetic issues? The answer lies, of course, in the profound aesthetic dimension of Leibniz's philosophy. Even though Leibniz has no explicit aesthetic theory, aesthetic concepts play a prominent role in his philosophy as a whole. So, on a deeper level, Cassirer's assessment is completely wrong: the aesthetic motive does play a decisive role in the construction of Leibniz's philosophy.

There is a deep aesthetic strand to Leibniz's metaphysics. Indisputably, the central concept of Leibniz's metaphysics is his concept of substance, since he regards substance as the basic unit of reality. Leibniz defines substance in terms of living force (*Vis viva*, *Kraft*), which he identifies with the power to unify a manifold, to create unity amid variety. Unity amid variety is order or harmony, which is the structure of beauty itself. Hence living force manifests itself as beauty, so that beauty is the measure of the power of a substance. The greater the power of a substance, the greater the beauty. In a late fragment, 'Initia et Specimina Scientiae novae Generalis', Leibniz himself makes this connection explicit by identifying the manifestation or appearance of power with beauty:

> Regarding power, the greater it is the more it shows itself through making many from one and [many] in one, since one governs many things and forms them in itself. Now unity in multiplicity is nothing other than harmony; and . . . the order that flows from it is that from which all beauty derives . . . From this, one sees how happiness, pleasure, love, perfection, essence, power, freedom, harmony, order and beauty are connected together, which is properly seen only by a few.[4]

The aesthetic dimension of Leibniz's philosophy is no less evident from his ethics. Leibniz conceives the highest good in essentially aesthetic terms. He defines the highest good as happiness or tranquility, which consists in constant pleasure.[5] Pleasure, he argues, derives from the perception of perfection, so

[2] *Freiheit und Form* (Berlin: Cassirer, 1916), p. 64.

[3] The most important is Leibniz's 'Remarques' on Shaftesbury's *Characteristics*, though only a paragraph discusses the issue of taste. See *Die philosophischen Schriften von Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz*, ed. C. I. Gerhardt, 7 vols. (Berlin: Weidmann, 1875–90), III, 423–31. (Henceforth this edition will be designated by the letter 'G'.)

[4] See G VII, 87. Cf. 'On Wisdom', in *Philosophical Papers and Letters*, ed. L. Loemker, 2nd edn. (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1969), p. 426. (Henceforth this edition will be designated by the letter 'L'.)

[5] G VII, 86; L 425. See also 'Elements of Natural Law', L, 136–7.

that the greater the perfection the greater the pleasure. But the pleasure arising from the perception of perfection is, for Leibniz, nothing less than beauty itself. Hence Leibniz sees all pleasure, the basic component of happiness, as an aesthetic phenomenon. Even sensual or physical pleasure is aesthetic, Leibniz argues, because it derives from the perception of a perfection, even if we are not fully aware of the perfection itself.[6]

Beauty also plays a critical role in Leibniz's theodicy. Theodicy is for Leibniz the attempt to justify the ways of God to man, i.e., to explain why God allows the existence of evil in the universe. The central thesis of Leibniz's theodicy is that this is the best of all possible worlds; in other words, it is incompatible with the divine goodness for God to have created a less than perfect universe.[7] But when Leibniz declared this to be the best of all possible worlds he might also have added that it is also the most beautiful. To make the best of all possible worlds into the most beautiful, one only has to contemplate its perfections, for beauty is the pleasure that arises from the contemplation of perfection. Hence the role of beauty in Leibniz's theodicy is clear: it confirms the existence of divine perfection in the universe. Whenever we see beauty, we recognize that something is perfect; and when we see it as perfect, we affirm the wisdom and goodness of its creator. So through beauty we take pleasure in the divine creation, which makes us ready to accept the ways of God. Such acquiescence in the ways of God is crucial, Leibniz believes, for us to love and honor God, our highest obligation.[8]

The aesthetic dimension of Leibniz's theodicy becomes even more apparent when we consider that Leibniz often explains evil by recourse to an aesthetic metaphor, the idea of a harmonic whole.[9] He regards the universe as ''this great and true poem'',[10] and he likens evil to the dissonance necessary for its harmony. The beauty of harmony consists in unity in variety; but the greatest beauty arises from a variety whose elements are not only different but even in conflict with one another. Just as the greatest beauty arises from unifying the greatest possible dissonance, so the perfection of the cosmos emerges from the evil of conflict itself. Hence evil is an essential fact of existence, as necessary to the perfection of the cosmos as dissonance is to beauty. So, for

[6] G VII, 87; L 426. [7] *Discours de métaphysique*, §3, G IV, 428. [8] Ibid., §4, 429–30.

[9] See especially the early *Confessio philosophi*, in *Leibniz, Samtliche Schriften und Briefe*, ed. Akademie der Wissenschaften (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1980), VI/3, 122–3, 130, 146. (Henceforth this edition will be designated 'AA'.) See also the 1677 fragment, 'Conversatio de libertate', in *Textes Inédits*, ed. Gaston Grua, 2 vols. (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1948), I, 271. (Henceforth this edition will be designated 'Gr'.)

[10] The metaphor appears in 'Meditations on the Common Concept of Justice', L 565–6.

Leibniz, no less than for Nietzsche, existence is justified only as an aesthetic phenomenon.[11]

Leibniz's significance in the history of aesthetics becomes fully apparent only when we place him in his broader historical context and compare him with the legacy of the Reformation. It is difficult to imagine an attitude more hostile to the aesthetic aspect of life than that of Protestant theology. Almost every central feature of Luther's and Calvin's theology—its nominalism, its insistence on eternal salvation alone as the highest good, and its sharp distinction between the heavenly and earthly realms—discourages aesthetics. The beauty of the senses is only a temptation to remain in the earthly realm, where our salvation cannot be found; and the beauty of the intellect is illusory because there is no realm of eternal forms when universals are only *modi cognoscendi intellectus*. Leibniz's great achievement was to reinstate the legitimacy of the aesthetic realm against the negative influence of Protestant theology. In doing so he went back to a Platonic metaphysics, which restored the place of the Forms, and a Thomist theology, which re-established the connection between the realms of nature and grace. We find several themes of the *Phaedrus* and *Symposium* restored in Leibniz's philosophy: that the sensate perception of beauty is an anticipation of the intellectual intuition of the Forms; that the end of life is the contemplation of beauty; and that the perception of beauty is the source of love. By restoring these Platonic themes, Leibniz kept alive the spirit of the Renaissance within Protestant culture. It was Leibniz, then, who gave refuge and comfort to Diotima amid all the efforts of Protestant clerics to persecute and banish her.

Yet Leibniz's achievement was by no means unambiguous. Some of the ambivalences in Plato's attitudes toward the arts resurface in his philosophy. We see in Leibniz not only the legacy of the *Phaedrus* and *Symposium* but also that of the *Republic*. Although Leibniz did not banish artists from his republic, he followed Plato in giving philosophers the guiding role in the state, and in allowing them to control and censor artists. And while Leibniz never belittled art as the imitation of appearances, as Plato had once done, he believed that, insofar as it involved a sensible medium, art could provide only a confused form of intellectual cognition. The full meaning of such experience could be fully understood and explained only by the philosopher. What the artist knew vaguely and confusedly through a sensible medium the philosopher alone could formulate in accurate and distinct terms. Like Plato, then, Leibniz saw rational insight—the intellectual perception of structure or form—as the paradigm of knowledge, of which the arts could provide only a primitive

[11] Cf. Nietzsche, *Der Geburt der Tragödie*, in *Sämtliche Werke*, ed. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari, 15 vols. (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1980), I, 152.

anticipation. Leibniz's ambivalence toward the arts will reappear time and again in the tradition of aesthetic rationalism.

2. Theory of Beauty

Although he has no general aesthetic theory, Leibniz does provide now and then some definitions of beauty.[12] One of the clearest appears in his 'Elements of Natural Law' (1670–1): ''We seek beautiful things because they are pleasant, for I define beauty as that, the contemplation of which is pleasant.''[13] It appears from this definition that Leibniz regards beauty as a completely subjective quality, for it seems to consist simply in the pleasure we take in the contemplation of an object. But this impression is quickly corrected by Leibniz's general theory of pleasure. He maintains that pleasure is the feeling of an excellence or perfection in things, whether in ourselves or in someone else.[14] This perfection or excellence is not a quality that we project into things but one belonging to things themselves, whether or not they are perceived by us; for Leibniz defines perfection as the degree of positive reality or essence of a thing, setting aside all its limitations.[15] Perfection, he further explains, shows itself in the power of a thing, its capacity to unite many properties into one, which is the same as harmony.[16] Hence pleasure is not only a feeling but also a cognitive state, a representation of something in reality itself, namely, its perfection, its unity in diversity or harmony.

[12] See also 'De existentia', from *De summa rerum*, AA VI/3, 588; 'Elementa juris naturalis', AA VI/1, 484; 'Elementa verae pietatis', AA VI/4, 1358; and 'De affectibus', AA VI/4, 1415.

[13] L 137.

[14] ''. . . pleasure is nothing but the feeling of an increase of perfection . . .'', from 'Two Dialogues on Religion', L 218; ''. . . pleasure is nothing but the feeling of perfection'', from 'Reflections on the Common Concept of Justice', L 569; and ''Pleasure is the feeling of a perfection or an excellence, whether in ourselves or in something else'', from 'On Wisdom', L 425; ''I believe that fundamentally pleasure is a sense of perfection, and pain a sense of imperfection, each being notable enough for one to become aware of it'', from *Nouveaux Essais*, G V, 180.

[15] ''By *perfection* I mean every simple quality which is positive and absolute, or which expresses whatever it expresses without any limits'', from 'Two Notions for Discussion with Spinoza', L 167; ''*perfection* is degree or quantity of reality or essence, as *intensity* is degree of quality and *force* is degree of action', from Letter to Arnold Eckhard, Summer 1677, L 177; ''*perfection* being nothing but the quantity of positive reality taken strictly, when we put aside the limits or bounds in the things which are limited'', from *Monadology*, §41, L 647; ''Perfection . . . is the degree of positive reality, or . . . the degree of affirmative intelligibility, so that something more perfect is something in which more things worthy of observation are found'', from Leibniz to Wolff, Winter 1714–15, in *Philosophical Essays*, ed. Roger Ariew and Daniel Garber (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1989), p. 230.

[16] See 'On Wisdom', L 426; and Leibniz to Wolff, April 2, 1715, G 231; and especially Leibniz to Wolff, May 18, 1715, G 233–4: ''Perfection is the harmony of things . . . that is, the state of agreement or identity in variety . . .''.

For Leibniz, then, beauty is both a subjective and objective quality. It is subjective insofar as it involves the feeling of pleasure; but it is also objective insofar as it is a perception of a structural feature of a thing, namely, its harmony or unity in variety. Beauty is therefore fundamentally relational, referring to how a subject reacts to specific features of an object or how these specific features act upon the subject. Hence Leibniz's definition puts him on the middle ground between those modern empiricists who made beauty a completely subjective quality, and those classical thinkers who simply identified beauty with harmony, symmetry, and proportion. In following this middle path Leibniz anticipates the entire tradition of aesthetic rationalism, which will also regard beauty as a relation between subject and object.

It is noteworthy that Leibniz's definition makes beauty a specific kind of pleasure. Beauty, like all pleasure, arises from the perception of perfection; but it is the specific kind of pleasure that arises from the *contemplation* of an object. We contemplate an object when we value its qualities for its own sake, apart from any interest we have in using or consuming the object. Physical pleasures too arise from perceiving the perfections of objects, viz., their power to stimulate or nourish us; but they are not forms of *aesthetic* pleasure because they do not arise from the contemplation of an object but an interest in using or consuming it.

Leibniz's emphasis upon contemplation does not mean, however, that he somehow anticipates Kant in thinking that aesthetic pleasure is disinterested, completely distinct from the desire. Rather, he expressly maintains, as a true disciple of Diotima, that the perception of beauty gives rise to love.[17] Whenever we take pleasure in the perfection, well-being, or happiness of some other animate or rational being, we love that being.[18] We do not love all beauty, however, because some inanimate objects can be beautiful and we do not love them; we talk about love for inanimate objects, viz., a painting, only by extension. However, whenever we are aware of the perfection of another animate or rational being and value it for its own sake—whenever, in other words, we are aware of its beauty—we love it.

It is also important to see that Leibniz does not limit beauty to the sensible world, as if it were restricted to what we perceive through the senses. We must not confuse his view with that of many of his successors—Baumgarten, Meier, Sulzer, and Mendelssohn—who held that beauty is the *sensate* perception of perfection. Although he thinks that all contemplative pleasure involves beauty, he does not limit such pleasure to the sensible or physical world; it is not

[17] 'On Wisdom', L 426.

[18] 'Elements of Natural Law', L 137; and *Nouveaux Essais*, G, V 149–50.

a feeling characteristic of our sensible or physical nature alone. Rather, he maintains that there are purely *intellectual* pleasures, specifically those that come from the contemplation of the harmony of the universe. The greatest pleasure of all is the beautific vision, which is the intuition of God face to face from the contemplation of "the harmony of things or the principle of beauty in them".[19]

So far is Leibniz from making pleasure sensible that he makes intellectual pleasure the paradigm of all pleasure. Hence he maintains that perfection consists in harmony, which we grasp through the intellect alone. Sensible pleasures are agreeable to us only because they are a subconscious and confused form of intellectual perception of harmony. Hence Leibniz writes in his *Principes de la Nature et de la Grace* that "The pleasures of the senses reduce to intellectual pleasures known confusedly." Music charms us, for example, because its beauty consists only in "the harmonies of numbers and . . . a calculation concerning the beats or vibrations of sounding bodies".[20]

3. Analysis of Sense

Crucial for Leibniz's aesthetic views is his account of sensible qualities in general. While Leibniz did not limit beauty to the pleasures of sense, he fully recognized that many characteristic aesthetic qualities are sensible. Leibniz's account of sensible qualities is fundamental for the entire rationalist aesthetic tradition, especially for those who held that beauty is a sensible pleasure.

Sensible qualities, Leibniz wrote Sophie Charlotte, are occult.[21] Rather than understanding only these qualities, as empiricists hold, we understand them less than any other. We use our senses, Leibniz says, like a blind man uses his stick. They help us to distinguish objects on the basis of colors, sounds, odors, and flavors; but they do not see into the essence of these qualities themselves. For these qualities consist in *insensible* parts, elements indiscernible by the senses themselves, viz., vibrations in the air or the motions of particles. We can know these parts only by inference; and we do not understand how their activity produces the characteristic qualities of sense; for example, why just this refraction of light makes us see red rather than blue. Sense qualities are indeed so mysterious, Leibniz argues, that we cannot provide even nominal definitions of them. A nominal definition is one whose marks or signs are sufficient to recognize one thing and to distinguish it from other things. But

[19] L 109. [20] *Principes de la Nature et de la Grace*, §17; G VI, 605.
[21] Letter to Sophie Charlotte, G, VI, 499–500.

we cannot recognize any sense quality simply by means of marks or signs alone; we have to actually sense the quality before we understand what we are talking about. If we want to know what blue is, for example, we have to see it directly. By means of signs alone we are no better off than a blind man.

Leibniz's analysis of sense qualities presupposes his general taxonomy of ideas, which he outlines in his 'Meditationes de Cognitione, Veritate et Ideis'.[22] According to his classification, all knowledge is either obscure or clear. An idea is obscure if it is not sufficient to recognize something and to distinguish it from other things. For example, I have an obscure idea of a buttercup when I cannot distinguish it from daisies and petunias. An idea is clear, however, if it is sufficient to recognize a thing and to distinguish it from others. All clear ideas, Leibniz adds, are either confused or distinct. An idea is confused if it is not possible to enumerate one by one all the marks or properties that distinguish it from other things; it is distinct, however, if I can so enumerate them. A distinct idea, he writes, is like a chemist's idea of gold; from its malleability and solvability in *aqua regia* he distinguishes it from all other metals. All distinct ideas, Leibniz further explains, are either adequate or inadequate. They are adequate when it is possible to enumerate what is involved in each of their characteristics, inadequate when this is not possible. The chemist would also have an adequate knowledge of gold, for example, if he could specify what is involved in its distinguishing characteristics; for example, if he could explain precisely in what malleability and solvability in *aqua regia* consists. Adequate knowledge therefore consists in a distinct knowledge of each distinguishing characteristic, or, as Leibniz puts it, "when everything that enters into a distinct notion is, again, distinctly known".

Following this taxonomy, Leibniz holds that sense qualities are clear but confused.[23] They are clear because we recognize them immediately and distinguish them from one another; but they are confused because we cannot explain in what they consist or enumerate their distinguishing characteristics. Sense qualities are therefore primitive, because, even though we can determine their causes, viz., light rays and sound waves, we cannot define them in terms of further characteristics or properties. Leibniz thinks that sense qualities are confused not only because they are *indefinable*, but also because they are *composite*, i.e., they consist in the combination of many separate elements. What we perceive are, for example, many vibrations or particles interacting with one another; but the senses confuse them in the sense that they unite them and see them as one thing, though in fact they are many things acting

[22] G, IV, 422–6.
[23] 'Meditationes', G IV, 422–3 and Letter to Sophie Charlotte, G, VI, 499–500.

together. It is the very essence of the senses to confuse things, Leibniz holds, i.e., to perceive together and at once many different things that are happening separately and in succession. For example, the senses see a spinning wheel as transparent when its rotation in fact consists in the rapid succession of many teeth and gaps. Hence to be confused is literally to be fused together, for many things to be seen as one.

Although Leibniz thinks that the senses confuse things, he still holds that they provide some form of cognition of reality, even if it is a dim and weak kind. If we were to analyze sense qualities into their causes and components, he maintains, we would eventually discover reality itself.[24] They are appearances and effects of this reality, arising of necessity from it, from the aggregation of the many insensible parts; they are not therefore simply illusions. They are what he calls "*phaenomena bene fundata*", i.e., appearances well founded in reality or based upon nature, just as the colors of a rainbow arise naturally from the reflection of the sun through rain drops.[25] Sense qualities give us knowledge of reality, Leibniz explains, in virtue of a *formal similarity* between them and their causes. Contrary to Locke, he thinks that even so-called "secondary qualities", viz., colors, tastes, and odors, have some likeness with their objects. Although reality in itself is purely intelligible, sense qualities have an underlying formal substratum or structure that resembles their intelligible causes and components. Leibniz uses the concept of "expression" to define the resemblance between sense qualities and their causes. "One thing expresses another", he explains, "when there is a constant and regular relation between what can be said about one and about the other."[26] A projection in perspective, for example, expresses a geometric figure. Alternatively, he defines expression as follows: "That is said to express a thing in which there are relations which correspond to the relations of the thing expressed."[27] This means that we can pass from a consideration of the relations in the expression to knowledge of the thing expressed. Hence from the qualities given to our senses—if we could only analyze them sufficiently—we could make inferences about the nature of reality itself. Leibniz is explicit that expression is common to all forms of knowledge, the genus of which natural perception, animal feeling, and intellectual knowledge are species.

Leibniz's analysis of the senses had ambiguous implications for the cognitive status of sensible aesthetic experience. On the one hand, it means that, however

[24] Leibniz to Foucher, 1676, G I, 373.
[25] Leibniz to de Volder, 1704–5, G II, 276; and to Arnauld, October 9, 1687, G II, 118.
[26] Leibniz to Arnauld, October 9, 1687, G, II, 112.
[27] 'Quid sit Idea', G, VII, 263.

confused, such experience still offers some insight into reality itself. Like all sense experience, it is an expression of its cause, and so has some formal similarity to it. On the other hand, however, aesthetic experience, by virtue of its very confusion, is still measured by the standard of intellectual cognition and found wanting; it remains on a lower level than intellectual cognition. The senses are simply a *confused* form of what we could or should know through complete analysis by reason alone. So, although Leibniz did give aesthetic experience some cognitive significance, it was of a very diminished kind: *confused* intellectual cognition. Apart from the pleasure they provide, then, the arts are dispensable as a form of cognition. All the knowledge they merely suggest and adumbrate is more accurately developed by the sciences.

In a few places Leibniz applies his analysis of sense qualities to aesthetic experience. It is the characteristic confusion of sense, he explains in the *Discours de métaphysique*, that accounts for the ineffability of aesthetic experience, the fact that we cannot precisely identify what pleases us.[28] That special ‘‘Je ne sais quoi’’ of a poem or picture comes from our incapacity to define its sense qualities. If we were to analyze these qualities into their components, they would lose their aesthetic appeal entirely. Hence Leibniz writes in the *Nouveaux Essais*:

> it is self-contradictory to want these confused images to persist while wanting their components to be discerned by the imagination itself. It is like wanting to enjoy being deceived by some charming perspective and wanting to see through the deception at the same time—which would spoil the effect. (G V, 384)

Leibniz’s recognition of the ‘‘Je ne sais quoi’’ is significant because it amounts to an admission that reason finds some limit in sensible aesthetic experience. The ‘‘Je ne sais quoi’’ is that which cannot be precisely identified, analyzed, or defined by the intellect; we destroy it in the very attempt to explain it. Yet Leibniz’s admission of the ‘‘Je ne sais quoi’’ apparently made him uneasy. If he accepts it in some passages, he denies it in others. He seems to deny it in those where he implies that the pleasure of aesthetic experience is derivative from its intellectual substructure. Hence in *Principes de la Nature et de la Grace* Leibniz writes that ‘‘The pleasures of the senses reduce to intellectual pleasures known confusedly.’’[29] In still another passage from ‘‘De affectibus’ he states that true beauty would be that which remains after analysis, when all its elements are clearly and distinctly perceived.[30] The two doctrines are in tension; for if aesthetic pleasure is in principle entirely reducible to intellectual pleasure, as Leibniz implies, there is no place for the ‘‘Je ne sais quoi’’ as a source of

[28] §24, G, IV, 449; cf. ‘Meditationes’, IV, 423.

[29] *Principes de la Nature de la Grace*, §17; G VI, 605.

[30] ‘De affectibus’, AA VI/4, 1415.

pleasure that comes from the senses. Leibniz seems to make the confusion of the senses both a necessary condition and obstacle of aesthetic pleasure. As we shall soon see, Leibniz bequeathed his uneasiness to later generations. This tension resurfaces in many of his successors, who hold that intellectual analysis both destroys and heightens the pleasure of aesthetic experience.

4. The Classical Trinity

One of the most important legacies Leibniz bequeathed to aesthetic rationalism was the principle of 'the classical trinity', i.e., the unity of truth, beauty and goodness. Although Leibniz does not explicitly defend or elaborate this principle, it is essential to and implicit in his entire metaphysics. This principle was not his innovation, of course, because it goes back to the Platonic tradition; it also resurfaces in the Middle Ages, especially in the Thomist tradition. Leibniz simply resurrected the principle after it had been eclipsed by Protestant theology, whose nominalism had undercut the essentialism or conceptual realism behind it. The principle later became one of the cardinal doctrines of aesthetic rationalism. The trinity is essential to the aesthetics of Wolff, Gottsched, Baumgarten, Meier, and Mendelssohn.

Allegiance to the classical trinity is one of the features that distinguishes aesthetic rationalism from the Kantian tradition. It was one of the remarkable feats of Kant's *Kritik der Urteilskraft* that it tore apart the classical trinity, utterly sundering the realms of goodness, truth, and beauty. In his first five paragraphs Kant makes his fateful distinctions between aesthetic, moral, and cognitive judgment. Since aesthetic judgments concern only a feeling of pleasure, Kant argues, they do not refer to anything whatsoever in their objects; they are not, therefore, cognitive judgments, which must be about the objective properties of things.[31] Thus Kant severs the ties between beauty and truth. Since, Kant further argues, aesthetic judgments are disinterested, independent of whether I desire the existence of the object, they are also not moral judgments, which are always committed to the existence of their object.[32] On the basis of these arguments alone Kant concludes in paragraph 5 that the realms of truth, beauty, and goodness are utterly separate.

Since Kant's distinctions, and the doctrine of aesthetic autonomy founded upon them, have become so prevalent, and since they seem virtually commonsensical, it is difficult for us now to conceive the alternative to them,

[31] *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, §1; V, 203–4. [32] Ibid., §4; V, 207–8.

even though the trinity was the predominant doctrine for millennia. It is worthwhile, then, to recover Leibniz's rationale for reinstating the trinity. This will clarify some of the basic assumptions of aesthetic rationalism as well as Kantian aesthetics.

What holds together the classical trinity for Leibniz—the cement that welds its elements into one—is his crucial but difficult concept of perfection. True to the scholastic tradition,[33] Leibniz identifies perfection with the positive reality of a thing, its essence insofar as it is not restricted or limited by something else. Imperfection is the negative reality of a thing, that which limits its essence and hinders it from realizing its essence. We then measure perfection or imperfection by two variables: by the degree of positive reality of the essence itself; and by the extent to which the thing realizes or actualizes that essence, however limited it might be. Hence perfection does involve a standard to evaluate things; it is not, however, an *external* standard, which we apply to things to see if they are useful for our purposes, but an *internal* standard, which we derive from the very nature of the thing itself; in other words, we measure the degree of perfection by seeing whether a thing realizes or actualizes *its* essence. Since perfection manifests itself as the power to unite a manifold, we can also measure it by the degree of harmony, so that the greater the harmony—the more things are united into one—the greater the perfection.

Understood in this sense, it is easy to see how the concept of perfection unites truth, beauty, and goodness. Perfection is truth in the sense that it is the reality of a thing, and in the sense that its order provides the criterion to distinguish between truth and falsehood, reality and illusion.[34] Perfection is goodness, because goodness consists in self-realization, actualizing the nature or essence of a thing. Finally, perfection is beauty, because beauty is harmony and the pleasure we take in contemplating it.

Leibniz would never have accepted, then, Kant's distinctions between the forms of judgment. For him, aesthetic judgment is a form of cognition because pleasure derives from the perception of perfection, which is an objective quality in a thing, its harmonious structure. Aesthetic judgment is also a form of moral judgment, because to say something is beautiful implies that it is perfect and therefore desirable. In general, Leibniz thinks that it is impossible for an object of choice to be perfect—the best of all options—and for someone not to will

[33] See Aquinas, *Summa theologica* I, q. iv, a 1: "a thing is said to be perfect in proportion to its actuality."

[34] Leibniz stresses the importance of order as a criterion of reality in his 'De modo distinguendi phaenomena realia ab imaginaribus', G VII, 319–22; L 363–6.

it. He maintains that the will is simply the power that strives to realize what the intellect regards as good; a will without motive or reason, indifferent to good or evil, is a mere fiction.[35]

There are two fundamental premises behind Leibniz's attempt to revive the classical trinity. The first is his essentialism, i.e., the doctrine that the distinction between good and evil, beauty and ugliness, is based on the very essence or nature of things. According to this doctrine, goodness and evil, beauty and ugliness, have their own proper objective natures which are independent of the will or taste in approving or disapproving them. Something is good or beautiful in itself; we will it because it is good, or we like it because it is beautiful; it is not that it is good simply because we will it, or that it is beautiful simply because we like it. Leibniz argues that if the will or taste alone were to determine the goodness or beauty of a thing, then one and the same thing could be good or bad, beautiful or ugly, depending on the whims of our will and taste. The second basic premise is Leibniz's teleology, his identification of the essence or nature of a thing with its purpose. Following Aristotle, Leibniz identifies formal with final causes, so that the purpose of a thing is to realize its essential form or essence. His definition of substance in terms of force is a self-conscious revival of the Aristotelian entelechy.[36]

Both of these premises are contested by Kant. First, he regards Leibniz's essentialism as a form of hypostasis, the chief fallacy of pure reason, which mistakes a necessity in our thinking for a necessity in things. Contrary to Leibniz, Kant maintains that what makes something valuable is the rational will alone, and that we have no reason to assume that there is value inherent in things, prior to the ends of rational agents.[37] Second, he questions whether it is possible to ascribe purposes to anything but rational agents. We have no evidence that non-rational animate beings act for purposes, because they are not conscious or rational;[38] and it is nonsense to assume that inanimate beings are purposive, because this violates the law of inertia,

[35] See 'A New Method for Learning and Teaching Jurisprudence', §31: "to will is nothing but to think of the goodness of a thing" (L 88); and Leibniz's 'Fourth Letter to Clarke': "A mere will without any motive is a fiction", "In things absolutely indifferent there is no foundation for choice, and consequently no election or will, since choice must be founded on some reason or principle" (G VII, 371; L 687).

[36] See Leibniz, *Nouveaux Essais*, G V, 155, Livre I, chap. xxi, §1.

[37] This is, of course, only one side of Kant, his voluntarist side. There is another more intellectualist or realist side of Kant. Thus he insists that the will of God is not the source of the authority of the moral law. See KrV B 846–7. On the more Platonic side of Kant's philosophy, see Patrick Riley, *Kant's Political Philosophy* (Totowa, NJ: Rowman & Littlefield, 1983), pp. 1–63.

[38] Kant makes this argument in his 'Ueber den Gebrauch teleologischer Prinzipien in der Philosophie', *Schriften*, VIII, 181.

according to which things act only if they are acted upon by external causes.[39]

While Kant's critique directly meets Leibniz, it is important to see that it has less effect against his successors in the rationalist tradition. They indeed embrace the trinitarian principle; but they do not entirely follow Leibniz in the foundation that they provide for it. Although they are indeed essentialists, they are less enthusiastic about Leibniz's teleology, which seemed to reintroduce the old scholastic essences and final causes into physics. One of the most important respects in which the rationalist tradition departs from its grandfather is in its attempt to bracket the whole question of teleology. Under the influence of Wolff, Gottsched and Baumgarten will attempt to leave aside final causes, and to interpret the concept of perfection purely formally, so that it refers to the formal structure of an object alone. We shall see in later chapters how this important difference between Leibniz and his successors was ignored by Kant and how it diminished his critique of the rationalist tradition.

[39] See *Metaphysische Anfangsgründe der Naturwissenschaften* IV, 543. Cf. *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, §§65, 73; V, 374–5, 394–5.

2

Wolff and the Birth of Aesthetic Rationalism

1. Wolff and the Aesthetic Tradition

Standard histories of aesthetics give little or no place to Christian Wolff (1679–1754).[1] If he is mentioned at all, it is usually as a transmitter of Leibniz or as a forerunner of Baumgarten. It has sometimes been noted that Wolff had a profound influence on some thinkers in the German aesthetic tradition; but this has been regarded as a paradox, because Wolff's philosophy is so rationalistic, and because Wolff was such "a philistine", someone "singularly lacking in sensitivity and taste".[2] It has been regarded almost as self-evident that Wolff wrote nothing about the arts.

It would be wrong to suggest that Wolff has been completely forgotten. He found a powerful—if notorious—champion in Alfred Baeumler, one of the leading German aestheticians of the Weimar years but later a fanatical Nazi spokesman. In his influential *Kants Kritik der Urteilskraft*,[3] a lengthy study of the precedents of Kant's work, Baeumler devoted several sections to Wolff. He stressed his fundamental importance for the development of German aesthetics, and in one passage even declared him to be "the grandfather of German aesthetics".[4] Baeumler was reacting against literary histories of

[1] All references to Wolff's works will be to the now standard edition, *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. II/12, ed. Jean École, J. E. Hofmann, M. Thomann, and H. W. Arndt (Hildesheim: Olms, 1968), p. 742. Roman numerals before the slash (/) indicate the Abteilung or Part, 'I' for the German works and 'II' for the Latin works; arabic numerals after the slash indicate volume numbers. Whenever possible, for precision and ease of reference, Wolff's own paragraph numbers, indicated by the German paragraph sign ('§'), are also cited. 'S' stands for Scholium.

[2] This is the view of L. W. Beck in his influential *Early German Philosophy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1969), pp. 278–9.

[3] *Kants Kritik der Urteilskraft: Ihre Geschichte und Systematik* (Halle: Niemeyer, 1923). The full title of volume I is *Das Irrationalitätsproblem in der Aesthetik und Logik des 18. Jahrhunderts bis zur Kritik der Urteilskraft*. Only volume I appeared.

[4] Ibid., p. 66.

German aesthetics that had neglected indigenous sources and focused instead on English, French, and Italian influences. Although Baeumler's revival of Wolff was in the service of his nationalism, it must be said that he had a point in stressing Wolff's influence, which had been indeed unduly neglected.

To assess Wolff's place in the history of German aesthetics, it is important to avoid anachronism. Both those who ignore and belittle Wolff, and those who emphasize and elevate him, flirt with this danger. The problem is that the modern concept of the fine arts, the subject matter of aesthetics, has no equivalent whatsoever in the first half of the eighteenth century in Germany. The modern concept, whose birthplace is generally considered to be Abbé Batteux's *Les beaux arts réduits à un même principe* (1746), does not become widespread until the middle of the eighteenth century.[5] Before Batteux's treatise, and indeed for a while after it, German thinkers worked with the older classical conception of art as any intelligent activity of producing things; and they followed the traditional distinction between the manual arts (*artes vulgares*), which worked with the hands, and the liberal arts (*artes liberales*), which used the mind.[6] If, then, we are to speak strictly, it is false to regard Wolff as the father of aesthetics if only because he had no concept of the fine arts, the subject matter of aesthetics in the modern sense. By the same token, however, it is silly to charge Wolff with philistinism; for on these grounds everyone in Germany prior to the general acceptance of Batteux's concept would be guilty of the same intellectual sin.

Although Wolff, like everyone of his generation, had no concept of the fine arts, he was still one of the most influential thinkers in the formation of the German aesthetic tradition. Virtually every aspect of Wolff's system—his metaphysics, ethics, psychology, and logic—were foundational for aesthetic rationalism. Gottsched, Baumgarten, Meier, and Mendelssohn base their aesthetics on Wolffian doctrines. Even Bodmer and Breitinger, despite their later break with rationalist aesthetics, were enthusiastic Wolffians in their early years. Of course, Wolff himself was no great innovator; but even his role as a transmitter of Leibnizian *Gedankengut* should not be underestimated. Few in

[5] Charles Batteux, *Les Beaux Arts réduits à un même principe* (Paris: Saillant & Nyon, 1746). On Batteux's importance, see Paul Kristeller, 'The Modern System of the Arts', in *Renaissance Thought and the Arts* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), pp. 163–227; and Wladyslaw Tatarkiewicz, *A History of Six Ideas* (Warsaw: Polish Scientific Publishers, 1980), pp. 11–23.

[6] The meaning of the liberal arts was very unsettled and vague in early eighteenth-century Germany. See J. G. Walch, *Philosophisches Lexicon* (Leipzig: J. F. Gleditsch, 1740), Sp. 1599, and J. A. Fabricius, *Abriß der allgemeinen Historie der Gelehrsamkeit* (Leipzig: Weidmann, 1752), I, §XXVII. Both Walch and Fabricius complain about the persistent vagueness of the term. Wolff adopted the traditional distinction between the liberal and illiberal arts, though he is critical of it because he does not think that the liberal arts are superior to the illiberal ones. See his *Philosophia moralis sive ethica*, §§483; II/12, 742–3.

the early eighteenth century had access to Leibniz's scattered and occasional fragments, which would remain unpublished for generations;, but everyone would have read Wolff's German or Latin treatises, each of which went through many editions. If people knew Leibniz at all, they most probably saw him through Wolffian lenses. In any case, it is a serious mistake to regard Wolff merely as Leibniz's disciple.[7] For good reasons, Wolff stressed his independence from Leibniz, and repudiated the label 'Leibnizian–Wolffian philosophy', which falsely suggested a single common doctrine.[8] Wolff was influenced as much by Tschirnhaus and Descartes; and, on important issues, he departs from Leibniz. Indeed, as we shall soon see, his departures from Leibniz are important for the development of aesthetic thought.

The fact that Wolff had such a great influence on the development of aesthetics is no irony or paradox at all. This is not the strange case of a philistine inspiring the flowering of poetics. For the truth of the matter is that Wolff gave the greatest importance to the arts—understood in the broad classical sense—and assigned them a central place in his system. Furthermore, he developed a general theory of the arts, a detailed theory of the imagination, and an explicit theory of beauty. All these theories were absorbed by Wolff's successors; and their enthusiastic endorsement and appropriation of them go a long way toward explaining Wolff's immense influence on the German aesthetic tradition. The only people who have lost sight of them, it seems, have been historians of aesthetics.

The common claim that Wolff wrote nothing about the fine arts—to think anachronistically for a moment—is simply false. The reason why scholars make this blunder is that they look in the wrong place. They note that Wolff wrote no poetics, and they expect him to have one, because poetry was the center of attention in the early eighteenth century. Here they follow the complaints of many of Wolff's successors, who felt his lack of a poetics to be a glaring gap in his system. However, it is unfair to demand a poetics of Wolff when most of his interest in the fine arts lay elsewhere. Everyone who writes about aesthetics has his paradigm or favorite art, and Wolff was no exception. His paradigmatic art was not poetry but architecture. He gave such importance to it that he wrote a treatise about it, his *Elementa architecturae civilis*, which appeared in 1738

[7] On the complicated question of Wolff's relationship with Leibniz, which cannot be pursued here, see Walther Arnsperger, *Christian Wolffs Verhaltnis zu Leibniz* (Weimar: Felber, 1897); Max Wundt, *Die deutsche Philosophie im Zeitalter der Aufklärung* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1945), pp. 139–41, 150–2; and Charles Corr, 'Christian Wolff and Leibniz', *Journal of the History of Ideas* 36 (1975), 241–62.

[8] See *Christian Wolffs eigene Lebensbeschreibung*, ed. H. Wuttke (Leipzig: Weidmann, 1841), pp. 41–2; and the 'Vorrede' (unpaginated) to *Ausführliche Nachricht von seinen eigenen Schriften* (1726), in *Werke*, I/9.

as the second part of volume IV of his *Elementa matheseos universae*,[9] the most common textbook on mathematics in eighteenth-century Germany.

So if it were not so anachronistic, it would be fitting to give Wolff the title "father of German aesthetics". That honor, for reasons we shall examine later, is usually conferred upon Baumgarten.[10] But this reputation is problematic because everything that can be said for and against Baumgarten wearing this crown also applies to Wolff. Baumgarten too has no conception of the fine arts; and his own theory of the arts closely follows Wolff. Only one curious and accidental fact has bestowed this title on Baumgarten: namely, the catchy title of his chief treatise, *Aesthetica*. It was Baumgarten rather than Wolff who baptized the modern discipline. But the irony here is that it is a similarity in name only; Baumgarten's conception of the arts is essentially Wolffian.

The aesthetic aspect of Wolff's philosophy emerges not only from the importance he gave to the arts, but also from the central role he assigns to beauty in his ethics. There is a profound aesthetic dimension to his account of the highest good. Wolff defined the highest good as constant progress toward perfection.[11] Like Leibniz, however, he never makes a sharp distinction between perfection and pleasure. Pleasure for him consists in nothing less than the awareness of perfection, so that the more we progress toward perfection the more our lives grow in pleasure.[12] Pleasure therefore serves as the stimulus, encouragement, or inducement for striving toward perfection. The aesthetic dimension of this account of the highest good becomes apparent as soon as we consider Wolff's account of beauty. Beauty consists in nothing less than the awareness of perfection, so that whenever we perfect ourselves we also perceive beauty itself.[13] So, just as Diotima taught in the *Symposium*, beauty is that which spurns us to attain the good. This erotic aspect of Wolff's philosophy, though never made fully explicit by him, is omnipresent and unmistakable, and it had the greatest influence on the younger generation. We shall see below how two younger Wolffians—Gottsched and Mendelssohn—made it more explicit.

Wolff occupies a very specific place in the German aesthetic tradition. He represents the pure case of rationalism, the absolute neo-classical thesis that makes no allowances for the irrational. Wolff fits this role better than Leibniz, who, for all his rationalism, sometimes admits the "je ne sais quoi", the indefinable aspect of aesthetic experience that eludes all rational analysis and definition. But where Leibniz makes such concessions Wolff is utterly

[9] See Tomus IV, *Elementa matheseos universae*, *Werke*, II/32, 383–488.
[10] See Chapter 5.1, below.
[11] Wolff, *Ethik*, §44; I/432; and *Philosophia practica universalis*, §374; II/10, 374.
[12] See *Philosophia practica universalis*, §§393, 395; II/10, 305, 306.
[13] See *Psychologia empirica*, §544; II/5, 420. See below, 2.4.

uncompromising. He maintains that aesthetic pleasure consists in the perception of a perfection, where perfection is a completely rational quality: harmony, unity-in-variety, the unification of many particulars under a single universal concept or rule. All confusion is for Wolff a defect, an imperfection,[14] and consequently no source of aesthetic pleasure. There is no place whatsoever in Wolff's ontology for the ineffable individual, because the identity of an individual is constituted entirely by its properties, the concepts that are predicable of it.[15]

Wolff's aesthetic rationalism has to be understood as one aspect of his general philosophical program. Philosophy could become a science, he believed, only if it followed the mathematical method, beginning with self-evident first principles, clear and precise definitions, and then making rigorous deductions from them.[16] Wolff wanted to apply this methodology to every discipline, not least the arts themselves. They too could become perfect sciences, he believed, if only we applied the mathematical method to them. Insofar as the arts were rational activities, they could be reduced to a few fundamental principles from which all their more specific rules could be derived. Wolff's example of how to mathematicize the arts is his *Elementa architecturae civilis*, where he formulates the principles, and resolves the problems, of architecture in strict geometric manner.

To many of us, who are accustomed to the modern distinction between the arts and sciences, nothing seems more deadening for an art than to turn it into a science, and worst of all a mathematical system. But, for any aspiring critic and poet in the early eighteenth century, who knew no such distinction, Wolff's program was the very fount of inspiration, the model for a new poetics.[17] Gottsched, Baumgarten, and Meier—Lessing too in the drafts for his *Laokoon*—all followed Wolff's lead; and the young Bodmer and Breitinger,

[14] See *Philosophia Prima sive Ontologia*, §485; II/3, 369.

[15] Ibid., §§181, 183, 186, 187; II/3, 148, 149, 151–2, 152. Cf. *Vernünfftige Gedancken von Gott, der Welt und die Seele des Menschen, auch allen Dingen überhaupt*, §§586–9; I/2, 361–4. (Henceforth this work will be referred to as *Metaphysik*.)

[16] See the *Discursus praeliminarius* to his *Logica*, §§118–19, 130; II/1.1, 54–5, 64. The precise sense in which mathematical methods are applicable to philosophy was a crucial issue for Wolff and his entire age. On this issue and Wolff's responses to it, see H. J. de Vleeschauwer, 'La Genèse de la méthode mathématique de Wolff', *Revue Belge de Philologie et d'Histoire* 11 (1932), 651–77; Giorgio Tonelli, 'Der Streit über die mathematische Methode in der Philosophie in der ersten Hälfte des 18. Jahrhunderts und die Entstehung von Kants Schrift über die Deutlichkeit', *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie* 9 (1959), 37–66; and Charles Corr, 'Christian Wolffs Treatment of Scientific Discovery', *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 10 (1972), 323–34.

[17] It was for some also the foundation for a new musicology. Wolff's influence in this direction has been charted by Joachim Birke, *Christian Wolffs Metaphysik und die zeitgenössische Literatur- und Musiktheorie: Gottsched, Scheibe, Mizler* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1966).

for all their insistence on the role of imagination, were loyal Wolffians in conceiving their poetics in mathematical form. All these thinkers wanted to do for poetics what Wolff had already done for philosophy: to bring it into systematic form, to justify its basic rules from higher principles. If criticism were a rational activity, they argued, then it should be possible to formulate and systematize the reasons behind it.

If we were to summarize Wolff's significance for the history of aesthetics, it would be necessary to stress at least three developments. First, Wolff denies the classical distinction between contemplation and action, thinking and doing, which had colored all thinking about the arts since antiquity. Following Bacon, who was an important inspiration for all his thinking, Wolff joins the realms of knowing and acting, so that knowledge depends on action, where action consists primarily in the productive activity of the arts.[18] This elevates the stature of the arts from their lowly role in antiquity, where they merely imitated appearances and where philosophy alone grasped the intelligible principles of things; now the arts become necessary instruments of philosophy itself. Second, Wolff's epistemology frees the artist's imagination from the constraints of the principle of imitation; since his epistemology extends truth to the realm of possible worlds, the artist remains within the realm of truth if he creates a possible world; it is not necessary, then, for him to copy the real world. "A novel", Wolff said in a celebrated dictum, is "the history of a possible world".[19] Third, Wolff makes the first principle of the arts the principle of sufficient reason rather than the principle of imitation. Applied to the arts, the principle of sufficient reason means that the artist should have a carefully conceived plan where every part plays a necessary role in the whole. This principle, rather than the principle of imitation, is the fundamental principle of Wolff's neo-classicism, and indeed of neo-classicism in general.

2. Theory of the Arts

Although Wolff, like everyone else in his age, had no concept of the fine arts, he was still among the first to conceive and advocate a philosophy of the arts. In his *Discursus praeliminarius* (1728), a programmatic statement of

[18] This practical side of Wolff's philosophizing has been rightly stressed by Hans Wolff, *Die Weltanschauung der deutschen Aufklärung* (Berne: Francke, 1963), pp. 115–19; and Charles Corr, 'Certitude and Utility in the Philosophy of Christian Wolff', *The Southwestern Journal of Philosophy* 1 (1970), 133–42.

[19] *Metaphysik*, §571; I/2, 349–50.

his philosophy as a whole,[20] Wolff envisages a philosophy of the arts whose business is to explain and systematize them. The task of this philosophy will be to formulate the rules behind each of the arts and to derive them from higher principles. Wolff complains repeatedly that such a philosophy has been entirely neglected (§§39, 71; II/1.1, 18, 33). In his *Ethik* he goes so far as to argue that we have a duty to develop a philosophy of the arts. Since we have a duty to do everything that perfects ourselves and our condition in life, and since the arts are so important in improving our condition, we have a duty to have as good a knowledge of the arts as possible.[21]

Wolff calls his philosophy of the arts "technology" (*technologia*), which he defines as "the science of the arts and of the works of art" (*scientia artium & operum artis*). It will be the business of technology, he explains, to determine "the reason for the rules of art and the works produced by art" (§71; 33). He seems to conceive technology specifically as a science of the *manual* arts, because he writes that it is "a science of that which one produces by using the organs of the body, especially the hands" (§71; 33). However, he by no means limits technology to the manual arts, because he also explicitly states that it covers "the liberal arts", among which he includes grammar, rhetoric, and poetry (§72; 33–4). Hence Wolff conceives his philosophy of the arts in very broad terms so that it comprises all the arts, manual as well as liberal. This coincides with his very general concept of art, which he defines in the wide classical sense as *any* aptitude or skill at producing things.[22] True to this definition, he cites the most diverse activities as examples of art, not only architecture and poetry, but also woodcutting, medicine, and agriculture. It is this broad classical sense of art that is involved in Wolff's conception of technology. To understand what Wolff means by "technology", then, we must set aside all the narrow modern connotations of the term, which associate it with industry, and we should recall instead the original broader meaning of the root "*téchn*-", which refers to the arts in the widest sense.

In his *Discursus praeliminarius* Wolff does not simply propose a philosophy of the arts, but provides an explicit argument for why there can be such a philosophy (§§39–40; 18–19). He conceives philosophy in general as the

[20] *Discursus praeliminarius de philosophia in genere*, in *Werke*, II/1.1. All references above are first to the paragraph number, then the page number of this edition. This work has been translated by Richard Blackwell, *Preliminary Discourse on Philosophy in General* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1963). Although Wolff outlines his science of technology only in the *Discursus*, he discusses the arts in other works. See especially *Philosophia moralis sive ethica*, §§483–92; *Werke*, II/12, 742–52. Wolff promised a philosophy of art as the sequel to his physics but postponed it to write his Latin works. See the 'Vorrede' to 'Teil III' of *Allerhand nützliche Versuche, dadurch zu genauer Erkäntnis der Natur und der Kunst der Weg gebahnet wird*, *Werke*, I/20.3.

[21] *Ethik*, §§368–9; I/4, 243–4.

[22] *Ethik*, §§366–7; I/4, 242–3.

knowledge of the reasons for things (§6; 3). More specifically, he contrasts philosophical with historical knowledge: historical knowledge consists in knowing *that* something happens, whereas philosophical knowledge consists in knowing *why* it happens (§7; 3). There can be a philosophy of any activity whatsoever, then, provided that there are reasons for it. Sure enough, Wolff insists that there are reasons behind all the activities in the arts (§§39–40; 18–19). They are fundamentally rational activities because they set definite ends and determine the most effective means to them; there are always reasons why they do things in one way rather than another. All these activities follow, even if implicitly and subconsciously, specific rules, which are guidelines about the most effective means to achieve their ends. Since, then, there can be a philosophy of any rational activity, and since the arts are rational activities, there can be a philosophy of the arts. This philosophy will have the more specific task of finding the fundamental principles or reasons for all the rules of the specific arts.

Wolff locates technology in a definite place in his philosophical system (§113; 52). Because art uses instruments to produce things, and because their efficacy has to be determined by mechanical principles, technology has to borrow its principles from physics. Since the system of philosophy is so ordered that those parts come first that provide principles for other parts, technology will have to come after physics (§114; 52). It is difficult to see how such reasoning applies to some of the liberal arts, especially poetry and rhetoric, which do not use instruments. But it is noteworthy that it does apply perfectly well to the examples Wolff gives, which are all from architecture (§113S; 52). Hence in his *Elementa architecturae civilis* he treats architecture as a series of physical problems which are to be solved by the application of general physical principles. Here again we see how architecture, not poetry, is Wolff's paradigmatic art.

While Wolff has a definite place for technology in his system, he has little idea about its internal organization. He says that there are as many parts of technology as there are arts (§114S; 52). The arts should be classified according to what they produce, he suggests, so that there will be as many arts as there are different kinds of products.[23] Since there will be so many arts, Wolff advises first classifying them into genera. What these genera are, however, he does not venture to say. "We cannot now say more concerning this problem", he writes. Because the history of the arts is still in its infancy, it is impossible to provide an accurate and complete systematization of them (§114S; 52).

Though vague about the internal organization of his science, Wolff does have very firm and fixed ideas about its exposition. He is explicit and emphatic that

[23] *Ethik*, §§366–7; I/4, 242–3.

the philosopher's discourse about art should not be artistic; in other words, the philosopher who writes about rhetoric or poetry should not write rhetorically or poetically (§150; 79). Wolff would have disapproved of Boileau's *L'Art poétique*, for example, which is a poem about poetry. Such a form of exposition is for him completely contrary to the purpose of philosophical discourse. The sole purpose of philosophical style, he argues, is not to persuade, which is the purpose of rhetoric, nor to please, which is the purpose of the poet, but to communicate ideas (§149; 77–8). Since the only aim of philosophical style is to make one's meaning clear and distinct, the philosopher should write in a rigorous scientific form. Given that Wolff defines science in terms of mathematical method—"the aptitude of demonstrating propositions from self-evident principles"—the same method will have to be employed in the philosophy of the arts.[24]

Why does Wolff champion a philosophy of the arts? Why is it so important for him? The short and simple answer to this question is that Wolff thinks that the very possibility of philosophy depends on the arts and the proper understanding of them. Philosophy is a science of not only possible but also actual being; it has to know of all possible beings why only one has become actual (§32; 14). To know how something possible becomes actual, however, it is necessary to consult experience (§31; 14). Contrary to his reputation as a dogmatic rationalist who ignores empirical knowledge, Wolff insists repeatedly that philosophy has to be founded on experience (§§10–11, 31, 34, 35; 4–5, 14, 15).[25] His ideal of knowledge is the mutual interdependence of reason and experience—what he grandly calls the "*Connubiam rationis & experientiae*"—where reason gives insight into the necessity of what has been observed and confirmed by experience.[26] While experience confirms *that* something is the case, reason demonstrates *why* it is the case, i.e., it shows why it must be so and cannot be otherwise.

Now the role of the arts in philosophy is that they provide it with the requisite knowledge of experience. Wolff conceives of the arts as means not

[24] See *Metaphysik*, §361; I/2, 218–19. Cf. *Discursus praeliminarius*, §30; II/1.1, 14.

[25] See also the 'Vorrede' to *Allerhand nützliche Versuche, dadurch zu genauer Erkäntnis der Natur und Kunst der Weg gebahnet wird*, *Werke*, I/20.1; and the 'Vorrede' to 'Teil III' of the same work, where he stresses "daß die Erfahrung die rechte Quelle ist, daraus die Erkäntniß der Natur quillet", and that those who want to know nature without experience "nichts als süsse Träume verbringen, damit die albernen sich bethören lassen."

[26] See Wolff, *Psychologia empirica*, §497; II/5, 379. On the precise meaning of the interrelation of reason and experience in Wolff's philosophy, which cannot be investigated here, see H. W. Arndt, 'Rationalismus und Empirismus in der Erkenntnislehre Christian Wolffs', in Werner Schneiders (ed.), *Christian Wolff 1679–1754* (Hamburg: Meiner, 1983), pp. 31–47. Arndt argues, I think correctly, that Wolff stresses the empirical dimension of knowledge more than Leibniz.

only of *producing* things, but also of *knowing* them. Following Bacon,[27] he thinks that there cannot be a sharp distinction between knowing and making, science and art. We explain things when we know how to make them, when we can recreate them from their elements; but the power to make things is art. The scientist who would know things must also be an artist who knows how to make them. Hence Wolff refers philosophers to the workshops of craftsmen and to the fields of farmers if they are to have knowledge of nature (§25; 12). He explains that it is the arts that widen the field of our experience beyond what is given only to the senses; they show us the inner workings of nature because they produce things by employing the same creative powers as nature herself (§24; 11).

Thus Wolff gives the arts a fundamental role in his system of philosophy. They are understood not only as the subject of one part of his system but as elements within every part. Within each part, they are the essential means of acquiring knowledge of nature, of increasing our experience so that it is not limited to what is only given to the senses.[28] They alone allow philosophy to achieve its mission of explaining why some things rather than others exist; and they alone provide sufficient evidence for its fundamental principles.

Wolff conceives all the arts as parts of a single art, which he calls the art of discovery (*ars inveniendi*).[29] The art of discovery is the art of deriving unknown truths from known ones. Such a derivation can take place in two ways: through reason or experience.[30] There is an *ars inveniendi a priori*, which discovers truths through reason; and an *ars inveniendi a posteriori*, which discovers truths through experience.[31] Through reason we derive something unknown from something known by strict inference; and through experience we observe given facts or produce new ones. We observe given facts through the art of experience (*Erfahrungs-Kunst*) and we produce new facts through experiment (*Versuch-Kunst*).[32] It is chiefly in this latter role that Wolff understands the role

[27] Wolff does not explicitly cite Bacon, though his spirit presides throughout the *Discursus*. In the edition for the *Gesammelte Werke*, Jean École finds many borrowings or implicit references to Bacon's *De dignitate*. See his notes to *Werke*, II/1.1, 111–89.

[28] *Ethik*, §297; I/4, 192. Cf. *Discursus praeliminarius*, §§24–5; II/1, 11–12.

[29] Wolff provides several accounts of the *ars inveniendi*. See the *Metaphysik*, §§362–7; I/2, 219–24; *Psychologia empirica*, §§459–508; II/5, 358–84; the most detailed and explicit account is in *Ethik*, §294–368; I/4, 190–243. Wolff's attempt to discover the *ars inveniendi* was one of the dominant concerns of his intellectual career; his interest in it goes back to his school days. See his *Lebensbeschreibung*, p. 114.

[30] *Ethik*, §§296–7; I/4, 192. Cf. *Metaphysik* §325; I/2, 181; and *Psychologia empirica*, §§454–64; II/5, 356–9.

[31] *Psychologia empirica*, §455; II/5, 356.

[32] Cf. *Psychologia empirica*, §456: "*Observatio* est experientia, quae versatur circa facta naturae sine nostra opera contingentia. *Experimentum* est experientia, quae versatur circa facta naturae, quae nonnisi interveniente opera nostra contingunt" (II/5, 357).

of the arts. They are all to be means of experimentation, providing us with knowledge of nature by acquiring power over it.

Here again it is difficult to see how Wolff's program applies to some of the liberal arts, especially poetry and rhetoric. Since they do not directly act on nature, it is hard to understand how they can be forms of experiment. It is noteworthy, however, that in his treatment of the *ars inveniendi* in the *Psychologia empirica* Wolff sees no difficulty whatsoever in enlisting these arts in his program. He explains that the chief faculty necessary for the *ars inveniendi* is wit or ingenuity (*Ingenium*),[33] which consists in the power of noting the resemblances between things (§476; II/5, 367). This faculty is found pre-eminently, he notes, among poets, orators, and historians, whose allegories, metaphors, and synecdoches bring out similarities between things that we would often not notice in our daily life (§477; II/5, 367–8). Wolff connects wit with another faculty often attributed to poets: a lively imagination (§479; 369–70). A lively imagination is one that has the power of reproducing a clear image and holding within consciousness everything contained within it (§478; II/5, 369). If a poet is to discern the similarities between things, Wolff argues, he must have a lively imagination, the ability to reproduce in a lively manner now what he has observed in the past. Nowhere does Wolff explain exactly how the ideas of poets, orators, and historians are to be collected and used by the scientist or philosopher; but the underlying assumption behind his exposition is that they provide observations that it is the task of the philosopher to collect and demonstrate. The reason of the philosopher is only a more refined form of wit: it demonstrates the connections between things that have already been observed by poets, orators, and historians (§483; II/5, 372). Wolff is at pains to show, however, that the poet and the philosopher engage in the same fundamental mental operations—viz., ascertaining the similarities between things—and that the poet's activity sometimes works according to some of the same fundamental principles as the mathematician, e.g., the principle of reducibility (*principium reductionis*) that likens the unknown to some property of something already known (§§472, 481; II/5, 365, 370).[34]

So rather than seeing philosophy and art as rivals, Wolff envisages the most intimate cooperation between them. In his ideal system they are inter-dependent, so that each achieves its ends only through the other. While philosophy formulates the general principles behind the arts, raising them to self-consciousness so that the artist achieves his goals more effectively and

[33] Wolff's own German translation for "*ingenium*" is "*Witz*". See 'Das erste Register' to the *Metaphysik*, I/2, 677.

[34] Cf. *Metaphysik*, §§241–2; I/2, 134–5.

methodically, the arts will increase the store of our experience, so that there is a sufficient foundation for the general principles of philosophy. Since Wolff makes no distinction between philosophy and science—philosophy is for him almost a synonym for science (§§29–30; 13–14)—he by implication denies any sharp distinction between arts and sciences. The modern contrast between them would have made little sense to him.

In the final analysis, Wolff's program gave the arts a very ambivalent status. On the one hand, they acquired a significance they never had before in the classical tradition. The arts are no longer limited to the imitation of appearances, the lowly status Plato accorded them in Book X of the *Republic*. They are also not restricted to idealizing nature, creating prototypes by selecting from and joining together all the most perfect individuals in nature. Rather, the arts are recognized to be creative powers in their own right, having the power to create new forms of experience, which are fundamental to knowledge in the true and proper sense. Like Bacon, Wolff casts aside the old contemplative model of knowledge of Plato and Aristotle, which allowed the philosopher to look down upon the arts. That model presupposed a distinction between doing and making, art and science, which he now calls into question. On the other hand, however, it is obvious that Wolff has no conception of the autonomy of the arts. They are still placed under the firm direction of philosophy, which alone determines the ends of knowledge. That the arts could provide a *sui generis* form of knowledge, one distinct in kind from philosophy, is a thesis Wolff never entertains.

3. Psychology

Wolff bases his theory of the arts and beauty upon his psychology, which he first sketches in his *Metaphysik* (1719) and then elaborates in his *Psychologia empirica* (1732) and *Psychologia rationalis* (1734). Wolff's psychology is crucial for the entire history of aesthetics before Kant.[35] Gottsched, Baumgarten, Meier, Sulzer, and Mendelssohn base their aesthetics on a Wolffian psychology. Since Kant's aesthetics arose from a reaction against Wolff's psychology, it too has to be understood against this background.

In the *Discursus praeliminarius* Wolff defines psychology as "the science of those things which are possible through human souls" (§58; II/1.1,

[35] The importance of Wolff's psychology for the history of aesthetics was understood long ago by Robert Sommer, *Grundzüge einer Geschichte der deutschen Psychologie und Aesthetik* (Würzburg: Stahel, 1892), pp. 1–23.

29–30). There are two forms of psychology, empirical and rational. Empirical psychology derives its principles from experience, whereas rational psychology gets its conclusions from a priori reasoning alone (§§111–12; 50–1). While empirical psychology treats the soul insofar as it is embodied and responds to things in the world, rational psychology considers only the essence of the soul, which is a thinking substance distinct from its empirical manifestations and physical embodiments. We get the evidence we need for empirical psychology, Wolff explains, by introspection, i.e., by attentively considering our own perceptions.[36] Although empirical psychology derives its principles from experience, it is not simply a form of historical knowledge, i.e., it does not simply record what happens in the human soul. The task of empirical psychology is to give general principles for whatever happens in the human soul, so that it also explains *why* something happens in it.[37]

Wolff conceives of psychology as a foundational discipline for all philosophy. This is partly because, true to the Cartesian tradition, he regards self-awareness as more certain than awareness of other things, viz., the existence of physical bodies or God.[38] But it is also because he conceives psychology in very general terms—it explains everything possible in the soul—so that it encompasses other basic areas of philosophy. Psychology provides the basis of ethics, he argues in the *Psychologia empirica* (§6; II/5, 5), because it explains from human nature why something is good or bad for the human soul. Psychology even supplies the foundation for logic, he contends in the *Discursus praeliminarius* (§89; II/1.1, 39–40), because logic is part of the cognitive faculty and it is the business of psychology to explain every faculty and all its operations. Last but not least, Wolff makes his theory of beauty part of empirical psychology, because it alone explains the feelings of pleasure that are at the heart of aesthetic experience.[39] We can now see why it is so misleading—contrary to a favorite trope of the secondary literature—to contrast Wolff's ''ontological'' aesthetics with a ''psychological'' one.[40] The whole distinction would have made little sense to Wolff or his followers.

Wolff's psychological standpoint regarding ethics, logic, and aesthetics sharply distinguishes him from the Kantian tradition. Kant's transcendental approach to these disciplines treats them as normative rather than psychological, and it focuses more on the reasons for *judgments* about experience than the *causes*

[36] *Psychologia empirica*, §2; II/5, 2. Cf. §§27–8; II/5, 18, 19.

[37] *Discursus praeliminarius*. §111S; II/1, 51; and *Psychologia empirica*, §4; II/5, 3.

[38] Hence Wolff begins his metaphysics and psychology with the Cartesian *cogito*. See *Psychologia empirica*, §§11–16; II/5, 9–13; and *Metaphysik*, §§1–8; 1–5. In the *Psychologia empirica* he explicitly affirms that we know the existence of our soul before that of the body. See §22; II/5, 15.

[39] *Psychologia empirica*, §10; II/5, 7.

[40] For examples of this, see Chapter 7.1 below.

of experience itself.[41] Although Kant has his own very baroque transcendental psychology, he still opposes the confusion of the logical and ethical with the psychological. One can no more derive logical principles from psychology, he argues, than ethical principles from life itself.[42] Since, however, Kant himself never clearly separates epistemological from psychological issues, his differences with Wolff are more in interest and focus than in principle. It is important not to confuse Wolff's psychologism with the many versions of psychologism that later clashed with the Kantian tradition; for Wolff's psychologism, unlike the later versions, is anything but naturalistic. As a metaphysical dualist who separates soul and body, Wolff denies the possibility of physical or naturalistic explanations of the soul.

Wolff sometimes states that there are two fundamental faculties of the soul: cognition and volition. Accordingly, the *Psychologia empirica* is divided into two parts, one treating the *Facultas cognoscendi* and another the *Facultas appetendi*. However, this distinction is more a matter of expositional convenience than philosophical principle. For Wolff thinks that, ultimately, there can be only *one* fundamental faculty of the soul, a *single* power of which all other powers are only instances. In his *Deutsche Metaphysik* he provides an explicit, if shaky, argument for why this must be the case. The soul is a simple substance; and for each simple substance there must be but one power to explain all its changes (§745; I/2, 745). A power consists in a striving (*Bemühung*); and if there were more than one striving the activities of the soul would be complex. Hence there must be in the soul but a single power from which all its changes are derived; all the different powers of the soul—sensation, imagination, conception, reasoning, and desire—are therefore aspects or manifestations of that single power (§747; I/2, 465–6).

What, then, is this single power? After a quick survey of the powers of sensation, imagination, and memory, Wolff comes to the conclusion that they are all ways or forms of representing the world; in other words, they are all forms of consciousness or awareness of things (§§747–53; 465–8). This power of representing the world, he then concludes, is nothing less than the very essence and nature of the soul (§755; 469). Wolff writes as if his conception of the soul were derived from experience, an inductive survey; but its deeper source lies in the rationalist tradition itself. The ancestors of Wolff's conception are Descartes *res cogitans* and Leibniz's *vis representativa*.

[41] Cf. KrV B 25 and A xvi–xvii.

[42] See Kant's *Logik:* "Einige Logiker setzen zwar in der Logik *psychologische* Principien voraus. Dergleichen Principien aber in die Logik zu bringen, ist eben so ungereimt als Moral vom Leben herzunehmen." *Schriften* IX, 14.

From this definition, Wolff attempts to explain all the other faculties of the soul. The most troublesome counterexamples would seem to be volition and emotion; but for each Wolff has an explanation. Following Leibniz, Wolff regards the will as a function of the power of representation, and more specifically of representations of the good. The representation of the good is the motivation (*Bewegungsgrund*) of an action, he argues in his *Ethik*, because it is impossible to not will a good action when we know distinctly that it is the best option for us (§§6–7; I/4, 8). If we do not will the best action, the reason is solely that we do not conceive it distinctly. Similarly, knowledge of evil is the motivation of not doing an action; no one would will an evil action if he distinctly understood it to be evil; if we do will something evil that is only because we have a confused representation of the good. Wolff explains emotion on a similar basis in his *Psychologia empirica*. Emotion too is a function of the power of representation, because affects consist in *confused* representations of the good.[43] Similarly, in his *Metaphysik*, he analyzes the affects into degrees of sensate desire or aversion, where desires and aversions consist in nothing more than confused representations of good or evil.[44]

Nowhere is the intellectualism of Wolff's psychology more apparent than in how he ranks the faculties of the soul. Since all the powers of the soul are functions of representation, and since representations can be graded in their quality, it is possible, Wolff thinks, to grade the powers of the soul.[45] He duly provides a hierarchy of the faculties of the soul, distinguishing between the *higher* faculty of the understanding and the *lower* faculties of imagination, memory and sensation (§§54–5; II/5, 33). The level of a faculty is determined according to Leibniz's taxology of ideas, where its height is directly proportionate to the degree of clarity and distinctness of its representations. Hence the intellect stands higher than the senses, memory, and imagination because its ideas are clear and distinct whereas those of the senses, memory, and imagination are always indistinct and sometimes obscure. What is decisive in determining the hierarchy is the degree to which the intellect is operative in its analytical role; for what is characteristic of distinct and adequate ideas, as opposed to vague and inadequate ones, is the degree to which ideas are analyzed into their elements.

Wolff's intellectualist psychology has profound implications for his theory of art. It means that aesthetic experience, no matter how emotional, must be in some sense cognitive, involving some state of awareness of the world, because all our psychological states are some form of representation, an awareness of

[43] *Psychologia empirica*, §605; II/5, 459.

[44] *Metaphysik*, §§439–45; I/2, 269–74.

[45] See *Metaphysik*, §279; I/2, 154.

some thing. It also implies that there cannot be a sharp distinction between aesthetic contemplation and desire, as if aesthetic experience could somehow be disinterested. For if, as Wolff explicitly argues, aesthetic experience represents something perfect or excellent, it follows that we must, other things being equal, have a desire for that perfection or excellence. Last but not least, it means that it is possible to rationalize all the arts, formulating their procedures into definite rules and deriving them from fundamental principles. Since the soul is essentially a thinking being; and since thinking, if it is to be effective, has to conform to the laws of logic, the soul is an essentially rational being. Hence the rationalization of its activities, their formulation into a deductive system, will reflect them accurately; there will be nothing irrational in the soul that eludes rationalization, because even volition and emotion are functions of representation, of our power of thinking about good and evil.

4. Theory of Beauty

The core of Wolff's theory of beauty consists in a few short paragraphs of his *Psychologia empirica* (§§543–9). Though Wolff's discussion is brief, its influence was great. Gottsched, Baumgarten, Meier, Sulzer, and Mendelssohn made Wolff's discussion the starting point for their own aesthetics. It is worthwhile, then, to take a close look at Wolff's theory.

Wolff develops his account of beauty in the context of his general theory of pleasure, which he expounds in three places, in his *Psychologia empirica*, *Deutsche Metaphysik*, and *Horae subsecivae Marburgenses*.[46] The central thesis of Wolff's theory, which owes its inspiration to Descartes,[47] is that pleasure consists in the intuitive awareness of perfection (*cognitio intuitiva perfectionis*) (§511; II/5, 389). According to his definition, then, pleasure is not simply a feeling or sensation but it is also a representation or awareness of something. Through pleasure I represent or am aware of something in an object, namely, its perfection. An objective property of a thing, perfection consists in its "harmony in variety" or "plurality in unity" (*consensus in varietate*, *plurium in uno*).[48] Intuition, the

[46] Cf. *Psychologia empirica*, §§509–78, *Werke*, II/5, 387–440; *Metaphysik*, §§404–33, *Werke*, I/2, 248–66, and 'De Volupatate ex cognitione veritatis percipienda', in *Horae subsecivae Marburgenses*, *Werke*, II/34.1, 167–248. All references in parentheses are to these three works, which are distinguished by their volume numbers.

[47] In the Scholium Wolff explicitly acknowledges Descartes as the source of his theory. See §511S; II/5, 389. Cf. *Metaphysik*, §404; I/2, 247.

[48] *Ontologia*, §503; II/3, 390.

specific kind of awareness involved in pleasure, is the immediate or direct awareness of a thing, i.e., an awareness that does not require words or symbols.[49] It is opposed to *figurative* awareness, which does involve words or symbols.

It is important to see that, although Wolff thinks that pleasure involves representation or awareness, he does not maintain that it necessarily involves knowledge or cognition. Wolff's term for awareness, "*cognitio*", is misleading in this respect because it suggests cognition; but by "*cognitio*" Wolff simply means thinking or awareness; for he defines it technically as acquiring or having an idea of a thing (§§51–3; II/5, 32). He is explicit that pleasure is not necessarily cognition because he notes that it can arise from *apparent* as well as *true* perfection (§514; II/5, 393). To take pleasure in something, he argues, it is not necessary that we perceive a *real* perfection; it is sufficient that there is only an *appearance* of perfection.[50] It is part of our daily experience, he says, that people often take pleasure in things that are really imperfect or that are even bad for them. Nevertheless, though pleasure does not involve knowledge, Wolff maintains that people still must at least *believe* that there is perfection in the object; they must at least *represent* or *think* it as perfect. That there must be at least such a belief or representation is clear, Wolff argues, because when someone later finds out that a perfection is only apparent he ceases to take pleasure in the object.[51]

The most distinctive feature of Wolff's theory of pleasure is its *intentional* component, i.e., its claim that pleasure involves a form of awareness or consciousness of something. Hence Wolff does not regard pleasure as simply a kind of sensation, a tingling or soothing feeling that refers to nothing whatsoever in the world. In this regard Wolff's theory of pleasure differs strikingly from that in the empiricist tradition. Its precise contours, and controversial dimension, become apparent as soon as we compare it with Hume's theory in his famous essay 'Of the Standard of Taste', which was published only four years after Wolff's *Psychologia empirica*.[52] According to Hume, all pleasure consists in "sentiment"; and all sentiment is right because "sentiment has a reference to nothing beyond itself". Whereas judgments of the understanding can be right or wrong "because they have a reference to something beyond themselves, to wit, real matter of fact", sentiments make no such reference and so are neither true nor false, right or wrong. Contrary to Hume, Wolff holds that pleasure does have a reference to something beyond itself; it at least purports to be about something in the world, namely, the perfection of things. This

[49] *Metaphysik*, §316; I/2, 173–4. [50] Ibid., §405; I/2, 248. [51] Ibid., §406; I/2, 248–9.
[52] Hume, *Essays Moral, Political and Literary* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1995), pp. 226–49, esp. 230.

means that there is an implicit act of judgment involved in pleasure, and that it can be right or wrong according to whether there is a real or only apparent perfection in the object. Hence Wolff distinguishes between true and false pleasures according to whether they are based on a true or apparent perfection (§514; II/5, 393).

Wolff attempts to confirm his theory of pleasure by applying it to ordinary experience. It is significant that most of his examples are taken from aesthetic experience (§512; II/5, 389–91). When we take pleasure in a picture, he argues, this is really the perception of a perfection, namely, the resemblance between it and its object. When an architect finds pleasure in seeing a building this is because he knows the rules of its construction and sees how well they have been observed; his pleasure in the building is much greater than a layman's because he knows the rules of its construction. To know these rules is to know its perfection, because these rules are forms of uniting a plurality into one or harmonizing many things into a whole. In general, it is a fact, Wolff believes, that the more insight we have into the perfection of an object, the more pleasure we take in perceiving it (§§409, 412; I/2, 250, 251).

Although some facts of ordinary experience seem to confirm Wolff's theory, others seem to disconfirm it. Since he holds that all pleasure is the object of desire, and that all pleasure is awareness of perfection, Wolff is committed to the classical rationalist analysis of desire, according to which it is impossible to desire something that I know to be evil. Sure enough, he explicitly defends such a thesis in his *Ethik*.[53] Such a thesis encounters, however, a notorious objection: *akrasia*, weakness of will, the apparent fact that it is possible for me to desire something that I know to be bad for me. Applying this problem to Wolff's theory of pleasure, it takes the following form: it seems that we might take pleasure in something—and so by implication desire it—when we know it is not perfect at all. All forms of addiction fall into this category, for in them we desire and take pleasure in things (viz., alcohol or drugs) that we know are bad for us.

In response to this objection, Wolff's strategy is to distinguish between true and false pleasure (§§513, 515; II/5, 391–2, 393). If I take pleasure in something that is bad, or at least less perfect than its alternatives, that is a false pleasure. It is a false pleasure for several possible reasons: because it is more momentary than a true pleasure; or because it is mixed with displeasure; or because it has more painful consequences than a true pleasure. Hence a true pleasure is more constant, less mixed with displeasure, or has less painful consequences, than a false pleasure. Hence if I desire a false pleasure, that can only be because I

[53] *Ethik*, §§6–7, *Werke*, I/4, 7–8.

do not know that it is a false pleasure, i.e., I do not have a clear and distinct knowledge of its alternatives, consequences, or components. It is therefore impossible for me to desire something that I know to be a false pleasure; for in that case it would be false to say that I really desire pleasure at all.

Having determined the nature of pleasure, Wolff proceeds to define beauty itself. He first notes how beauty is defined in ordinary usage: ''what pleases is said to be beauty'' (§543; II/5, 420). This definition follows the proverb that beauty is in the mind of the beholder, or that everyone has their own taste (*suum cuique pulchrum*). However, Wolff is not satisfied with this definition, which he thinks is insufficiently exact for psychology. He then offers what he thinks is a more precise definition: ''Beauty consists in the perfection of things insofar as they are apt by the power in them to produce pleasure in us'' (§544; II/5, 420). It is noteworthy that Wolff stresses the more objective element involved in this definition: there would be no beauty if there were no perfection in things having the power to produce such pleasure within us.[54]

Wolff later reformulates his definition more concisely, when he writes that beauty consists in simply the ''observability of perfection'' (*observabilitas perfectionis*) (§545; II/5, 421). He now explains that there is both a subjective and objective element of beauty. Its subjective element consists in the feeling of pleasure; if there were no perceiving subject, there would be no pleasure, and hence no beauty (§545S; II/5, 421). Its objective element consists in the perfection, because, even if there were no one to perceive it, there would still be perfection in the object, a unity in multiplicity or harmony in variety. The single phrase ''*observabilitas perfectionis*'' neatly joins both these elements together, for it means that beauty is neither perfection nor pleasure alone but both: the pleasure from observing perfection.

Such, very briefly, is the sum and substance of Wolff's theory of beauty. Its most striking and characteristic feature is its extreme intellectualism or rationalism. It makes the *sole* source of aesthetic pleasure reside in the perception of perfection, which consists in unity in diversity, harmony among variety. Perfection is essentially structure or form, the proper object of reason or the intellect in the rationalist tradition. True to that tradition, Wolff holds that the characteristic tasks of reason are to grasp one in many or many in one, or to see the universal in the particular or the particular in the universal.[55] Perfection is therefore the proper and characteristic object of the intellect. All aesthetic pleasure for Wolff is ultimately a form of *intellectual* pleasure; the pleasure that we have through our senses is really only a confused form of it.

[54] See too *Horae subsecivae Marburgenses*, *Werke*, II/34.1, 171.

[55] *Logik*, §30; *Werke*, I/1, 130.

One of the chief problems with Wolff's theory of beauty is that it seems overly intellectual or rationalistic, incapable of explaining the phenomenon of the "je ne sais quoi", the indefinable aspect of beauty. Hence Wolff maintains that the more insight we have into the perfection of an object—the more we analyze it into its distinct elements and see how each of them are necessary for the whole—the greater the pleasure that we will have in perceiving it (§§409, 412; I/2, 250, 251).[56] This point, which Wolff takes to be a simple fact of experience, is controversial, for it runs counter to an observation made by Leibniz: that distinct cognition ruins the charm of beauty. This rationalist or intellectual side of Wolff's theory is most apparent when he insists that the arts should be strictly governed by the principle of sufficient reason, so that nothing enters into their products that does not follow the rules. When Wolff writes about architecture, for example, he demands that it should cease to be an art and become more like a science, so that each of its precepts are derived from first principles according to the mathematical method.[57] It was such extreme intellectualism that later became a source of dissatisfaction with Wolff's theory of beauty. Although Baumgarten, Winckelmann, and Mendelssohn would all accept Wolff's essential thesis that beauty consists in the intuition of perfection, they would stress the confused nature of such intuition; in doing so they were attempting to do justice to a phenomenon their master could not explain: the "je ne sais quoi". Wolff, however, could only see all confusion as nothing more than an imperfection, a lack of order, and so banished it from the realm of beauty.

Whatever its problems, the attraction of Wolff's theory of pleasure and beauty for the rationalist tradition should be plain. It would prove to be the foundation for its account of aesthetic judgment. Since Wolff's theory holds that aesthetic pleasure involves an act of judgment, it makes taste subject to rational assessment. We can determine from the tribunal of critique whether such judgments are true or false, whether there is sufficient evidence for them. Hence taste is not simply a matter of having a sensation or feeling, whose intrinsic qualities we cannot assess. This was one of the basic points dividing the rationalist tradition from the empiricist tradition of Burke and Hume.

5. Foundations of Neo-Classicism

One of the hallmarks of the rationalist tradition of aesthetics, as we have already mentioned, is its confidence in and emphasis upon rules. This is a theme that

[56] Cf. *Psychologia empirica*, §517; II/5, 395–7.

[57] Cf. *Psychologia empirica*, §150; II/5, 103–4 and *Discursus praeliminarius*, §40; II/1.1, 19.

appears repeatedly in Gottsched, Baumgarten, Lessing, Winckelmann, and Mendelssohn. Although Baumgarten, Winckelmann, and Mendelssohn fully recognized the indefinable dimension of aesthetic experience—the irreducible "Je ne sais quoi"—they never ceased to believe that aesthetic creation and judgment are fundamentally governed by rules. It was through knowledge of the rules that the artist could create beauty and the critic judge it. To understand this cardinal doctrine of the rationalist tradition, we need to go back to Wolff, who provides it with its metaphysical and epistemological foundation. More specifically, we need to go back to a fundamental work of Wolff's, one that the young Mendelssohn said had to be read twice by any serious philosopher: his *Ontologia* (1729). In the *Ontologia*, and its German counterpart, the so-called *Deutsche Metaphysik* or *Vernünfftige Gedancken von Gott, der Welt und der Seele des Menschen, auch allen Dingen überhaupt*, Wolff explicitly defines what he means by rules, and he gives a detailed and explicit account of the ontology and epistemology behind them.[58] Wolff's account is crucial for the entire rationalist tradition, which follows him closely. What later thinkers presuppose Wolff attempts to justify and explain.

Wolff's account of a rule appears in the context of a more general discussion of the concepts of order, truth, and perfection, three of the fundamental concepts of his ontology. The most fundamental of these concepts is order. Wolff defines it as the similarity in how things succeed one another in time or coexist with one another in space (§472; II/3, 360).[59] Since order consists in such similarities, each thing in order has its determinate time or place, i.e., there is a reason why it occurs or is situated in just this manner and in no other.[60] If I know why it takes just this place and no other, or why it occurs at just this time and no other, then I know the reason (*ratio*) or ground (*Grund*) for its order (§474; II/3, 361–2). Order, of course, is a matter of degree. The degree of order depends on the number of similarities in which things succeed or coexist with one another (§148; I/2, 77).

Order plays a fundamental role in Wolff's epistemology, because it is what distinguishes truth from falsehood, reality from dream (§§494–6; II/3, 382–3).[61] Truth is simply order in the changes of things; and we determine that order precisely according to the principle of sufficient reason. We know

[58] See *Ontologia*, pars I, sectio III, caput VI, 'De Ordine, Veritate & Perfectione', §§472–530; II/3, 360–412. Cf. *Metaphysik*, §§132–75; I/2, 68–94. References in parentheses are to both texts, distinguished by their volume numbers. These expositions are essentially the same in content with only minor variations; the Latin version is usually more detailed than the German version. I will cite whatever exposition is the clearest.

[59] Cf. *Metaphysik*, §§132–3; 1/2, 68–9.

[60] Cf. ibid., §139; I/2, 73.

[61] Cf. ibid., §142; I/2, 24.

that something is real if we know why it must occur as it does and cannot be otherwise, or if we can specify the precise rule or sufficient reason by which it succeeds or coexists with other things (§143; I/2, 74). A dream or illusion is disorder in the changes of things. Since order is a matter of degree, and since it determines the distinction between reality and illusion, truth and falsehood, reality and truth also have degrees corresponding to the degrees of order (§151; I/2, 78).

Wolff defines perfection in terms of order. Perfection is a specific form of order, the correspondence (*Zusammenstimmung*) of a manifold, or harmony in variety (*consensus in varietate*), where harmony is the tendency of things to be one with another (§503; II/3, 390).[62] The perfection of a clock, for example, consists in all its parts working together to show the time. Because in any such correspondence there must be something that brings the different things together, every perfection has its ground or reason, from which it can be understood and judged (§§505–6; II/3, 394).[63] The reason for the perfection of the clock, for example, is that it tells the time exactly. There are rules for judging perfection, just as there are rules for order, which correspond to the grounds or reasons for the thing (§168; I/2, 90). The more grounds that we find to explain the correspondence of the parts, the more perfections the thing has (§160; I/2, 84).

Just as there are different degrees of order, so there are different degrees of perfection. The degree of perfection partly depends on the extent to which something agrees with its ground or reason (§154; I/2, 80).[64] In the case of the clock, for example, there are degrees of perfection according to how well it shows time; a clock that shows minutes as well as hours is more perfect than one that shows only hours; and one that shows seconds as well as minutes is more perfect than one showing only minutes. The degree of perfection also partly depends on the extent to which something contains lesser perfections within itself (§162; I/2, 86).[65] There are simple and composite perfections, where a composite perfection consists in the harmony of many things, each of whose parts harmonize with one another. Since the perfection of a thing derives from its rules, the thing that complies with more rules is more perfect (§168; I/2, 90). The degree of perfection then depends on two fundamental variables: the degree of harmony—or the greater the degree of unification—and the number of the parts that are harmonized. In other words, the greatest perfection would be that which unifies to the greatest degree the greatest number of parts; such perfection would have the greatest possible unity amid the greatest possible variety.

[62] Cf. *Metaphysik*, §152; I/2, 78–9.
[63] Cf. ibid., §153; I/2, 79–80.
[64] Cf. *Ontologia*, §519; II/3, 405.
[65] Cf. ibid., §520; II/3, 406.

Now that we have considered Wolff's concepts of order and perfection, we are finally in a position to understand his concept of a rule. A rule is essentially the law or method for creating, or the proposition for understanding, order and perfection. It is a principle or proposition that formulates the sufficient reason for why there is a similarity in things coexisting and succeeding one another. Hence Wolff's explicit definition of a rule in the *Ontologia* is "a proposition specifying the determination that conforms to reason" (*propositio enuncians determinationem rationi conformem*) (§475/II/3, 362).

There are some subtle ambiguities in Wolff's account of rules. Sometimes he simply equates the rule with the reason (*ratio*) or ground (*Grund*) behind the order (§§145; I/2, 75); but at other times he identifies it with what in nature conforms to the reason or ground, i.e., the specific similarity between things (§§141, 149; I/2, 74, 78). A rule can also be either objective or subjective: objective as the reason or ground in nature; subjective as the principle by which we understand and judge order (§141; I/2, 74). However we interpret it, the rule is the method by which we create or understand order and perfection.

Wolff's faith in rules is ultimately founded on his adherence to one fundamental principle: the principle of sufficient reason. It is this principle that is behind all order and perfection. If we know the sufficient reason for something, we are able to understand its order, why things occur and coexist in just this manner and no other. Wolff calls the general reason by which we understand the perfection of a thing—the reason why all its parts come together to form a coherent whole—"the determining reason for the perfection" (*rationem determinantem perfectionis*) (§506; II/3, 394). It is important to see that Wolff construes this principle in a very general sense. The sufficient reason for something is that from which I understand why it is so and cannot be otherwise (§56; II/3, 39). This means that the reason might be a final or efficient cause, a purpose or antecedent events. However, following Bacon and Descartes, Wolff is wary of introducing final causes into natural philosophy (§§99–102; II/1.1, 45–6). While he values natural teleology, he thinks that it should be introduced into the system of philosophy only *after* theology and physics. Nothing within physics or cosmology itself requires, however, commitment to final causes. There is insufficient evidence, Wolff argues, for Leibniz's view that the elements of things are monads, entelechies, or active spiritual entities that act for ends.[66]

Except in a few occasional passages, Wolff does not explicitly apply his concepts of order, perfection, and rule to the arts. Now and then, however, he does lay down some guidelines for how to judge the perfection of things,

[66] See Wolff, *Metaphysik*, §§598–9; I/2, 368–70.

and he often gives artworks as examples. In his *Metaphysik* he specifies four precepts: (1) know the simple perfections, i.e., the order of the parts; (2) see how the order of all the parts derives from the necessity of the whole; (3) compare the rules governing each of the parts and judge their possible exceptions; and (4) investigate which rules can have exceptions (§174; I/2, 93). Wolff admits, however, that when the number of parts in a manifold is very great, it becomes difficult to judge the perfection of the whole, which is the reason why people often make mistakes in judging works of art (§171; I/2, 91–2).

Although he is quite explicit in laying down rules for judging perfection, it is important to stress that Wolff does not regard rules as absolute or a priori limits upon the ends of the artist. He would have brusquely rejected the later complaints of the *Stürmer und Dränger* that the rules are only so many fetters on the imagination. The rules do not restrict the ends of the artist, Wolff thinks, for the simple reason that the rules derive from the artist's ends. Which rules the artist follows depends on the ends he chooses; and there are no prior restrictions on his choice. Where the artist sets different ends he has to follow different rules. In other words, the rules are only means to ends; they do not prescribe ends themselves. Wolff's very liberal attitude toward the arts is apparent from his treatment of the imagination in his *Metaphysik*, where he writes that the artist should be free to create according to any plan or design (§§241–7; I/2, 134–8). There are no limitations about which plans or designs he should follow; the only restriction is that he should have some plan or design. Only when the artist proceeds according to random association or arbitrary fancy, putting together ideas that have no connection with one another or that follow no plan or reason, does Wolff censure him (§244; I/2, 136). In that case he violates the fundamental principle behind all plans and designs: the principle of sufficient reason.

When placed in a broader historical context, Wolff's liberal attitude shows that he is not imposing fetters but breaking them. For he is in effect liberating the artist from a strict version of the doctrine of imitation, one that would limit the artist to copying the present order of nature. He is explicit in the *Metaphysik* that, as long as the artist creates according to some design, he is still within the realm of truth, for truth consists in order, whether in the actual world or in all possible worlds (§245; I/2, 136). The artist should imitate nature, to be sure, but not in the sense that he copies *its* order and perfection, but only in the general or formal sense that, like nature, he creates order and perfection.

Still, for all his liberality, it would be incorrect to regard Wolff as an aesthetic anarchist, someone who rejects all order in art. While he holds that the artist

should be free to create according to any plan or design, whether in nature or his imagination, he still insists that the artist rigorously and severely follow his design. Any plan or design contains its underlying theme or concept—its sufficient reason within itself—and the artist must remain utterly true to it. Since everything in the artist's design has a sufficient reason, each part must play a necessary role in the whole, so that there should be nothing superfluous. Hence in his *Psychologia empirica* Wolff states that the architect should proceed strictly according to the principle of sufficient reason, so that everything in his design plays a necessary role (§150; II/5, 103).

The net result of such rigorism is nothing less than neo-classical aesthetics. All the fundamental neo-classical values—order, harmony, simplicity—follow directly from Wolff's insistence that the artist strictly follow the principle of sufficient reason. The fundamental principle of neo-classicism is simply the principle of sufficient reason itself, which decrees that the artist must create everything according to reason. It is perfectly correct, therefore, to say that neo-classicism is the aesthetic of rationalism.

The irrational makes its appearance only in one place in Wolff's neo-classical world: the exception to the rule. It is not a brief and fleeting appearance, however, since in his *Ontologia* Wolff expends many paragraphs in his struggle to keep it under control.[67] An exception to the rule would seem to be an impossibility in Wolff's ontology because it appears to violate the principle of sufficient reason. But it is just this impression that Wolff spends so much effort trying to correct. Exceptions arise only when there is some conflict of rules; and they do not consist in the disobedience of rules as such but in obeying one rule in preference to another (§510; 398). Although, taken in themselves, exceptions to rules are defects, they are not necessarily so when they take place in a whole; they do not give rise to imperfections but really sustain the perfection of the whole (§514; 401). Whenever there is some collision of rules, then, Wolff advises following that rule which contributes most to the perfection of the whole (§518; 405).

Having followed Wolff's account of rules this far, we can now understand why he, and the entire rationalist tradition, had such faith in them. Rules are inevitable in the arts for two reasons. First, they specify the *means* necessary to the artist's ends; if he does not follow them, he simply cannot do what he wants. Given that only certain actions are efficient means to certain ends, and given that the same actions on different occasions effectively lead to the same results, it is possible to formulate generalizations about how it is possible to achieve certain ends most efficiently; and such generalizations are

[67] *Ontologia*, §§510–25; II/3, 398–408.

the rules. Second, rules specify how each part of a work fits into the plan of the whole; they are based on the general idea of the work, the sufficient reason behind it, and they determine how each part implements it and plays a necessary role in the whole. The first reason makes rules necessary for artistic production; the second reason makes them necessary for critical understanding and judgment. In the first case what justifies the rules—what makes them rational—is the principle of instrumental rationality, which states that we should choose efficient means to our ends. In the second case what justifies them is the principle of sufficient reason itself, which states that there should be a reason for everything in a work of art. Again, it is necessary to emphasize that in both cases the rules are not fetters or constraints upon the artist's plans; for they simply concern whether he has effectively carried out his own plans, whatever they might be.

Although Wolff's rule aesthetic is liberal in spirit and eminently plausible, it did not enjoy a happy fate. Later in the eighteenth century it became associated with a more narrow neo-classical aesthetics, which stressed a very strict literal reading of the principle of imitation. Here Gottsched played a fateful role. As a close follower of Wolff he succeeded in linking Wolff's neo-classicism with the cause of his own French-inspired dramaturgy; it then seemed as if following rules meant complying with the three unities. Hence the reaction against Gottsched became a rebellion against rules in general. Having been thrown out with the bathwater, the baby has been an orphan ever since.

We are also finally in a position to understand how Kant too misinterpreted rationalism. In the *Kritik der Urteilskraft* Kant understands a rule as "the concept of an object", which is its inherent purpose, what it is meant to be or its underlying ideal.[68] His reasons for understanding a rule in this sense are clear enough: a rule is supposed to be a criterion for judging a work of art, and knowing the purpose of an object does provide such a criterion. If I know, for example, the purpose of a pruning knife or a racing horse, then, with the aid of experience, I will be able to determine which precise characteristics of a knife or racing horse best achieve these ends. Given such knowledge, I will have a criterion by which to judge particular cases according to how effectively they accomplish these ends. By determining which characteristics they have or lack, I will even be able to explain why they are effective or ineffective. In giving this reading of a rule Kant was simply following the account he had read in G. F. Meier's *Anfangsgründe aller schönen Künste*, which became the most popular manual of rationalist aesthetics in the later eighteenth century. Meier

[68] *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, §8, V, 215–16; §34, V, 285–6.

understands the sufficient reason behind any order or perfection as nothing less than its purpose.[69]

Yet Meier's account, it must be stressed, was an oversimplification, and indeed a distortion of the rationalist tradition as a whole, which closely follows Wolff's more liberal and sophisticated account. Wolff's account of a rule implies no commitment to the concept of a natural purpose or a Platonic ideal. The rule is simply the artist's concept of the whole work or his method for achieving specific ends, where these concepts and ends are determined not by nature but by artists themselves. We have indeed already seen that Wolff's account of the principle of sufficient reason implies no commitment to a natural teleology. The sufficient reasons that explain the order in nature are for him first and foremost mechanical causes. Under Meier's influence, Kant read natural teleology into rationalist aesthetics, which has been deeply misunderstood ever since.

[69] Meier, *Anfangsgründe aller schönen Wissenschaften* (Magdeburg: Hemmerde, 1754), §§24, 471, 473; I, 40, III, 511, 517.

3

Gottsched and the High Noon of Rationalism

1. Herr Professor Gottsched's Peruke

After Wolff, the most prominent figure in the development of aesthetic rationalism was Johann Christian Gottsched (1700–66). Gottsched is a seminal, if also controversial, figure in German cultural history. His chief claims to fame rest on his two grand ambitions: making German into a leading literary language, on par with English and French; and reforming the German theater, so that it became a platform for serious literature rather than popular entertainment. Whether Gottsched actually contributed to these goals is a matter of opinion; but, considering the state of German literature and drama at the time, he at least deserves credit for conceiving them and working indefatigably to realize them. Yet, despite his noble ideals and tireless labors, Gottsched's reputation suffered terribly after Lessing's scathing attack upon it. In some famous damning lines from his *Literaturbriefe*, Lessing wrote:

> 'Nobody', writes the author of the *Bibliothek*, 'will deny that the German theater owes a great part of its improvement to Herr Professor Gottsched.' I am this nobody; and I deny it outright. It is to be wished that Herr Gottsched never interfered with the theater. His presumed improvements are either dispensable trivialities or true corruptions.[1]

Lessing, however, had his own battles to fight. Such an attack might have been warranted in his day, when it was still necessary to fight an uphill battle against literary orthodoxy. But, with the growth of time and perspective, Lessing's barb has seemed less just. Ever since Theodor Danzel's *Gottsched und seine Zeit* (1848), there has been much revisionist scholarship on Gottsched,

[1] See 'Literaturbrief 17', February 16, 1759, in Lessing, *Werke und Briefe*, vol. IV (Frankfurt: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1997), p. 499.

reappraising his role in German literary history.[2] Seen more in his historical context, in the light of the German literature and drama of his day, Gottsched proves to be a pivotal figure. He was a towering figure in the German Enlightenment, a titanic force in the reform of German literature and drama. Even if one disagrees with his Francophile ideals, he still remains an important figure in the development of a national literature and drama. No history of German literature and aesthetics can afford to ignore him.

For better or worse, by the mid-1730s, Gottsched had become so successful that he became known as "the literary dictator of Germany".[3] His power and prestige came partly from his position as a professor at Leipzig, partly from his role as spokesman and organizer of the *Deutsche Gesellschaft*, a society modeled on the French Academy in Paris, and partly from his capacity as editor of an influential journal, *Beyträge zur critischen Historie der deutschen Sprache, Poesie und Beredsamkeit*. Notoriously, though, dictators invite rebellions, especially from a younger generation. And, sure enough, Gottsched's reign, if it ever was that, did not last long. In the 1740s the ageing professor became embroiled in one quarrel after another, and his pomp, self-importance, and bluster only turned him into a figure of fun. Gottsched had taken his stand with French classicism—the plays of Racine, Corneille, and Molière—which he held to be a model for the new German drama. Although that was perhaps good pedagogy in the 1720s and 1730s, it had less meaning for a new and more self-confident generation, eager to throw off the Norman yoke in all its guises. Already by the 1750s Gottsched seemed to belong to another age. When the young Goethe visited the old and ailing man in the 1760s, he noted his comical efforts to maintain his dignity by donning a hopelessly old-fashioned peruke.[4] That wig, so pathetically worn, was the perfect symbol for a bygone age.

Gottsched's significance for German culture lies not only in the realms of literature and drama, but also in that of philosophy. He was a professor of

[2] See Theodor Danzel, *Gottsched und seine Zeit* (Leipzig: Dyke, 1848); Gustav Waniek, *Gottsched und die deutsche Literatur seiner Zeit* (Leipzig: Breitkopf und Härtel; 1897); and Eugen Reichel, *Gottsched* (Berlin: Gottsched Verlag, 1912). Even Marxist scholars have been appreciative of Gottsched's role in the development of German "bourgeois" culture. See, for example, Werner Rieck, *Johann Christoph Gottsched: Eine kritische Würdigung seines Werkes* (Berlin: Aufbau, 1972). There were, however, some significant dissenting voices against the attempt to rehabilitate Gottsched. See, especially, Friedrich Braitmaier, *Geschichte der poetischen Theorie und Kritik von den Diskursen der Maler bis auf Lessing* (Frauenfeld: Huber, 1888).

[3] The phrase "literary dictatorship" has been much disputed in Gottsched scholarship. Waniek questioned whether Gottsched ever achieved one, and Reichel whether he ever aspired to one. See Waniek, *Gottsched und die deutsche Literatur*, pp. 260–3, and Reichel, *Gottsched*, II, 1–49. Still, the fact remains that many of Gottsched's contemporaries and successors saw his stature in such terms.

[4] Goethe, *Dichtung und Wahrheit*, in *Sämtliche Werke, Briefe, Tagebücher und Gespräche*, ed. Dieter Borchmeyer et al., 40 vols. (Frankfurt: Deutsche Klassiker Verlag, 1986), I/14, 293.

philosophy in Leipzig, a prominent position indeed, given that Leipzig was then the cultural heartland of Germany. Gottsched was in the very forefront of the *Aufklärung* as one of Wolff's first disciples. In 1725 he gave some of the first lectures on Wolff's philosophy; and when it was still very risky to do so, he defended Wolff against the charges of atheism and fatalism hurled against him. Gottsched was also an important popularizer of Wolffian doctrine. In the 1720s he edited two moral weeklies, *Der Biedermann* (1727–9) and *Die vernünftigen Tadlerinnen* (1725–6), modeled on Addison and Steele's *Tatler*, whose goals were to improve taste and to educate the public according to the principles of Wolff's philosophy. Not content merely to popularize the new philosophy, Gottsched also took great pride in providing it with a metaphysical and psychological foundation. Hence he published in 1733 his *Erste Gründe der Weltweisheit*, a compendium for his lectures, which covered all basic parts of philosophy, especially ontology, psychology, and natural theology. This became one of the most successful and widely used Wolffian textbooks.[5]

It would be a mistake to portray Gottsched as either a profound innovator or an obedient disciple of Wolff. His *Erste Gründe* closely follows Wolff on most points; however, he also did not hesitate to take issue with Wolff, even regarding fundamental issues. His doctoral dissertation, for example, defends the theory of physical influx against Wolff's objections; and in the preface to his *Erste Gründe* he even questions Wolff's conception of philosophy—the science of all possible things—because it makes philosophy too speculative. It is correct to argue that Gottsched was a more secular and naturalistic thinker than either Leibniz or Wolff.[6] Indeed, he had a more critical attitude toward the claims of revelation than his great predecessors, who rarely openly questioned Christian dogma. However, it is also anachronistic to portray Gottsched, who goes to great lengths in *Erste Gründe* to defend a natural theology, as the ancestor of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche.[7]

Within the Wolffian school, Gottsched's main achievement was his poetics, the extension of Wolffian principles to poetry. This was the aim of his chief theoretical work, *Critische Dichtkunst*, which first appeared in 1730. The failure to develop a poetics was seen by many contemporaries as a serious gap in Wolff's system. Ambitious and eager to prove himself, Gottsched rushed to fill the breach, competing against his Swiss rivals, J. J. Bodmer and J. J. Breitinger, for the honor of being the first to write a Wolffian poetics. Though the Swiss

[5] On its influence, see Reichel, *Gottsched*, II, 603–12.
[6] This is the argument of Reichel, *Gottsched*, II, 467–612.
[7] See Reichel, *Gottsched*, II, 533, 599, 601.

beat him to the post,[8] his work prevailed in the end. While the Swiss efforts were largely ignored, *Critische Dichtkunst* became an immensely successful work, going through at least four editions in Gottsched's lifetime. It was indeed so influential that a shorter version, which also went through several editions, became a textbook in German schools. The work has been hailed as the first complete German poetics.[9]

In the history of German aesthetics, Gottsched marks the high noon of aesthetic rationalism, the height of its confidence in the powers of reason. He never questioned Wolff's extreme rationalism; he only ruthlessly and relentlessly enforced it. What Wolff had tacitly taken for granted in the arts that Gottsched explicitly defended. Reason, Gottsched believed, could and should comprehend, criticize, and control all aspects of aesthetic experience. All the figures after Gottsched in the rationalist tradition—Baumgarten, Winckelmann, Lessing, and Mendelssohn—show a lesser confidence in, and a greater awareness of, the limits of reason. They were forced to respond to challenges to aesthetic rationalism, which made them qualify or limit the claims it made on behalf of reason. Gottsched represents the standard, then, against which declining trust in reason has to be measured.

There are four salient features to Gottsched's aesthetic rationalism, all of them Wolffian legacies. First, faith in the omnipotence of critique, the power of criticism to examine and appraise *every* aspect of aesthetic experience. Second, belief in the omnipresence of rules. Wherever there is an aesthetic quality, Gottsched holds, there are rules that govern it, norms by which we can produce, appreciate or criticize it. Third, his ideal of poetry, which demands that the poet strive above all for clarity and distinctness. Fourth, his intellectual concept of taste, according to which the intellect has the power to discern aesthetic perfection, which is often confused by the senses and imagination.

Such an extreme aesthetic rationalism is based upon two fundamental premises, both of them controversial, if not problematic. The first premise is the traditional classicist belief, which Gottsched rarely articulates and never defends, that the *sole* form of aesthetic experience is beauty. Gottsched refuses to admit other kinds of aesthetic experience, such as the new, surprising, and wonderful, which appear not to conform to the order and regularity of beauty. The second premise is Gottsched's thesis, which he attempts to prove in his

[8] Most notably in their *Von dem Einfluß und Gebrauche der Einbildungs-Krafft zur Ausbesserung des Geschmackes* (Frankfurt, 1727). This work was only a fragment of a much larger projected one, a complete poetics on Wolffian principles, which was never written. Bodmer's and Breitinger's chief poetic works would not appear until 1740.

[9] This is the opinion of Waniek, *Gottsched und die deutsche Litteratur*, p. 176.

Erste Gründe, that the highest beauty consists in the *intellectual* perception of perfection. Following Wolff, Gottsched does not recognize the value of the "je ne sais quoi", the irreducible and indefinable sensual aspect of beauty. While he admits that some beauty consists in a *sensible* perception of perfection, he thinks that this is a lesser form, for he maintains that aesthetic pleasure is heightened rather than destroyed through intellectual analysis.

In fundamental respects Gottsched's aesthetic rationalism is based upon Wolff's ontology and psychology. It has therefore all the liberal implications of these Wolffian doctrines: the artist is free to create his own possible world through the imagination, unhindered by the need to imitate the real world. However, Gottsched went beyond Wolff in one crucial respect: in his defense of a stricter reading of the principle of imitation, and more specifically in his endorsement of the classical three unities of French tragedy. In this regard Gottsched's aesthetics is more conservative than Wolff's and betrays the liberal spirit behind it. Gottsched's fanatical insistence on the classical unities became one of the chief reasons for the rebellion against him and his eventual obsolescence. But, in the minds of his contemporaries, Gottsched had so associated the cause of rationalism with his own narrow classicism that the rebellion against his dictatorship had become a revolt against reason itself. Hence, by the 1760s, aesthetic rationalism seemed to be as fusty, musty, and dusty as Gottsched's peruke itself.

2. The Importance of Taste

Any study of Gottsched's aesthetic thought has to begin with one basic question: Why was criticism, the theory of poetry and rhetoric, so important for Gottsched? Why did he devote so much of his life to its study? This was a crucial question for Gottsched himself, who went to great pains to justify his devotion to philosophy in general and to poetry and rhetoric in particular. Even in his own day, he feared that the study of philosophy was declining in the universities. Students were inclined to devote themselves to a *Brotstudium*, to a purely vocational subject like divinity, law, or medicine; philosophy, poetry, and rhetoric seemed like dispensable luxuries or idle entertainment.[10] So, as a professor of these subjects, Gottsched felt it necessary to give some defense of them.

[10] See the 'Vorrede' to his *Erste Gründe* (unpaginated); and 'Rede zum Lobe der Weltweisheit' (1728), in *Gottscheds Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Eugen Reichel, 6 vols. (Berlin: Gottsched Verlag, 1902), VI, 13–32.

Along with virtually every eighteenth-century thinker, Gottsched shares the general view that the purpose of criticism is to promote good taste.[11] He understands taste as the power to discern and accurately judge beauty; and he thinks that criticism, because it determines the rules for judging beauty, is necessary to attain taste. Assuming that criticism really does form good taste, the question about its justification now becomes: Why is the cultivation of taste so important? How does it make our lives better?

Gottsched's first attempt to answer this question appears in his early moral weekly, *Die vernünftigen Tadlerinnen*, published from 1725 to 1726.[12] Since a central aim of this weekly was to promote morals and taste among the general public, Gottsched devotes one of his first articles to the concept of good taste and why we should cultivate it. He understands taste as a metaphor for the power of judgment (*Beurtheilungskraft*), the power to discern the finer aesthetic qualities in things. He also assumes that a person of good taste will not only have the power to judge beauty, but also the willingness to make beauty part of his or her life. Hence the person of good taste, he writes, not only knows how to discern good music, but also how to dress well and to decorate their room. Indeed, someone is a model of good taste only if everything he or she does has something pleasant or lovable about it. The immediate reason for developing this capacity, of course, is that it will make one's own life more pleasant; but Gottsched goes an interesting and important step further. She maintains that the person of good taste should increase not only his or her own pleasure but that of everyone else in society; such a person should be not only the subject but also the object of aesthetic pleasure. By wearing the right attire, by decorating their homes, by designing their gardens, he or she gives pleasure to everyone else around them. Hence the cultivation of taste is not only a self-regarding duty; it is a civil obligation as well.

After the demise of his original weekly, Gottsched continued his reflections on the role of taste, eventually developing an original, well-thought-out and sophisticated theory. He first sketched this theory in his 1728 moral weekly *Der Biedermann* and later expounded it systematically in his 1734 *Erste Gründe der Weltweisheit*.[13] Now Gottsched's central thesis is that the cultivation of taste is necessary to achieve the highest good. The highest good, the final end of

[11] See 'An den Leser', the preface to the first edition of *Critische Dichtkunst*, *Ausgewählte Werke*, ed. Joachim Birke und Brigitte Birke, 7 vols. (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1973), VI/2, 403.

[12] See *Die vernünftigen Tadlerinnen*, vol. I, January 31, 1725, Fünftes Stück (Halle: Spörl, 1725), pp. 33–40.

[13] See *Der Biedermann*, 'Neuntes Blatt', June 30, 1727 (Leipzig: Wolfgang Deer, 1727–29), I, 33–6; and *Erste Gründe der Weltweisheit*, §§66–68; II, 44–6.

human beings, is happiness. Happiness consists in nothing more than constant or enduring pleasure. But in what does pleasure consist? Gottsched's answer is simple, straightforward, and, at least at first blush, surprising: the contemplation of beauty.[14] Falling back upon Wolff's theory of pleasure, Gottsched holds that we acquire true and lasting pleasure only when we perceive real as opposed to apparent perfection. He also maintains, again with Wolff, that the perception of real perfection is nothing less than beauty.[15] Hence *all* true pleasure is for Gottsched aesthetic, because it is the perception of perfection, which is nothing less than beauty. And so the central importance of taste: it alone gives us the power to discern and appreciate true beauty, the main source of all real and enduring pleasure, the fundamental component of the highest good.

If pleasure consists in the contemplation of beauty, how do we go about acquiring it? Gottsched thinks that we must first learn to be sensitive to the world around us. Since this is the best of all possible worlds, as Leibniz taught,[16] there is perfection everywhere, and we get some of the enduring pleasure of happiness simply by learning to be responsive to it and appreciative of it. Hence Gottsched tells us that the entire universe is a beautiful stage, in which there are three sources of wonder and delight: the perfection of ourselves, of nature, and of God.[17] To be happy we only need to contemplate this stage, to admire these forms of perfection. Fostering this aesthetic attitude toward the world was one of the central aims of *Der Biedermann*, which vowed to increase the general happiness by making people aware and appreciative of their place in this, the best of all possible worlds.[18] Prima facie this aesthetic attitude seems to be purely passive, to acquiesce in an almost complacent view of the world that is already perfect. But Gottsched assures us that it is entirely compatible with, indeed complementary to, the fundamental principle of ethics itself: 'Do everything to make yourself and others more perfect'.[19] He explains that devoting ourselves to our own perfection, and that of our fellow citizens, only increases our own pleasure, and that of everyone else, because the greater the perfection, the greater the pleasure we derive from perceiving it.

[14] Gottsched writes in *Der Biedermann:* "Wer auf die Natur des Menschen und seinen Neigungen etwas genauer acht hat, der wird leicht wahrnehmen, daß ihm nichts gefällt, nichts eine Lust und Vergnügung bringet, als die Schönheit, und das Erkenntniß der Vollkommenheit" (34). Since Gottsched thinks that beauty is the pleasure that comes from the knowledge of perfection, both these expressions amount to the same.

[15] Cf. *Erste Gründe* §402; I, 239; *Der Biedermann*, p. 34.

[16] On Gottsched's debt to Leibniz's optimism, see 'Vorrede' to *Erste Gründe* and *Der Biedermann*, 'Zwei und Achtzigstes Blatt', November 29, 1728, II, 128.

[17] See 'Neuntes Blatt', June 30, 1727; I, 35–6.

[18] See 'Erstes Blatt', May 1, 1772; I, 4. Cf. 'Zwei und Achtzigstes Blatt', November 29, 1728, II, 125–8.

[19] *Erste Gründe*, §68; II, 45–6.

Hence Gottsched's aesthetic view of the world is based on Leibniz's optimism. Gottsched thinks that this is the most *beautiful* of all possible worlds because he endorses Leibniz's thesis that this is the *best* of all possible worlds. To transform the best of all possible worlds into the most beautiful we only need taste, the power of discerning all these perfections. Sure enough, Gottsched was an early champion of this Leibnizian doctrine, defending it decades before Voltaire's vicious parody in *Candide*. It would be very unfair, however, to cast Gottsched in the role of a Dr. Pangloss *avant la lettre*. Ever since his early Leipzig years he had been deeply troubled by the problem of evil.[20] It seemed to him that God, the omnipotent creator, had to be the source of evil. Leibniz's *Theodicée* cured him of his doubts when he came to realize that the chief source of evil came from culpable human ignorance, from our failure to know the good and to act on it. His defense of Leibniz's optimism appears mainly in his *Erste Gründe der Weltweisheit*, where he expounds systematically his natural theology.[21]

To an important extent, however, Gottsched's defense of optimism does not depend on metaphysics at all. His most revealing account of his reasons for endorsing optimism appears in a short lecture, his 'Rede von den Vorzügen und Vollkommenheiten des Menschen' (1730).[22] Here Gottsched admits that we can look at the world and human beings from two opposing angles, one optimistic and the other pessimistic. From the optimistic angle the world seems beautiful, pleasant, and good; and from the pessimistic it seems ugly, painful, and bad. We can see human beings from similar perspectives. There are humanists who are optimistic about human nature, because they see its apparently infinite potentiality for good; and there are misanthropes who are pessimistic about human nature, because they see its apparently infinite potentiality for evil. Remarkably, Gottsched is willing to admit there is truth in both perspectives. He thinks that recognizing the validity of both will make us more cautious and tolerant in making our judgments about the worth of life and human beings. Still, in the end, Gottsched believes that there are stronger reasons for accepting the optimistic standpoint. His reasons are more moral than metaphysical, more pragmatic than speculative. The main reason for accepting the optimistic standpoint is simply that it gives one much greater peace of mind. The more the optimist sees perfection in things, the happier he becomes; the more the pessimist sees imperfection in things, the more miserable he becomes. Because of their effect on the attitude and happiness of the believer, optimism and pessimism are self-fulfilling doctrines. Hence the choice for optimism is clear.

[20] See Waniek, *Gottsched und die deutsche Literatur*, p. 28.

[21] *Erste Gründe*, §§1121–77; I, 563–92.

[22] *Gesammelte Schriften*, VI, 32–46.

3. Defense of Tragedy

It is striking that Gottsched's defense of the aesthetic attitude toward the world is the very opposite of Nietzsche's. While Gottsched's defense presupposes his optimism, Nietzsche's rests on his pessimism. Gottsched thinks that the aesthetic attitude reveals the perfections of the world; Nietzsche holds that it conceals its horrors. So much for Gottsched as the forerunner of Nietzsche!

Obviously, we cannot begin to resolve the issues between Gottsched and Nietzsche here. But the contrast between them does pose an interesting question: How does Gottsched deal with tragedy? Since tragedy shows how good people suffer misfortune, it would seem to fly in the face of Gottsched's optimism and to support Nietzsche's pessimism. But Gottsched did not want to banish the tragedians from his republic; rather, he goes out of his way to secure them a prominent place. Why is this? Why did he vindicate the tragedians when they seem to undermine his own worldview?

Gottsched first outlined his defense of tragedy in a 1729 speech, 'Die Schauspiele und besonders die Tragödien sind aus einer wohlbestellten Republik nicht zu verbannen'.[23] The speech, as the title suggests, is Gottsched's answer to Plato's banishment of the artists in Book X of the *Republic*. The heart of his defense is very simple: tragedy is a crucial instrument of enlightenment, the most effective means for the moral and civil education of the people. For Gottsched, tragedy, like all poetry, is essentially fable. It tells us a moral truth in a pleasing sensible form; and it teaches us the general precepts of morality through concrete examples, whether from history or from imagination. This is the most effective means of teaching the people the basics of morality, Gottsched thinks, because most of them do not have the leisure or training to appreciate the abstruse demonstrations of metaphysics, natural theology, and natural law. Art has a powerful advantage over philosophy, then, because it can appeal to the heart and imagination, which are much more powerful springs of human conduct than reason. Although tragedy sometimes shows how vice prospers and virtue suffers, it never does so in a manner that would make the spectator prefer vice to virtue; rather, it always makes us sympathize with the virtuous man who suffers misfortune. Rather than undermining our faith in the moral universe, then, tragedy supports it by making us admire someone who struggles against adversity. Gottsched admits that plays do not have an immediate transformative effect on their audience; they do not instantly

[23] *Gesammelte Schriften*, VI, 254–64. See also *Der Biedermann*, 'Ein und Achtzigstes Blatt', November 22, 1798, II, 121–4; and *Critische Dichtkunst* Theil II, Cap. X, 'Von Tragödien oder Trauerspielen', *Ausgewählte Werke*, VI/2, 309–35.

convert people to the paths of virtue. However, somewhat defensively, he notes that this is also true of sermons, which no one would want to abolish. The improvement of the human heart is not a work that can be achieved in a couple of hours; and it is enough that a play contributes only a little to this end.

In his 1729 speech Gottsched's main concern is to defend tragedy against those who would banish it on moral grounds; he deals only indirectly with the broader metaphysical question that tragedy poses for his optimism. It is noteworthy, however, that he turns to just this question in a later lecture, his 1751 'Ob man in theatralischen Gedichten allezeit die Tugend als belohnt, und das Laster als bestraft vorstellen möge?'.[24] From his optimism and moralistic conception of theater one might think that he answers the question in the affirmative; but he does just the opposite. He argues that a poet not only may but indeed must show that virtue is sometimes vulnerable and vice victorious. The chief premise behind his argument is the principle of imitation. Since we so often see in nature that virtue goes unrewarded and vice unpunished, the poet has to reflect these facts. This is a remarkable argument for an optimist, a virtual admission that we do not live in a morally perfect world! But Gottsched, having seen the threat to his worldview, struggles to blunt the force of his concession. The limitations of tragedy are such, he argues, that it cannot represent the moral perfections of the universe. Since the principle of imitation means that a tragedy cannot present more than a single action, it is impossible in a well-constructed play to show that virtue is rewarded and vice is punished, for that usually happens only after many actions or over a long time. In showing the misfortunes of the virtuous, then, tragedy represents only a partial view of the world; it fails to rise to the perspective of the whole, which shows that everything is directed according to moral ends. Such are the ways of divine providence, Gottsched consoles himself, that, whether in this world or the next, virtue will get its reward and vice its punishment.[25] This argument implies then, that if tragedy were not so limited, it would have to disappear as an art form; for in the broader metaphysical view of things there is no tragedy: virtue is rewarded and vice is punished in the best of all possible worlds.

Gottsched's defense of tragedy is ultimately Aristotelian. Time and again he falls back on Aristotle to defend tragedy against Plato's famous criticisms in Book X of the *Republic.* Although in his first lecture Gottsched alludes to Plato's objections, he never treats them explicitly or specifically. Still, given that he explicitly affirms Aristotle's views, we do not have to guess what his response would have been to Plato. The theory of catharsis is his reply to Plato's objection that tragedy makes the spectator morally weak by encouraging

[24] *Gesammelte Schriften*, VI, 265–84. [25] Ibid., 276–7.

him to feel pity. By arousing fear and pity in the spectator, tragedy not only develops our powers of moral sympathy, but it also steels us emotionally should similar misfortunes befall ourselves. Gottsched also relies on Aristotle to respond to Plato's objection that poetry, like painting, only imitates things in the sensible world. Following Aristotle he replies that drama gives us a much more philosophical form of knowledge than history.[26] While history teaches us only what some particular person did at a particular time and place, tragedy teaches us something much more universal: what a person of such and such a character would, should, or could do on similar occasions.

Although in his defense of the arts Gottsched is constantly taking issue with Plato, even if only implicitly, in at least one crucial respect his attitude toward the arts is fundamentally Platonic. For never does he question the Platonic doctrine that philosophy should have sovereignty over the arts. Indeed, time and again he reaffirms this doctrine, true to the rationalist tradition. It is the philosopher alone, he writes in the *Criticische Dichtkunst*, who determines the right character of a poet (II, 3; 145). Since, as Wolff taught, the philosopher alone knows the reasons for things, he alone knows why we regard some things rather than others as beautiful; hence it is the task of the philosopher, not the artist, to determine the basic rules of art. The revolution in philosophy inaugurated by the Wolffian system, Gottsched announces in the preface to the first edition of the *Critische Dichtkunst*, has finally established the proper concept of criticism.[27] It has shown us that the critic is not a pedant or philologist but first and foremost a philosopher. While the public can enjoy art, and the artist can create it, they still proceed blindly and haphazardly, hitting their target only by luck rather than skill, without the guidance of the philosopher. Without the philosopher the artist and the public fumble and stumble in the Platonic cave, because they have but an implicit and confused knowledge of the fundamental principles that govern all the arts. So, in the end, although the arts are not banished from the Gottschedian republic, they are still under the firm dictatorship of philosophy.

It is in this last respect that Gottsched became a challenge and target for future generations. Although he gave such importance to taste and the arts, Kant, Schiller, and the Romantics would rebel against the very terms in which he justified them. Gottsched's terms were much too philosophical and moral; they could justify the arts only at the expense of their autonomy, their right to pursue

[26] See *Critische Dichtkunst*, I, iv, §21; *Werke*, VI/1, 220–1. All references to this work will be to the edition by Joachim and Brigitte Birke, *Johann Christoph Gottsched, Ausgewählte Werke* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1973). Upper-case Roman numerals refer to the part, lower-case numerals to the chapter, and '§' to the paragraph number within each chapter.

[27] 'An den Leser', *Ausgewählte Werke*, VI/2, 394–5.

truth independent of morality and religion, and independent of the guidance of philosophy. From a later perspective, then, Gottsched had disenfranchised the arts by making them the handmaiden of philosophy. The development of the concept of aesthetic autonomy by Kant, Schiller, and the romantics in the 1780s and 1790s is in no small measure a reaction against Gottsched.

4. Theory of Taste

Given the importance of taste for Gottsched, there could be no more important part of his philosophy than the theory of taste. Only such a theory would be able to determine the principles of critical judgment, without which the spectator cannot enjoy, and the artist cannot create, true beauty. Even more urgently, only such a theory could settle the question whether there really is a standard of taste. Gottsched knew all too well that he could not simply assume the existence of such a standard, and that some writers had equated taste with whatever we like. After studying the controversy concerning taste in France and Britain, he was determined to settle it once and for all.

Gottsched's theory of taste appears chiefly in chapter III of his *Critische Dichtkunst*. His theory is essentially a restatement and defense of Leibniz and Wolff. What were, however, only a few hints in Leibniz, and only a few paragraphs in Wolff, now become a detailed theory. While Gottsched is not rigorous, or even consistent, he is at least clear and explicit, revealing both the strengths and weaknesses of aesthetic rationalism. His lucid exposition makes chapter III one of the clearest statements of the early rationalist position on taste.

To avoid the controversies surrounding the concept of taste, Gottsched insists on getting back to basics and explaining the issues in simple and straightforward terms. Resolution of these issues, he says, requires three things: first, knowledge of the chief faculties of the soul, which we get only from philosophy; second, skill in logic so that one can make good definitions; and, third, practice in poetry itself (I, iv, §2; VI/1, 170). The French, who began the controversies about taste, have not treated the problem well, he says, because they failed to satisfy the first two requirements; the Germans, however, because they have a better knowledge of logic and systematic philosophy, have made much more progress in resolving these issues. By applying logic, metaphysics, and psychology to them, Gottsched is confident that he can considerably advance the discussion.

Gottsched begins with an analysis of taste in the literal sense. Taste is the power of the tongue to sense and distinguish the various effects of food and

drink upon it (I, iv, §3; 170). Applying Leibniz's classification of ideas, he explains that the knowledge that we acquire through this sense consists in clear but confused representations (§4; 171–2). They are clear because we recognize them immediately, and because we can distinguish them from one another, viz., sweet from sour, bitter from smooth; but they are also confused because we cannot explain further in what these properties consist and precisely how they differ from one another. In this respect taste does not differ from any of our other senses, because the colors of sight, the sounds of hearing, the odors of smell, and the textures of touch all consist in clear but confused representations. It is because of the confusion intrinsic to these qualities, Gottsched thinks, that people say there cannot be any disputing about taste.

Having analyzed taste in the narrow literal sense, Gottsched turns to its broader metaphorical one. He begins with one general observation of great significance for the argument to come: that one does not use taste in this latter sense whenever it is possible to reach universal agreement. Hence no one speaks about taste in any of the sciences where reason plays the decisive role, because the use of reason makes it possible to have universal assent (I, iv, §6; 171–2). Theorems in geometry and proofs in arithmetic, for example, are not matters of taste. However, one can speak of taste in the liberal arts, viz., poetry, painting, music, and architecture, because here reason cannot reach definite conclusions. Furthermore, we can also talk about taste in studies where there is some controversy, Gottsched says, because people speak of natural law according to "the taste of Pufendorf", or theology according to "the taste of Mosheim". Whenever, however, we can demonstrate something according to clear and distinct concepts—whenever it is possible to reach universal agreement—there something ceases to be a matter of taste.

On the basis of this observation Gottsched concludes that taste, even in the broader metaphorical sense, also depends on clear but confused concepts of things (I, iv, §7; 172–3). Like taste in the narrow literal sense, taste in the broader metaphorical sense judges things according to the clear but confused knowledge of the senses. It is the confusion of sensory knowledge that ultimately explains why taste even in this sense is subject to disagreement. Hence Gottsched finally arrives at his definition of taste in the metaphorical sense: the power of judging beauty according to the clear but confused knowledge of sensibility (§9; 172–3).

It would seem from Gottsched's analysis so far that he accepts an irresolvable subjectivity in matters of taste. Since he says that taste rests upon the confused knowledge of the senses, and since he also says that such confusion is the

source of disagreement, it seems he should conclude that there is no universal agreement about matters of taste. However, this is just the conclusion he is so eager to avoid. The whole point of his chapter is to demonstrate that there is a distinction between good and bad taste, where good taste is what *everyone* of sufficient *intellectual discernment* would approve. His discussion shifts abruptly in this direction when he considers a specific example: a layman and architect each choosing the plan for a house (§7; 172–3). The layman will choose the plan that suits his taste; but the architect will adopt the plan that conforms to the rules of his discipline. In these cases it is possible that the layman and architect agree; but it is also possible that they disagree (§8; 173). What follows if they disagree? In that case, Gottsched argues, the judgment of the architect is to be preferred to the layman. The contrary thesis—that the plan of the layman is the most beautiful—is absurd because *ex hypothesi* it violates the laws of architecture. This would be like saying that a piece of music is beautiful that violates all the rules of music. The rules of the liberal arts do not depend upon the whims of a single person, Gottsched insists, because they have their ground in the eternal nature of things, in the correspondence of a manifold, or in its order and harmony (§8; 173–4).

Whatever the technical flaws of Gottsched's argument, he concludes from it that there is a distinction between good and bad taste. Good taste is that which judges *correctly* from the senses—or on the basis of clear but confused knowledge—that something is beautiful or ugly; bad taste is that which judges *incorrectly* from the senses that something is beautiful or ugly (I, iv, §9; 174–5). The crucial question here is what determines whether the judgment is correct or incorrect? Gottsched is ready with his answer: it consists in conformity with the rules, compliance with the norms for the perfection of each kind of thing, viz., buildings, musical compositions, poems, etc (§10; 176). Hence the ultimate arbiter of good taste, Gottsched explains, is the understanding (*Verstand*), which alone determines the rules of perfection for each kind of thing.

Having concluded that the intellect is the final judge of taste, Gottsched assigns an almost negligible role to the senses. The senses themselves cannot be such arbiters of taste because by their very nature they consist in indistinct knowledge, which is precisely the source of all the disputes about taste. Pleasure too is not a sufficient criterion of taste, Gottsched argues, because the whole question of taste is what we *should* take pleasure in (§10; 175). Good taste is about taking pleasure *in beauty*, and it is not the case that anything we like, or anything that pleases us, is beautiful. Something is not beautiful just because we like it; rather, we should like something because it is beautiful. Beauty is that which conforms to the rules of perfection of a thing; and only if we

have a sufficiently perceptive intellect do we take pleasure in something that conforms to these rules.

Despite the care Gottsched devotes to the exposition of his theory, it has glaring deficiencies. The most obvious is that its conclusion contradicts its starting point. It begins with the thesis that taste belongs to sensibility, the faculty of clear but confused representations; and it ends with the thesis that taste belongs to the understanding, the faculty of clear but distinct representations. To resolve this tension, Gottsched has to make one controversial assumption: that the confused representations of sensibility are ultimately reducible in principle, through a sufficiently long analysis, to the distinct representations of the understanding. One might question this assumption, though, on the very plausible grounds that the characteristic qualities of beauty—its ineffable charm, grace or "je ne sais quoi"—depend on the irreducible confusions of sensibility. So, on this view, the very act of translating beauty into distinct intellectual terms would destroy it. Such, indeed, was the thesis of Leibniz, who held that the charm of beauty rests on the inherent inexplicability of confused representations.[28] Ironically, Gottsched cites just this view of Leibniz to support his own theory![29]

The difficulties of Gottsched's theory of taste resurface in his theory of beauty, which he sketches in his *Erste Gründe der Weltweisheit*. Following Wolff, Gottsched identifies beauty with the sensate perception of perfection. Perfection is harmony, unity in difference; and when we perceive it through the senses it is called beauty (*Schönheit*) (§249; I, 132–3). The perception of beauty is clear but confused sensate knowledge; in other words, we do not have a *distinct* knowledge of its perfection, the capacity to describe its distinguishing characteristics in words (§27; I, 18–19). The pleasure of beauty too, Gottsched says, consists in the clear but confused perception of perfection (§514; I, 249). It follows from this analysis that the characteristic pleasure of beauty should be destroyed through intellectual analysis. After all, beauty consists in the *confused* sensate perception of perfection, which intellectual analysis progressively grinds into dust. However, following Wolff, Gottsched insists that the more we have a clear and distinct knowledge of the rules the greater should be our pleasure. There are degrees of pleasure, he explains, according to the degree of perfection in the object, and the degree to which the perceiver understands that perfection (§§517–18; I, 250–1). How, though,

[28] See Leibniz, 'Remarques sur les trois volumes intitulés: Characteristicks of Men, Manners, Opinions Times', Gerhardt III, 430: "Le goût distingué de l'entendement, consiste dans les perceptions confuses dont on ne sauroit assés rendre raison."

[29] See Gottsched, §9; 174n. He cites the very lines quoted above.

is this possible? When the *confused* perception of perfection is necessary to beauty, analysis should not increase but decrease our pleasure, because it provides *distinct* knowledge of perfection.

Viewed as a whole, Gottsched's theories of taste and beauty suffer from an insuperable dilemma. He cannot account for *both* the characteristic sensual qualities of beauty and the possibility of a standard of taste. These characteristic qualities involve confusion; but standards of taste require distinct concepts. We acquire such concepts only through analysis; but analysis destroys the ineffable charm or inexplicable grace of beauty. Furthermore, by Gottsched's own argument, the element of confusion makes agreement impossible; but the standard of taste presupposes the possibility of such agreement. So, in sum, beauty is either purely intellectual, so that there can be the agreement or concepts necessary to a standard of taste; or it still has its sensible charm and grace, so that there cannot be the agreement or concepts necessary to a standard of taste. In other words, Gottsched does not allow for standards of taste that can account for the *sui generis* qualities of beauty. We shall see in later chapters how some of Gottsched's successors—notably, Baumgarten and Mendelssohn—attempted to find the middle path between the horns of this dilemma. Seen from a broader historical perspective, Gottsched's theory of taste is essentially a reinstatement of Wolff's. Although it is more refined and sophisticated than the crude sketch in the *Psychologia empirica*, it ultimately does not get beyond its central assumptions. The fundamental bias of Gottsched's theory, like Wolff's, is intellectualistic. Hence Gottsched assigns to the understanding alone the power of deciding matters of taste; he presupposes that the sensible qualities of beauty are ultimately reducible to intellectual terms; and he assumes that the analysis of the intellect does not decrease but increases aesthetic pleasure. The most controversial and problematic aspect of Wolff's theory reappears in Gottsched's: it gives little place to the indefinable, the "je ne sais quoi", that mysterious dimension of beauty that is intellectually inexhaustible. Here too we shall see how other thinkers in the rationalistic tradition attempt to get beyond Wolff's and Gottsched's intellectualism by leaving space for mystery.

5. Poetics

Of all the arts, the most important for Gottsched was poetry. He rarely discusses music, painting, and sculpture, which were decidedly lesser arts for him. His interests in poetics came chiefly from his concern with the theater. Since

most plays in the early eighteenth were still in verse, the precondition for the rehabilitation of German theater was the reformation of German poetry. What in turn drove Gottsched's interest in the theater was his allegiance to the *Aufklärung*. In early eighteenth-century Germany there was no more powerful platform for enlightenment than the stage.

Gottsched's chief work on poetics was his *Critische Dichtkunst*.[30] Its aim was to set standards for German poetry so that it could vie with the best French and English models. Hence it was not simply a theoretical treatise about the principles of poetry but also a practical manual about how to write good verse. To this end, Gottsched collected the wisdom of the best critics from modern and classical sources, gave advice about every form of poetry, from the ode to the epic, and provided copious examples of models to follow and pitfalls to avoid. In the preface of the first edition he is perfectly frank about his eclectic method.[31] He does not intend to write something new and original, but only to bring together the best critical ideas from the ages. On no account is the work the realization of the Wolffian program, the application of the mathematical method to poetry. It applies Wolffian principles, to be sure, but not a Wolffian method. Although Gottsched states that he wants to bring all the rules into some kind of systematic unity, this does not mean that it proceeds *more geometrico*; the work is better described as an organized compilation, where sundry and scattered critical views are gathered together and placed under specific topics. Gottsched tells us that he was inspired by the *Diskurse der Mahler* of the Swiss aestheticians J. J. Bodmer and J. J. Breitinger to seek the reasons for critical judgment; but he was never so ambitious, or so foolish, as to announce or promise, as they did, a program for a mathematical poetics.[32]

Gottsched outlines his concept of poetry in the first six chapters of volume I, the core of the general or theoretical part of *Critische Dichtkunst*. Following Aristotle, whom he regards as "the philosopher" regarding poetics, Gottsched conceives poetry first and foremost as an imitation of nature (I, 1, §33; VI/1, 141). This is, of course, only its genus, not its *differentia specifica*, because music, painting, and sculpture are also forms of imitation. Poetry differs from them, however, only in the *manner* of its imitation. While the musician imitates nature

[30] All references to this work will be to *Ausgewahlte Werke*, ed. Joachim and Brigitte Birke, 7 vols. (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1973). The first set of numbers refers to part, chapter, and paragraph; the second to volume and page numbers of this edition.

[31] *Ausgewählte Werke*, VI/2, 400.

[32] Waniek is correct when he criticizes Danzel for thinking that Gottsched intended to provide a philosophical foundation for poetry. See his *Gottsched und die deutsche Litteratur*, p. 129. Braitmaier, *Geschichte*, I, 93, makes the same mistake as Danzel.

through sound, the painter through color and canvas, and the sculptor through chisel and stone, the poet imitates nature through rhythmic speech (I, 2, §5; VI/1, 147). Poetry differs from history, not insofar as it is verse, because, as Aristotle taught, history too can be in verse. What is characteristic of poetry is that it imitates nature through the imagination; it is, as it were, *invented* history. To make this point Gottsched relies on German etymology: poetry is *Dichtung*, and "*dichten*" means to invent or imagine (I, iv, §7; VI/1, 202).

If poetry is fiction, how does it imitate nature? Gottsched has been charged with "grenzlose Gedankenlosigkeit" because of a blatant contradiction between his conception of poetry and his adherence to the principle of imitation.[33] There is, however, no contradiction at all. To see how imitation and imagination fit together in his poetics we only need to recall Aristotle, whom Gottsched closely follows. He adheres to Aristotle's theory that poetry is an imitation of nature not in the narrow sense that it describes what has happened, like the historian, but in the broader sense that it imagines what *could*, *should*, or *would* happen under certain hypothetical circumstances (I, iv, §28; VI/1, 220–1). The compatibility, indeed interdependence, of imitation and imagination become further apparent when we keep in mind the broad rationalist conception of truth, which encompasses not only what *is* the case but whatever *can* be the case. This means that the poet can create a possible world and still remain within the realm of truth. Sure enough, Gottsched explicitly takes up this rationalist concept of truth and uses it to defend the poetic imagination; hence he cites Wolff's dictum that a novel is the history of a possible world (I, iv, §9; VI/1, 204).

What also combines fiction and imitation for Gottsched is fable. "The origin and soul of all poetry", he writes, "is chiefly fable" (I, iv, §7; VI/1, 202). Fable seems to unite these characteristics because it is both true and false: true, insofar as it contains a profound moral lesson; and false, insofar as it dresses this moral in a fictional shell. Gottsched therefore defines fable more precisely: it is a narrative about possible events having a hidden moral point (I, iv, §9; VI/1, 204). Gottsched's equation of poetry with fable is initially somewhat surprising, given our modern understanding of poetry, which virtually equates it with all forms of verse. Here, though, it is important to keep in mind Gottsched's concern with drama. The chief source of his view of poetry is Aristotle's identification of the core of drama with plot or narrative.[34] One might still object that such a conception of poetry is too narrow on the grounds that it scarcely accommodates some genres, viz., odes or elegies. Gottsched stuck to

[33] Braitmaier, *Geschichte*, I, 102.
[34] Gottsched explicitly cites Aristotle, *Poetics*, chapter vi, I, iv, §7; VI/1, 202.

his theory, however, because of its great strategic value. What chiefly motivates it is his concern to defend poetry. If poetry were fable, then it would have a moral content, contrary to those who dismissed it as entertainment; and it would also be a source of philosophical truth, contrary to the classic Platonic objection. Although to a later generation Gottsched's stress on fable seemed narrowly moralistic, it is only fair to keep in mind his context: the pressing need to defend poetry against its powerful religious and moral critics.[35]

If Gottsched was ready to press poetry into the service of morality, he was reluctant to make it do the bidding of religion. One of the most striking features of his conception of poetry is that it is so explicitly and strictly secular or naturalistic. Since Gottsched aimed to harness poetry for the purpose of *Aufklärung*, he wanted to get it out of the hands of religion, where it could be an instrument of enthusiasm and superstition. Hence, in the first chapter of *Critische Dichtkunst*, he takes issue with the common theory that poetry arose from the primal need to praise God, and that the poet was the first priest of his people (I, 1, §17; VI/1, 130). Poetry, he contends, had an entirely natural origin: the need for people to express and communicate their feelings (I, 1, §18; VI/1, 131). Admittedly, the people regarded the first poets as inspired, and so they made them their priests; but such a belief, Gottsched implies, was only the product of a primitive superstition (I, 1, §28; VI/1, 137). So rigorous is Gottsched's secularism that he does not acknowledge even the literary qualities of the Bible. The poems in the Bible are hardly masterpieces, he claims, because ancient Hebrew did not have the complex structure of Latin or Greek. He is skeptical of the English claim to find great poetry in the Bible, on the grounds that people generally find what they read into it (I, 1, §6; VI/1, 118). In separating poetry from its traditional alliance with religion, Gottsched took an important step toward the *Goethezeit*, which would see art rather than religion as the chief source of modern culture.

Gottsched's overwhelming concern for creating good poetry, rather than simply theorizing about it, eventually got him into trouble. In one notorious passage from *Critische Dichtkunst* he gave some rather pat advice about how to write a poem (I, 4, §21; VI/1, 25). To write a poem, he explained, the aspiring author need do nothing more than choose a moral dictum and find the appropriate story to illustrate it. Such advice, combined with Gottsched's insistence on the rules, made it seem as if he wanted to concoct poems according to a recipe book. "Gottsched wants us to write poems", J. E. Schlegel sniffed, "just like a *Hausfrau* makes a pudding."[36] There seemed to be little need for

[35] The point was stressed by Waniek, *Gottsched und die deutsche Literatur seiner Zeit*, p. 151.

[36] As cited in Braitmaier, *Geschichte*, I, 107.

imagination, still less for inspiration, and none at all for genius. Gottsched's opponents lighted on these passages, along with some bad verse written by his acolytes, as evidence for his philistinism.

Such a critique is unfair. No one was more opposed to *Reimschmiederei* than Gottsched. He insisted that what makes a good poem is its content, the thoughts behind it, not its mere compliance with rules of versification. The whole objection rests upon confusing *complying* with rules with self-consciously *applying* them, as if Gottsched were making the latter a necessary condition of the former. While Gottsched does think that conformity with the rules is a necessary condition for a good poem, he does not expect that the poet actually has to apply them self-consciously; the poet could be guided by instinct, passion, or inspiration, and still write a perfectly good poem because it happens to comply with the rules. Gottsched realizes that, because we can often comply with the rules instinctively or subconsciously, knowledge of them is not necessary to write a good poem. However, he insists that, because such knowledge makes clear and distinct what we otherwise do subconsciously, it helps to direct our energies, hone our skills, and direct our talents.

The later generation of *Stürmer und Dranger* who condemned Gottsched for his lack of appreciation for genius and inspiration really only begged the question against him. For, already in the 1720s, Gottsched was suspicious of inflated claims for genius. His naturalism and secularism made him skeptical of the ancient claims for divine inspiration. The poet needed to have a high degree of wit, acuity, and imagination, he insisted, but that did not mean he had some unique gift or capacity bestowed upon him by the gods. Rightly, Gottsched warned that natural talent and inspiration are never sufficient guarantees of writing good verse, and that in the past they had all too often been the excuse for confusion, turgidity, and self-indulgence. He also saw clearly that writing good poetry is a matter of discipline, training, and education as much as inspiration and imagination; and he advises the poet to stand back from his feelings and insights before he would commit them to print. Gottsched's skepticism toward claims of genius in the *Kritische Dichtkunst* looks forward to Reynold's *Discourses*, written some forty years later.[37]

Gottsched's poetics is a central pillar of his aesthetic rationalism. It represents the spirit of Wolff's rationalism, much as Boileau's poetics once embodied the spirit of Descartes's rationalism.[38] It is indeed no accident that Gottsched

[37] See Reynolds Third and Sixth Discourses, written 1770 and 1774, in *Discourses on Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), pp. 41–53, 93–113.

[38] Boileau's relationship to Descartes is much more complicated than Gottsched's relationship to Wolff, since Boileau was never a direct student or disciple of Descartes as Gottsched was of Wolff.

follows his great French predecessor on point after point. Hence he cites approvingly the famous lines from Boileau's *L'Art poétique*: "Aimez donc la Raison! Que toujours vos ecrits/Emprutent d'elle seule & leur lustre & leur prix" (I, xi, §5; VI/1, 425). The crux of Gottsched's rationalist poetics is his definition of poetic style or what he calls "the poetic manner of writing" (*die poetische Schreibart*). He defines a manner of writing in general as "the exposition of many connected thoughts, such that, through sentences and manners of speaking, one can distinctly perceive their connection" (§I, xi, §1; 421). Here the reference to *distinct* perception is telling, for it brings poetry into the realm of the intellect (*Verstand*), which Gottsched defines as the power of representing things distinctly.[39] What distinguishes poetry from prose, Gottsched argues, is simply the greater degree of wit in poetry (§I, xi, §6; 427). He defines wit as "the capacity of the intellect to perceive the similarities of things".[40] Wit manifests itself in poetry in the form of similes, metaphors, and figures of speech. Hence poetry differs from prose, on Gottsched's reckoning, simply in terms of its greater use of figurative speech. Since wit too is an intellectual power, the difference between prose and poetry is more one of degree than of kind. Poetry too is intellectual discourse, though of a more figurative and entertaining kind.

Such an intellectualist or rationalist conception of poetry is not simply a reflection of Gottsched's neo-classical taste, but the result of his general philosophical principles. There are two basic premises behind it. First, the classical principle of imitation, which states that the very essence and purpose of poetry consists in the imitation of nature (I, 1, §32; 142). Second, the rationalist conception of nature, which Gottsched inherits from Leibniz and Wolff, according to which nature is governed by the greatest possible order amid the greatest possible variety. Adding these premises together necessarily yields a very intellectual concept of poetry. Since a poem should imitate nature, and since nature is rational, it follows that a poem should be rational too; in other words, it should have some of the distinguishing characteristics of rationality: simplicity, clarity, precision, and distinctness; the whole poem should have that unity in diversity characteristic of nature itself.

The apparent upshot of such an intellectualist poetics is that there is no place for the irrational or indefinable, the "je ne sais quoi". Gottsched does not seem to acknowledge the penumbral dimension of poetry, its suggestiveness, allusion, and ambiguity. Sure enough, in his *Critische Dichtkunst* he insists that

On Boileau's relationship to Cartesianism, see Heinrich von Stein, *Die Entstehung der neueren Ästhetik* (Stuttgart: Cotta, 1886), pp. 33–54.

[39] *Erste Gründe der Weltweisheit*, §478; II, 233.

[40] Ibid, §488; II, 321.

one of the greatest virtues of a poetic sentence is its distinctness (I, ix, §18; VI/1, 367). It is noteworthy, however, that Gottsched does not think that the ideal of distinctness commits him to endorsing a plain and natural style, as if the best poem were simply a kind of rhythmic prose. He insists that the poet should avoid the banal as well as the bombastic (I, viii, §3; 321). The poet should seek the middle path between the fantastic and trite, the high-blown and the prosaic, which consists in the judicious use of figurative speech (I, viii, §5; 323). The right use of metaphor, simile, and images, Gottsched admits, gives poems their special grace (I, viii, §3; 321). Although he recognizes the importance of figurative speech, he insists that the poet still must not depart from the ideal of distinctness (I, ix, §18; VI/1, 367). Even if it is not prosaic, every element of a poem should have a distinct meaning. Figurative speech must remain under the dominating control of the intellect (I, viii, §18; 342). There is no greater vice in the use of figurative speech, he warns us, than obscurity (I, viii, §19; 342). Nowadays the new Miltonian school would have us believe, he complains, that something is beautiful only if it is obscure. To prevent this kind of abuse, he lays down precise rules for the use of figurative speech, first and foremost among them the demand that similes and metaphors be immediately understandable (I, viii, §12; 331).

6. The Rules

Gottsched is notorious in German literary history as a grumpy fuddy-duddy, a pedantic stickler for the rules. The reputation is not entirely undeserved. The invocation of the rules became a virtual talisman for him. We have already seen how he made them the touchstone of good taste. But they were also his key for the revival of German theater and poetry. What Germany lacked was not literary talent, he believed, but the knowledge of how to direct it; and such knowledge only came from the rules. Hence Gottsched wrote in the preface to his *Sterbenden Cato:* "We are not lacking in great and sublime spirits who seem almost to be born for tragic poetry. Everything comes down to a science of rules, which, however, cannot be grasped without trouble and patience."[41]

For later generations, Gottsched's schoolmasterly insistence upon the rules was his tragic flaw, the source of his downfall from literary grace. Lessing, himself a believer in rules, savaged Gottsched for construing them so severely and narrowly. Gottsched's rules were not Aristotelian laws of nature, he

[41] *Ausgewählte Werke*, II, 4.

argued, but only the arbitrary, artificial, and affected conventions of French classicism. The *Stürmer und Dränger* of the 1760s—the young Goethe, Lenz, Hamann, Gerstenberg—saw Gottsched's rules as so many shackles on the creative imagination of the artist, whose genius should be free to create his own rules.

The rehabilitation of Gottsched in the nineteenth century made his emphasis on rules seem less like the work of a stuffy reactionary than that of a timely reformer. Danzel, for one, argued that Gottsched was perfectly correct to have insisted on the importance of rules, even if he went too far by making them the *sole* basis of literature.[42] Correctness in language and style is the foundation for good literature, Danzel believed, even if it cannot and should not be the only mark of literary quality. The rules were, however, the necessary antidote to the coarse and childish verse of Gottsched's day.

The troubled history and controversy surrounding Gottsched's invocation of the rules forces us to raise the more basic question: Why did Gottsched appeal to rules in the first place? What does he mean by them? What justification does he give for them?

The common view is that Gottsched provided no philosophical foundation whatsoever for his invocation of the rules, which was simply the legacy of the "*Schulpoesie*" of the seventeenth century, a legacy that Gottsched dogmatically assumed and rigidly applied.[43] This view entirely ignores, however, Gottsched's attempt to provide a metaphysical foundation for his aesthetics in his *Erste Gründe der Weltweisheit*. Here he precisely defines the concept of a rule, which is deeply embedded in his general ontology or *Grundlehre*. Gottsched's theory is indebted to Wolff's account of these concepts in his *Ontologia*.[44]

Gottsched's definition of a rule appears as part of a larger series of definitions, which begins with the concept of truth and ends with beauty. The truth of things is simply their order (§248; I, 132), which consists in "the similarity in the way and manner things are next to one another and succeed one another" (§246; I, 131). When many parts in a thing correspond to one another, such that there is an inner order to them, the thing is called perfect (§249; I, 132). Perfection is therefore harmony, the correspondence of a manifold (§249; I, 132). When such perfection appears to the senses, without being distinctly understood, it is beauty (§249; I, 133). It is in this context that Gottsched gives his definition of rules: they are simply laws of nature, the regular patterns in which things follow and stand next to one another (§247, 250–1; I, 131, 133).

[42] Danzel, *Gottsched und seine Zeit*, pp. 7–10. [43] Thus Braitmaier, *Geschichte*, I, 19, 93.

[44] Wolff, *Ontologia,* pars I, sectio III, cap. VI, De Ordine, Veritate & Perfectione, §§472–530, *Werke*, II/3, 360–412. On this text, see above, Chapter 2.5.

There are two basic principles behind Gottsched's definition of rules. First, the principle of sufficient reason, according to which everything in nature happens for a reason (§216; I, 118). Second, the essentialist principle that everything has an inner nature from which all its essential properties follow of necessity (§248; I, 132).[45] Gottsched joins these two principles, so that the sufficient reason for things lies in their essential natures. Ultimately, it is the nature of a thing that is the source of all order; this nature is the single cause from which its many actions or properties flow, and so it is the basis of its unity-in-variety or perfection. Since rules are another formulation for that order, we can no more deny rules than we can deny that nature is orderly. These rules are simply the ways in which the necessity of things manifests itself. They are the principles nature follows in creating order.

Although both these principles are controversial, they are still plausible. The principle of sufficient reason is indispensable, and essentialism remains at least defensible. So no one should charge Gottsched with basing his aesthetics upon an antiquated metaphysics. The main source of suspicion against Gottsched's ontology is that its essentialism involves an obsolete doctrine of final causes. After all, teleology is vital for Leibniz's metaphysics, which was in so many respects important for Gottsched. It is noteworthy, however, that, in this important respect, Gottsched expressly differs from Leibniz.[46] Following Wolff, he does not give final causes a foundational role in his ontology. He argues that final causes are intelligible only if there are intentions of rational beings, and that we have no reason to attribute intentions to all substances (§307; I, 156). Hence Gottsched regards Leibniz's monadology as highly speculative, because we have no evidence that the essence of living things consists in their powers of representation (§393; I, 195). Although Gottsched later formulates a theodicy of his own, a doctrine of divine providence according to which God is the source of all order and goodness in the universe, it is important to see that his belief in order does not presuppose it; rather, that belief is the basis for his theodicy, since he infers God's existence from independent evidence for order in nature.

Whatever the merits of Gottsched's metaphysics, one might well ask what all this has to do with aesthetics. Granted that nature follows rules, why must

[45] This is not Leibniz's predicate-in-notion principle, which maintains that *all* properties true of a thing follow from its essence. Gottsched holds at best a qualified version of this principle since he thinks, following Wolff, that there are *accidental* properties, and holds that only essential properties follow of necessity from the nature of a thing. See *Erste Gründe* (§§238–9; I, 128). Cf. Wolff, *Ontologia*, §148; II/3, 123.

[46] Gottsched's differences with Leibniz on this score go back to his early years at the University of Königsberg. His master's dissertation was a critique of Leibniz's monadology. See Waniek, *Gottsched und die deutsche Literatur*, pp. 11–12.

the artist follow nature? The short and simple answer to this question, of course, is the principle of imitation. If the artist must imitate nature, and if nature follows rules, the artist too must follow rules. There is a very revealing passage in Gottsched's *Critische Dichtkunst* where he makes just this connection between his metaphysics and aesthetics:

> Beauty has its source in the nature of a thing. God made everything according to number, mass, and weight. Natural things are beautiful in themselves; and if art wants to produce anything beautiful, it must imitate the model of nature. The exact proportion, order, and right measure of all parts, in which each thing consists, is the source of all beauty. The imitation of perfect nature therefore gives a work of art its perfection . . . (III, §20; VI, 183)

The passage shows the basic grounds for Gottsched's faith in rules. It suggests the following argument: (1) The purpose of art is to create beauty. (2) Beauty consists in proportion, order, and measure. (3) Proportion, order, and measure are based upon and created by rules. Therefore, (4) art achieves its end, the creation of beauty, only if it follows the rules. If, *per contra*, the artist were to renounce the rules, he would have to betray beauty itself, the sole ideal of art.

Rarely were the grounds of aesthetic rationalism laid out so plainly, revealing all its strengths and weaknesses. There are at least two vulnerable points to Gottsched's argument, both of them targets for later critics. First, he assumes that beauty is the sole source of aesthetic experience. His critics argued, as we shall soon see, that there are other forms of aesthetic experience that are not like beauty—the new, the great, and the violent—because they do not conform to order, proportion, and measure. If this is the case, these forms of experience do not conform to rules. Second, even assuming that beauty is the sole source of aesthetic experience, it is questionable that it is reducible to rules of mathematical proportion and harmony, because, as Leibniz already argued, this leaves out the "je ne sais quoi".

7. Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde

Later critics have seen Gottsched's insistence on the rules as a form of aesthetic tyranny chiefly because he seems to adhere to a very narrow conception of the principle of imitation. It appears as if Gottsched interprets this principle to mean that the poet should imitate nature in the sense of passively reproducing or copying the *real* world, i.e., what is actually given or happens to exist in nature. There is then no room for the poet to create his own world in the imagination. Hence Gottsched has been accused of clipping the wings of

the creative imagination; and the intellectual development after him has been understood as one of increasing liberalization, a continual extension of the boundaries of imagination.

There is both truth and falsehood in this criticism. The assessment of its merits is complex because of Gottsched's own vacillating accounts of the principle of imitation. In some places he gives this principle a very broad liberal interpretation, in others a much more narrow conservative one. Regarding the principle of imitation, Gottsched turns into a veritable Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. His liberal personality derives from Wolff's philosophy; his conservative personality from French classicism. Gottsched no more succeeded in uniting these two warring sides of himself than did R. L. Stevenson's character.

Gottsched's more liberal side appears chiefly in his account of the poetic imagination in his *Erste Gründe der Weltweisheit*, the work in which he most closely follows Wolff. Here Gottsched clearly encourages the creative imagination, its right to create its own world independent of reality. He states that there are two forms of imagination: that which simply reproduces what we have already seen in the past as if it were present; and that which creates something completely new from the elements of our experience (§457; 224). Gottsched is explicit that the artist should use his imagination in the creative rather than reproductive sense. Like Wolff, he lays down only *formal* restrictions on the creative imagination. In other words, there are no limits on *what* the artist can imagine; he is free to create any possible world; however, whatever world he creates, he should be consistent and follow the principle of sufficient reason. To follow this principle means that he should follow a clear plan and create a world that is an organic whole, where everything happens for a reason or everything plays a necessary role in the whole. Hence Gottsched explains that the poet can use his creative imagination in two ways: he can invent a possible world where everything happens according to some plan or reason; or he can proceed without any clear plan, throwing together haphazardly all kinds of material with no organizing principle (§458; 224). Much like Wolff before him, Gottsched praises the former use and damns the latter.

In the *Erste Gründe der Weltweisheit* Gottsched gives an interpretation of the principle of imitation that agrees perfectly with this liberal attitude. The artist is still imitating nature, he explains, when he is using his imagination and controlling it through the use of his reason (§459; 224–5). The imitation of nature does not mean, therefore, the simple duplication of what is given, but creating in the same manner as nature, i.e., according to reason. Just as nature creates everything for a reason, and so makes unity in variety or perfection in

the real world, so the artist should create like nature, making unity in variety or perfection in his imaginary world. What the artist imitates, then, is the productivity of nature, not its products.

Gottsched's liberal side also makes some important appearances in his *Critische Dichtkunst*. We have already seen how in that work Gottsched defines poetry as a power of invention, and how he distinguishes the poet from the historian by the poet's power to create his own imaginary world. This liberal side appears all the more plainly in his detailed account of the principle of imitation in the fourth chapter of Book I. There Gottsched explains that there are three forms of imitation. There is simple description, a close portrayal of what is given in nature, which he regards as the lowest form of poetry (I, iv, §1; VI/1, 195). There is also the imaginative recreation of what someone would or should do under certain circumstances (I, iv, §3; 197–8). Here the artist imitates a person by knowing their type of character and human nature; but he does not bind himself to an existing person, or what an existing person has actually done, which is the task of the historian. Finally, there is fable or fantasy, which is "the source and soul of all poetry" (I, iv, §7; 202). Here the artist creates his own world or universe, which obeys its own laws; but there is still a moral purpose or truth behind the story. Gottsched attempts to justify fable by appealing to Leibniz's doctrine of possible worlds. The fantasy world of the poet, he writes, is like one of Leibniz's possible worlds. Just as there is truth in a possible world if everything is governed by a reason, so there is truth in the artist's creation if everything is organized according to a theme. Here again Gottsched reminds us of the Wolffian dictum that a novel is the history of a possible world.

So much for Dr. Jekyll. Mr. Hyde makes his first striking appearance in the chapter on tragedy in the *Critische Dichtkunst*. Here Gottsched provides a very narrow account of the principle of imitation by interpreting it according to the classical three unities. He maintains that a tragedy should show unity of action, time, and place, where each of them is understood in a very literal and strict way. The unity of time means that the action should take place in a single day, and indeed it should take no longer than the time necessary for the spectator to watch it (II, x, §16; VI/2, 320). The unity of place means that the action should be located in a single place, not even allowing for changes in scene (§18; 322). Gottsched admits that these restrictions are severe, and he stresses that they are only an ideal. Nevertheless, he still insists that the playwright should attempt to approach them, and that the quality of a play is in direct proportion to how close it comes to them (§29; 322). Understandably, it was these kinds of restrictions that became such a provocation for the dramatists of the *Sturm und Drang*.

Mr. Hyde makes an even more spectacular appearance in Gottsched's critique of opera in *Critische Dichtkunst*. Here he condemns opera because it is such a gross violation of the principle of imitation. There is almost nothing in opera that is like the real world, he says. Where, after all, do people sing in their everyday life? All the actions in the opera house are more like romances than anything in nature. Writing of opera plots and characters he says: "All these things are so strange to us, that we would not regard them as bearable even in a travel description of Lilliput; and yet in the opera they are supposed to be beautiful" (II, xiii, §7; VI/2, 367). Opera becomes sufferable, he writes, only if we imagine that we are in another world. A striking violation of his own guidelines! For, according to the *Erste Gründe*, the artist's legitimate creation is another merely possible world. Why not a world, then, where people sing throughout their daily lives?

It is clear from these examples that Gottsched is operating according to stricter principles than those he lays down in *Erste Gründe*. There it seems as if the artist is free to create *any* possible world, as long as it is consistent and conforms to some underlying plan. The imitation of nature seems to be only a *formal* principle, insofar as it allows the artist to create anything, as long as there is some reason behind it. The discussions of tragedy and opera in the *Critische Dichtkunst* show, however, that this merely formal principle is insufficient to give Gottsched all the restrictions that he wants. The formal principle alone might allow the poet to write a tragedy with many changes of time and place, or to write about a world where people sing rather than talk. If Gottsched wants these further restrictions, his principle of imitation has to be not only formal but also substantive, i.e., it should demand not only that the poet create *like nature in having a design or plan*, but also that he create according to *the very same design or plan* as nature herself. In other words, the principle of imitation should also stipulate that there is some similarity between fiction and reality.

Gottsched does have a more substantive principle of imitation, which appears in his account of the concept of verisimilitude (*Wahrscheinlichkeit*) in Part I, chapter vi, of *Critische Dichtkunst*,[47] one of the most interesting and controversial chapters of the entire work. Provisionally and deliberately vaguely, Gottsched defines verisimilitude as the similarity between fiction and reality (I, vi, §1; VI/1, 255). The crucial question, of course, is *how much* similarity should there be. Here the critic has to find a delicate balance: if he demands too much similarity, the result is tyranny; if he demands too little, the result is

[47] It is misleading to translate the poetic concept of *Wahrscheinlichkeit* as probability. The concept of probability applies to what we assume as true but cannot demonstrate. Gottsched, however, is discussing fiction that we do not assume to be true, and that we have no interest in demonstrating.

license. There has to be some middle path, then, between a shackled and an indulgent imagination. Perfectly aware of this problem, Gottsched notes that the demand for verisimilitude, if taken too strictly and pushed too far, completely undermines all fable, the very essence of poetry. After all, since animals do not talk, even Aesop's fables lack complete verisimilitude.

To deal with this issue, Gottsched distinguishes between two forms of verisimilitude: unconditional and conditional (I, vi, §2; VI/1, 256). Unconditional verisimilitude is *exact* similarity with the real world; conditional verisimilitude is only *partial* similarity. Fables do not have unconditional verisimilitude because they are in some respects false; but they do have conditional verisimilitude because they are also in some respects true. They have a conditional verisimilitude in the sense that, *if* we accept their starting assumptions, everything else that they say would be true. If, for example, we accept that animals could talk and act like humans, then donkeys would rebel against their masters, because it is also a fact about our world that donkeys are bad-tempered beasts of burden which are often mistreated. The concept of conditional verisimilitude means that something intrinsically impossible and unbelievable according to the general laws of nature—viz., animals talking—becomes through its connection with other circumstances not only possible but also plausible or believable (I, vi, §5; VI/1, 258).

It is questionable, however, whether Gottsched's account of verisimilitude walks the fine middle line between oppression and extravagance. While the conditional form of verisimilitude might allow for the talking animals of Aesop's fable, which Gottsched wants, it also seems to permit the singing actors of opera, which he despises. Gottsched is in a dilemma because he cannot have both the imaginative freedom of fable and the realistic constraints of classical tragedy. If the principle of imitation licenses the one it cannot mandate the other.

So, in the end, Gottsched's critics did have a point. In his insistence on the three unities, Gottsched did unduly restrain the poetic imagination. Somewhat unfairly and one-sidedly, however, they saw only one side of Gottsched. The misdeeds of Mr. Hyde had concealed the more gentle and liberal Dr. Jekyll. Unfortunately, it was those misdeeds that made Gottsched's reputation.

4

The Poets' War

1. Leipzig versus Zurich

One of the most famous episodes in German cultural history in the early eighteenth century was Gottsched's bitter quarrel with the Swiss aestheticians J. J. Bodmer and J. J. Breitinger. This dispute officially began in 1740, though there were preliminary skirmishes dating back to the 1720s. Its epicenters were Leipzig and Zurich, but it eventually spread to every corner of Germany. Gottsched and the Swiss had armies of supporters, and everyone became either a *Gottschedianer* or a *Schweizer.* For ten years the dispute raged, giving birth to treatises, satires, poems, plays, and even whole journals. When it began, Gottsched was the literary dictator of Germany; when it ended he was a spent force, a relic of a bygone era. It was not that he was intellectually defeated, outclassed in dialectical skill; but his age had outgrown him.[1] His tragic flaw is that he had closely identified himself with French neo-classicism, which he saw as the literary model of Germany; but German writers had so grown in self-confidence that they despised French tutelage. The irony is that no one had done more to promote that self-confidence than Gottsched himself!

Almost everything about this dispute remains in dispute. There are opposing accounts about who started it, when it began, and why. For throwing down the gauntlet, Gottsched blamed the Swiss; but they blamed Gottsched. The Swiss felt provoked by Gottsched's intemperate and harsh review of one of Bodmer's books. For his part, Gottsched said the dispute began in the late 1730s when Breitinger, in a review of an article in Gottsched's *Critische Beiträge*, harshly attacked present trends in German literature, trends that Gottsched was known to support. Danzel argued that the dispute began only in the 1740s, citing copious evidence that the Swiss were corresponding on a friendly basis

[1] This was the assessment of Hermann Hettner, *Geschichte der deutschen Literatur im achtzehnten Jahrhundert*, 2 vols. (Berlin: Aufbau, 1979; 1st edn. Braunschweig: Vieweg, 1862–70), I, 283.

with Gottsched late into the 1730s.[2] Waniek, however, traced the source of the dispute to some squabbles in the 1720s, when Gottsched and the Swiss displayed their mistrust and jealousy, even if not in name, in some early journal articles.[3] However one dates the beginning of the dispute, there is general agreement that this early rivalry was its underlying cause. It is perhaps best to say, with Braitmaier, that after the early squabbles there was only a ceasefire, never really a truce.[4]

There is also a fair amount of unanimity about the *official* beginning of the dispute. No one doubts that open hostilities began only in 1740. The spark that ignited the conflagration was Gottsched's hostile review of Bodmer's *Critische Abhandlung von dem Wunderbaren in der Poesie*. Following the precedent of Addison's famous articles in the *Spectator*, Bodmer's tract was a defense of Milton's *Paradise Lost* against its French critics, Voltaire and Magni, who condemned it for violating the rules of epic poetry. Although he had no taste for Milton, Gottsched himself had encouraged Bodmer to explain his merits to the German public. So Bodmer, to say the least, must have felt betrayed by Gottsched's hostile reception of his work. Siding with Milton's French critics, Gottsched openly declared his contempt for *Paradise Lost*, which he saw as the English equivalent of "Lohensteinian bombast". He impugned Bodmer's judgment for defending Milton, insinuating that it was to sell copies of his translation rather than to enlighten the public, who had already lost the taste for such indulgence in the supernatural. Needless to say, the Swiss retaliated for such rough treatment; and soon the dispute spiraled out of control, going far beyond its Miltonian starting point. The warring parties seemed to quarrel about everything in the realm of literature: the theory of tragedy, the role of rhyme in verse, how to express passions in poetry, the proper use of fable, the limits of verisimilitude, the right to introduce new foreign words into German, and so on.

What was it all about? What was at stake? What were the fundamental issues? It is not easy to say. This is partly because the dispute ranged over so many subjects, and partly because it was so acrimonious and scurrilous. Amid so many subjects, and through all the bluster, diatribe, and satire, it is hard to pinpoint the significant. Even contemporaries despaired of finding the intellectual substance behind all the fuss. In 1743 Christlob Mylius and Johann

[2] Danzel, *Gottsched und seine Zeit* (Leipzig: Dycke, 1848), pp. 187–94.

[3] Waniek, *Gottsched und die deutsche Literatur seiner Zeit* (Leipzig: Breitkopf und Härtel, 1897), pp. 71–82.

[4] Friedrich Braitmaier, *Geschichte der poetischen Theorie und Kritik von den Diskursen der Maler bis auf Lessing*, 2 vols. (Frauenfeld: Huber, 1888–9), I, 147.

Cramer, two literary critics in Halle, wrote this skeptical assessment of the dispute:

It seems to us that the writings of the Swiss on poetry and Gottsched's *Dichtkunst* could be placed happily on the same shelf without a dispute arising among them . . . We are not in a position to answer in any sound way those who ask us about the proper causes of this critical quarrel. Doubtless, the bard who one day will sing about this war will need the revelation of the muses no less than Homer when he wanted to describe the battle between Achilles and Agamemnon.[5]

Later scholars have not been much wiser. More than two centuries later, there is still little agreement about the main issues. There is even disagreement about whether the dispute had any philosophical significance at all. Danzel, the first to make a thorough study of the sources, believed it to be "the birthplace, indeed the creative act, of all modern German literature".[6] However, Waniek, who wrote the most exhaustive account, saw no issue of principle at all.[7] In his view, the conflict was more about poetic ideals than philosophical principles. Waniek even questioned whether Gottsched or the Swiss knew enough about the first principles of aesthetics to conduct a proper philosophical debate.

Another reason it is difficult to determine the issues behind the dispute—and indeed whether there is anything at stake at all—is that Gottsched and the Swiss share so many common principles. When we compare their chief writings on aesthetics, it is difficult to discern any fundamental difference in principle. They agree about all the following points: that the essence of poetry lies in fable; that poetry should be a didactic *ars popularis*, teaching morality in popular form; that the fundamental rule of art is imitation of nature; that the poet imitates nature not merely by copying what exists but by imagining what could be; that poetry is the master art, superior to painting and sculpture; that the basis of taste lies in the understanding rather than in sentiment; that all art should be based upon rules; that good poetry should consist in clear and distinct ideas; that Opitz is the model of German poetry, Lohenstein its nemesis. The list goes on and on, though these are its most important items. When we consider all their affinities, it seems that the differences between the disputants are only in critical *judgment*, i.e., in how they *apply* their principles but not in the principles themselves. This seems to be especially the case in the debate about Milton's *Paradise Lost*, for example, because here the issue is not about the principles by which to judge Milton but simply whether he violates them.

[5] As cited in Hettner, *Geschichte*, I, 262. [6] Danzel, *Gottsched und seine Zeit*, p. 185.
[7] Waniek, *Gottsched und die deutsche Literatur seiner Zeit*, pp. 367–8, 370.

The close agreement between Gottsched and the Swiss stems from their common heritage. They were all schooled in Wolff's philosophy, and they all shared the ambition of extending Wolff's rationalism into the sphere of poetics. Indeed, they even competed with one another about who had the right to inherit the Wolffian mantle. In their 1727 *Von dem Einfluß und Gebrauche der Einbildungs-Krafft*, which was dedicated to Wolff, Bodmer and Breitinger outlined a program for a rationalist poetics that would attempt to derive all the rules of poetry from first principles. In doing so they looked over their shoulders nervously at Gottsched, who, they knew all too well, also had similar lofty ambitions. Their preface took aim at critics like him—they specifically mentioned "*die Tadlerinnen*"—for not proceeding according to sure principles in criticism and for looking more at the form than the substance of poetry.[8] Bristling at such cheek, Gottsched penned a swift riposte in *Der Biedermann*.[9] He made it clear that he agreed with the Swiss about the need for a rational poetics, and that Wolff's philosophy alone could provide it; he doubted, however, whether the Swiss were the first to develop this program, an honor he seemed to reserve for himself. Even more ominously, Gottsched questioned whether the Germans needed to get their literary masters from beyond the Alps, and he attacked the pretensions of Bodmer to be "a grammatical pope, against whose pronouncements no one should appeal".

When we consider this early skirmish between Gottsched and the Swiss, it is hard to disagree with those who see no philosophical substance in the dispute. After all, they are not fighting about first principles—they agree that Wolff has already provided them—but only about who gets to apply them. We see at best a clash between very large egos, squabbling about who deserves to be called the high priest of German criticism. Surely, there is truth behind Waniek's scathing assessment: "It is pitiful how complacency, vanity, envy and other petty and personal motives determine the grouping of forces on the German Parnassus."[10]

Despite the acrimony, despite the competition between inflated egos, and despite scarcely discernible differences in substance, there were still—so I shall argue—fundamental issues at stake in the debate between Gottsched and the Swiss. The dispute had indeed all the importance Danzel gave it, even if he never formulated it correctly. The significance of the dispute, which could not have been clear to the participants themselves, we can now see with the

[8] Bodmer and Breitinger, 'Schreiben an Herrn Christian Wolffen', *Von dem Einfluß und Gebrauche der Einbildungs-Krafft zur Ausbesserung des Geschmackes* (Frankfurt, 1727), (unpaginated).

[9] *Der Biedermann*, Blatt 56, May 31, 1728, II, 21–4.

[10] Waniek, *Gottsched und die deutsche Literatur seiner Zeit*, p. 51.

benefit of hindsight: *for the first time it questions from a non-religious perspective the Enlightenment principle of the sovereignty of reason.*[11] During their debate with Gottsched the Swiss broke, more by implication than by intention, with their rationalist heritage and began to defend forms of aesthetic experience that transcend the boundaries of rational criticism. They championed the new, the strange, the wonderful, and the violent as forms of aesthetic experience that cannot be compressed into the harmonious forms of beauty. Since all sides agreed that beauty alone consists in rational order, they were in effect placing much of the aesthetic dimension beyond the jurisdiction of reason. Whatever is aesthetically pleasing, but is not beautiful, now transcends the boundaries of rational criticism and assessment. This was a much greater move beyond the rational than the mere "je ne sais quoi", the indefinable grace of beauty, conceded by Leibniz; for now beauty itself was being toppled from its central place in the fine arts.

At stake in this dispute, then, was nothing less then the authority of reason itself, or, more specifically, the fundamental principle of the Enlightenment, the sovereignty of reason. Now the *Aufklärer* were to learn that there are more things on heaven and earth than is dreamt of in their philosophies. Some things stand above all comprehension, above all criticism. These things are not the old holy mysteries beyond this world—the trinity, the incarnation, the miracles of the saints—but the extraordinary experiences we sometimes have within it. They are called by many names—the sublime, the violent, the wonderful, the new, the strange—but they are anything and everything that is pleasing because it transcends and even violates law, regularity, and harmony.

2. Misreadings of the Dispute

Before we consider the fundamental issues dividing Gottsched and the Swiss, it is necessary to examine some common interpretations of the dispute. Since these interpretations are so entrenched, and since they also contain an element of truth, it is impossible to ignore them. In sifting through them we will gain a much clearer idea of the basic issues.

One of the oldest and most prevalent interpretations views the dispute essentially as a conflict about the rights and limits of the creative imagination.[12]

[11] On the meaning and importance of this principle for the early Enlightenment, see my *The Sovereignty of Reason: The Defense of Rationality in the Early English Enlightenment* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), pp. 3–19.

[12] See, for example, Hettner, *Geschichte*, I, 279–84; Braitmaier, *Geschichte*, I, 231; W. Sherer, *A History of German Literature*, 2 vols. (New York: Haskell, 1971), II, 22–3; and Walther Linden, *Geschichte*

This conflict is usually cast in the following terms: Gottsched wanted to restrict the imagination to the imitation of the actual world, whereas the Swiss attempted to extend it to possible worlds. It is sometimes noted that both parties to the dispute uphold the principle of imitation; but it is then claimed they have very different accounts of this principle: supposedly, Gottsched adopts a narrow reading, according to which imitation is limited to copying the *existing* world, whereas the Swiss advocate a liberal reading, according to which imitation is extended even to *possible* worlds.[13] It is also recognized that both parties stress the importance of rules; but it is then argued that they have opposing views about the range of their validity: Gottsched insists the rules are a *sufficient* ground for aesthetic judgment, whereas the Swiss think that they are only a *necessary* ground. We are also told that the conflict regarding the rights of the imagination, and the extent of validity of rules, also emerges in opposing attitudes toward the wonderful: the Swiss encourage the wonderful, seeing it as essential to poetry, whereas Gottsched discourages it, regarding it as a perversion of poetry.

While there is an element of truth to this interpretation, it is untenable in its most crude and common forms. If we carefully compare the writings of Gottsched and the Swiss in the 1740s, it is impossible to discern any fundamental difference in principle in their views about the rights of the imagination. No less than the Swiss, Gottsched insists that the poet has the right to create a possible world, as we have seen.[14] Far from having different interpretations of imitation, both parties agree that the poet imitates nature

der deutschen Literatur (Leipzig: Reclam, 1937), pp. 234–5. This interpretation is still widely accepted; it is reaffirmed by Wolfgang Bender, for example, in his 'Nachwort' to the reissue of Bodmer's treatise on the wonderful (see n. 18 below). The source of this interpretation goes back to the eighteenth century, to J. K. Manso's summary of the dispute in his *Übersicht der Geschichte der deutschen Poesie*, in *Nachträge zu Sulzers allgemeiner Theorie*, Band VIII (1806), pp. 84f. On its influence see Danzel, *Gottsched und seine Zeit*, pp. 196–7.

[13] See Cassirer, *Freiheit und Form* (Berlin: Cassirer, 1916), pp. 66–8. The same mistake is made by Waniek, *Gottsched und die deutsche Literatur seiner Zeit*, p. 166, who holds that Gottsched's principle of imitation is limited to "*Wiedergabe des Wirklichen*". He notes that Gottsched sometimes understands imitation in a broader sense by allowing it to include possible worlds; however, he insists that this is not "der Ausfluss einer allseitig begründeten Weltansicht", because Gottsched disputes Leibniz's doctrine of the pre-established harmony (p. 167). Here Waniek is simply philosophically confused, however, since denial of the pre-established harmony does not exclude the doctrine of the contingency of the world, a Leibnizian doctrine that Gottsched always upheld against Spinozism. In general, Waniek's treatment of the whole topic is tainted by a confusion of the possible with the wonderful; he assumes that simply by admitting possible worlds, Gottsched is also forced to admit the idea of the wonderful. However, the wonderful is not coextensive with the realm of possibility; it is rather a specific form of possibility, namely, that which has the least degree of verisimilitude.

[14] See above Chapter 3, sections and 7. Although Gottsched limits the imagination when he insists on the three unities of classical drama, the nature of tragedy was not an issue between him and the Swiss.

not only by copying the real world but also by imagining a possible world like the real world. Furthermore, they share virtually the same concept of verisimilitude: the likeness, under hypothetical conditions, of a possible world with the real world. It is also striking that they distinguish the poet from the historian on the same grounds: the poet imagines a possible world whereas the historian describes the real world. It is no less false that Gottsched discourages while the Swiss encourage the wonderful; for Gottsched holds that there is something intrinsically wonderful about all fable, which is the very essence of poetry.[15] Only occasionally does Gottsched censure Milton on grounds of verisimilitude; he knew all too well that he could not go too far in doing so; for, from the point of view of verisimilitude, there is little difference between Aesop's world of talking animals and Milton's world of flying demons. Finally, it is also noteworthy that the Swiss, no less than Gottsched, insist that the creative imagination must observe the constraints of verisimilitude.[16] If the possible world is too dissimilar to our world, they realize, it will lose all point and credibility, and so its power of aesthetic semblance. The Swiss too stress that the imagination has to be regulated by reason if it is not to give birth to monsters. *Summa summarum*, if there were fundamental differences between Gottsched and the Swiss regarding the limits of imagination, they could only have been in their *application* of their main principles but not in the principles themselves.

Rather than a dispute about the rights of the imagination, the famous quarrel between Gottsched and the Swiss regarding the merits of Milton's *Paradise Lost* is better seen as a conflict about ideology than aesthetics. Gottsched's chief objection to *Paradise Lost* concerns less its style than its religious dimension, which to him borders on superstition and enthusiasm. In his view, Milton's epic is based on a Christian mythology that no longer suits the taste of his enlightened age.[17] It appeals to the interests and beliefs of a darker bygone era, specifically the age of pre-Enlightenment Protestantism, when people still believed in the presence of angels and demons, and when they were obsessed with their eternal salvation. Now, however, in the age of enlightenment, reason rather than Scripture is our ultimate authority, so that people give less credibility to the belief in spirits, and are less concerned with the faith necessary for redemption. Noting the ideological source of Gottsched's objections explains why he could accept the wonderful in Aesop but not in Milton: the Aesopian

[15] Gottsched, *Critische Dichtkunst*, I, v, §2; VI/1, 225–6.

[16] See Breitinger, *Critische Dichtkunst* (Zurich: Conrad Orell, 1740), I, 132, 299.

[17] See Gottsched, *Critische Dichtkunst*, I, v, §15; 238 and his review of Bodmer's *Critische Abhandlung von dem Wunderbaren in der Poesie*, ibid., pp. 246–7, 250.

fables have a moral lesson still applicable to our era, whereas the Miltonian ethic of faith and salvation has its roots in the dark ages. This also explains why Gottsched questions the verisimilitude of Milton's work. The Swiss themselves insisted that a work of the imagination has verisimilitude only if it finds some credibility among its public; but Gottsched doubts that stories about the struggles between angels and demons have any credibility in a more enlightened age.

The ideological differences between Gottsched and the Swiss are especially apparent in their contrasting views about the existence of spirits, the main subject of Milton's epic. It is noteworthy that, in his defense of Milton, Bodmer would often appeal to revealed religion to defend the verisimilitude of Milton's imagination.[18] He was convinced that Holy Scripture gives us reason to believe in the existence of spirits, and even heaven and hell; indeed, he thought that it provides evidence for the existence of the very spirits described by Milton. In contrast, in his *Erste Gründe der Weltweisheit*, Gottsched argues that reason gives us no right to believe in the existence of spirits in general, let alone the specific demons of Milton's twisted imagination.[19] While Gottsched does not question all revelation, at least not openly, he insists that it has no place in philosophy. Since he also thinks that poetry must serve philosophy, he effectively banishes the realm of revelation from poetry too.

For Gottsched, the ultimate problem with the Swiss enthusiasm for Milton is that it violates his deeply held conviction that literature should be a tool of enlightenment, a means of propagating the truths of reason in popular form. All parties to the dispute held that poetry should be one of the *artes populares*, a means of popular instruction in the fundamental truths of philosophy. But Gottsched was surprised, even indignant, that the Swiss could betray this crucial tenet. He was no less religious than they; his *Erste Gründe* contains all the standard demonstrations of the beliefs of natural religion, i.e., the existence of God, providence, and immortality. But it was precisely such a *natural* religion, not the *revealed* religion of the Bible, that Gottsched believed should be popularized by modern poetry.

Another less common, but more interesting and plausible, interpretation of the dispute sees it as a clash between poetic ideals.[20] Supposedly, Gottsched represents a strictly rationalistic ideal, the old standpoint of Boileau, according to which reason should be the fundamental rule of poetry; the Swiss, however,

[18] See Bodmer, *Critische Abhandlung von dem Wunderbaren in der Poesie und dessen Verbindung mit dem Wahrscheinlichen* (Zurich: Conrad Orell, 1740), pp. 16–17, 41, 42, 57.

[19] *Erste Gründe*, §§652–3, 1163; I, 316, 317, 586.

[20] Waniek, *Gottsched und die deutsche Literatur*, pp. 372–5, 378. To some extent the same interpretation is developed by Danzel, *Gottsched und seine Zeit*, pp. 207–8.

defend a more emotional and empirical ideal, according to which poetry should reproduce the life of feeling and the world of immediate experience. We are told that the Swiss reacted against Gottsched's extreme rationalism because it is too abstract and impersonal, and because it left out of account feeling, individuality, and sensuality. Hence in their chief poetic writings in the 1740s—Breitinger's *Critische Dichtkunst* and *Critische Abhandlung von der Natur, den Absichten und dem Gebrauche der Gleichnisse*, and Bodmer's *Betrachtungen über die poetische Gemählde der Dichter*—the Swiss formulate a poetics whose aim is to restore the realm of individuality and sensuality to poetry. Rather than making poetry a witty discourse that addresses the intellect, they conceive it as a form of verbal painting that appeals to the senses and imagination. The task of the poet is to recreate through words the life of the senses, to reproduce the immediacy, individuality, and sensuality of perception. What the painter makes on canvas through paint, the poet creates for the imagination through words. The power of the poet's portrait is to make it seem as if absent objects were present, to make us imagine objects as if they were actually before the senses.[21]

There is some truth to this interpretation. The Swiss did have a more empirical interpretation of the principle of imitation than Gottsched,[22] and they were more concerned with reproducing the individuality and sensuality of immediate experience. Still, this is more a difference in emphasis than in principle, as is clear from the following points. First, the Swiss too had a rationalist ideal of poetry, even in the 1740s. No less than Gottsched, they made clarity and distinctness into their guiding principle. Hence Breitinger would declare about poetry in his *Critische Dichkunst*: "The foremost and essential property of good style consists in distinctness" (289–90).[23] Second, Gottsched himself was far from underrating the need for the poet to recreate the immediacy and vividness of the senses. Thus in his own *Critische Dichtkunst* he stresses that, in using figurative speech, the poet should strive to retain its original sensuous meaning, because this has a more potent effect on the imagination (I, viii, §12; VI/1, 331). Third, since the Swiss too insist that the essence of poetry consists in fable, they also have difficulty in accounting for the place of feeling in poetry. No less than Gottsched, they limit feeling to a single genre of verse, what they called the "pathetic" or "fiery" style.

[21] Breitinger, *Critische Dichtkunst*, I, 31; and Bodmer, *Betrachtungen*, pp. 52–3.

[22] Bodmer, *Betrachtungen*, p. 4: "The senses are the first teachers of men. All knowledge comes from them."

[23] Although Waniek notes that both parties shared a similar rationalist foundation to their poetics, he claims falsely that the Swiss opposed the tendency toward "deutlicher Verständigkeit". See *Gottsched und die deutsche Literatur*, p. 371.

Though this interpretation is misleading, there is still an important point behind it. The more precise formulation of this point would stress the following: that although Gottsched and the Swiss share similar rationalist ideals, the Swiss began to move away from them in some of their writings in the 1740s when they began to stress the *sui generis* qualities of poetic discourse. It is striking, for example, how Breitinger maintains that emotions and imagination have a logic or structure all their own. Hence in his *Critische Dichtkunst* he argues that the passions have their own language, a *sui generis* grammar and logic completely unlike reason (II, 354). And in his *Critische Abhandlung* he extends this line of thinking to the figurative speech of poetry. Here he envisages, in a much-cited phrase, "a logic of the imagination" whose task is to identify and classify the various kinds of images, similes, and metaphors used in poetry. Unlike Gottsched, he sees these forms of speech as the product of the imagination as well as the understanding (9). There is an entire realm of knowledge, he explains, where the intellect of philosophy cannot take hold: the confused and obscure representations of the senses (13–14). Since these representations are in principle unanalyzable into distinct concepts, we can grasp their content only through similes and metaphors. Here Breitinger begins to look forward to Baumgarten, who will stress the autonomous status of sensibility in his *Aesthetica* (1750).

Even here, however, it is necessary to keep this development in context, and not to read it anachronistically, as if the Swiss finally overcame Wolff's rationalism and the road to Baumgarten were well and truly paved. For, in the most important respects, Bodmer and Breitinger are stuck within the confines of rationalism, remaining on the same footing as Gottsched. In the very chapter where he develops his theory of a logic of passion, for example, Breitinger reaffirms the Wolffian theory that the affects are only a confused form of knowledge of perfection.[24] We only need to strip them of their confusion, he implies, to find out what they are in essence: an intellectual perception of perfection. What point remains, then, to a distinct logic of the passions? It is also noteworthy that, even when he insists that poetry alone grasps the vividness and particularity of sense experience, Breitinger does not grant it any special cognitive status for doing so; his paradigm of knowledge remains firmly rationalistic. Hence he assigns the figurative speech of poetry to the "lower faculty of wit", true to the Wolffian conception of sensibility as a "*facultas inferior*"; and he admits in true Platonic fashion that, in dwelling in the world of sense, poetry only gives us knowledge of the appearances of things.[25] So we

[24] *Critische Dichtkunst*, II, 362. Cf. Bodmer's *Critische Betrachtungen über die poetischen Gemählde der Dichter* (Zurich: Conrad Orell, 1740), pp. 341–2, which affirms the same Wolffian doctrine.
[25] Cf. *Critische Abhandlung*, pp. 7, 38.

are very far here from Hamann's radical empiricism and nominalism, which descry the abstractions of rationalism and claim that only the senses reproduce the reality of things.

Another influential interpretation, which has been put forward by Ernst Cassirer, regards the dispute essentially as a re-enactment in aesthetics of the methodological debate between the rationalist and empiricist strands of the Enlightenment.[26] For Cassirer, Gottsched represents the rationalist methodology of Descartes and Wolff, which proceeds deductively or *more geometrico*, beginning with universal principles and deriving particular conclusions from them, whereas the Swiss represent the empiricist strand of the later Enlightenment, which begins from experience and particular data and derives more universal conclusions from them. This fundamental difference in methodology, Cassirer thinks, appears in their opposing attitudes toward aesthetic rules. While Gottsched attempts to derive rules from first principles, the Swiss insist that they have to be derived from particular works.

For all its plausibility and suggestiveness, there are several difficulties with Cassirer's account. First, as one might expect from the lingering rationalism of the Swiss, their methodological differences with Gottsched are by no means so sharp or clear-cut, even in the 1740s. No doubt, the Swiss were more influenced by the empiricism of Addison and Dubos, and they also criticized some of the most elaborate and excessive exercises in rationalist methodology of the Gottschedians.[27] Nevertheless, they were still very far from endorsing in principle an empiricist methodology. In his *Brief-Wechsel von der Natur des Poetischen Geschmacks* (1736) Bodmer defended the rationalist theory of taste against the empiricist aesthetic of Calepio, which he regards as a form of aesthetic enthusiasm.[28] And in his 1740 preface to Breitinger's *Critische Dichtkunst*—the very text usually cited as evidence for Swiss empiricism—Bodmer again explicitly rejects empiricist criticism on the grounds that attempting to establish rules on the basis of experience alone would mean endorsing works simply because they give pleasure. Second, for all his rationalism, Gottsched himself did not practice a deductive method in his poetics. In the preface to the second edition

[26] Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1951), pp. 331–8.

[27] According to Waniek, one of the important opening moves in the dispute was Bodmer's critique of an article by one of Gottsched's disciples, which attempted to prove a point about poetics *more geometrico*. Apparently, Bodmer objected to the pointless pedantry and advocated a more empirical approach. See *Gottsched und die deutsche Literatur*, p. 358.

[28] *Brief-Wechsel von der Natur des poetischen Geschmacks* (Zurich: Conrad Orell, 1738), pp. 2–4, 8–25, 41–73. The actual correspondence took place from December 1728 to July 1731. For an analysis of its contents, see Daniel Dahlstrom, 'The Taste for Tragedy: The *Briefwechsel* of Bodmer and Calepio', *Deutsche Vierteljahrschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte* 59 (1985), 206–23.

of his *Critische Dichtkunst* he informs his reader that he has learned all his rules and judgments from the great masters of poetry.[29] The method of the work is self-consciously and frankly eclectic, collecting together rules that others have applied in special genres and in particular cases. Third and finally, the methods that Gottsched and the Swiss actually practice are very similar: they first propose a general rule, which they then attempt to illustrate or justify through examples.

Although, when taken generally, Cassirer's account runs into these difficulties, it still contains an important core of truth. When we examine more closely how Gottsched and the Swiss attempt to derive their rules, an important difference in methodology emerges. Gottsched attempts to derive his rules on a more general metaphysical basis, whereas the Swiss attempt to derive them from psychological observation. Hence in his *Erste Gründe der Weltweisheit* Gottsched derives rules from the first principles of his ontology. Since the artist must imitate nature, and since nature is governed by rules, the artist too must create according to rules. The Swiss, however, attempt to justify rules by determining how works have a pleasing effect on their spectators.[30] They are more like empirical generalizations about what are the best means of achieving specific ends. It is noteworthy, though, that this contrast between Gottsched and the Swiss relates more to their differing starting points than their differing methodologies. Gottsched has an *objective* starting point, attempting to ground rules on the nature of things, whereas the Swiss, under the influence of Addison and Dubos, have a more *subjective* starting point, which focuses on aesthetic experience itself.

3. The Point in Dispute

Now that we have some idea of what were *not* the issues at dispute, it is necessary to examine what they were. We will set aside all the many minor sub-disputes, and focus solely upon the most important issue for aesthetics in general. When we do this, it is not difficult to locate the basic issue dividing Gottsched and the Swiss: it concerns nothing less than the nature of aesthetic pleasure itself.[31] True to the Wolffian tradition, Gottsched defends a

[29] *Ausgewahlte Werke*, VI/1, 13.

[30] See, for example, Breitinger's 'Vorrede' to Bodmer's *Critische Betrachtungen*, and Bodmer's preface to Breitinger's *Critische Dichtkunst*. Both prefaces are unpaginated.

[31] I take issue, therefore, with Klaus Berghahn's claim that "Between Leipzig and Zurich there were no fundamental differences of opinion regarding the conception of taste and the task of literary

neo-classical aesthetic, according to which the *sole* object of aesthetic pleasure is beauty, which consists in order, regularity, or unity-in-variety. The Swiss, however, champion a proto-Romantic aesthetic, according to which there are other sources of aesthetic pleasure beside beauty, namely, the sublime and the wonderful, or, to use their own terms, the great (*das Grosse*) and the new (*das Neue*).[32] The great and the new, they expressly argue, are not the same as beauty, because they transcend all forms of order and regularity. The great is the immeasurably vast, i.e., that which fills the soul with astonishment because it surpasses all comprehension and measurement. The new is the miraculous and surprising, i.e., that which astounds us precisely because it is abnormal or irregular. Although the great and the new can coincide, they are also distinct because the great need not be new and the new need not be great.[33]

Seen in this light, the dispute between Gottsched and the Swiss is a battle about the limits of aesthetic experience, where the crucial question is whether these limits should be circumscribed by reason or extended beyond it. For Gottsched and the Swiss, there is a great deal of agreement about the realm of reason: it is the sphere of order, regularity, or unity-in-variety; there is much disagreement, however, about whether that sphere exhausts the aesthetic realm or not. In making beauty the sole object of aesthetic pleasure, and in stressing that beauty consists in order and proportion, Gottsched limits aesthetic experience to the realm of reason alone. However, in making the great and the new legitimate sources of aesthetic pleasure, and in stressing that they are not limited to order, regularity, or unity-in-variety, the Swiss are claiming that there are other legitimate sources of aesthetic pleasure beyond the sphere of reason.

Although the dispute is not explicitly formulated in these terms, the opponents' fundamental principles divide them along just these lines. Gottsched's commitment to a narrow neo-classical aesthetic is apparent in several respects. First, from the foundation he gives for the principle of imitation. He argues

criticism.'' See his important and influential article 'From Classicist to Classical, 1730–1806', in Peter Uwe Hohendahl (ed.), *A History of German Literary Criticism, 1730–1980* (Lincoln, NB: University of Nebraska Press, 1988), pp. 13–98, esp. p. 36. Berghahn stresses the Swiss opposition to Dubos's influence in the *Briefwechsel*, but ignores their dependence on him in the *Dichtkunst*.

[32] This thesis already appears in Bodmer's and Breitinger's early tract *Von dem Einfluss und Gebrauche der Einbildungs-Krafft*, pp. 19–26. Here they announce the program of explaining the various kinds of poetic descriptions, and they distinguish between descriptions of the great and splendid (*groß und herrlich*), the beautiful (*schön*), and the new and uncommon (*neu und ungemeine*). The inspiration for their program was Addison's article in *The Spectator* about the various pleasures of the imagination, the ''great, uncommon, or beautiful''. See no. 412, June 23, 1712.

[33] It is noteworthy that the Swiss do not use the term ''*das Erhabene*'', the customary term for the sublime, to designate these forms of experience. Their terms are ''*das Neue*'' and ''*das Grosse*''. Their account of ''*das Grosse*'' is like the sublime, but they use it in a more narrow sense than Kant or Burke.

that the artist must imitate nature because his fundamental goal is the creation of beauty and nature is the source of all beauty. Second, from his analysis of aesthetic pleasure. In his *Erste Gründe der Weltweisheit* he analyzes aesthetic pleasure in terms of the sensate intuition of perfection, where perfection is defined as order or unity-in-variety. Third, from the narrow limits he imposes upon the wonderful. In chapter v of his *Critische Dichtkunst* Gottsched insists that the poet should be as sparing as possible in using the wonderful. If the wonderful goes too far and violates the limits of nature, he argues, it simply becomes ridiculous (I, v, §24). Although Gottsched still permits the wonderful, and although he even insists that it is essential to all fable, it is noteworthy that he does not grant it any *sui generis* aesthetic value. Hence he insists that the poet should use it only for the purposes of moral instruction. Only if the poet has to write for an ignorant and superstitious public should he resort to the wonderful, which is then a necessary means for people to understand his message (I, v, §1). On no account, however, should he introduce the wonderful for its own sake, as if it were a worthy aesthetic pleasure of its own. The Swiss, by contrast, sometimes go so far as to claim that the new and wonderful is "the sole source of pleasure".[34]

The rationale for the Swiss break with neo-classicism is especially clear from Breitinger's argument for the importance of the wonderful or new in poetry. In chapter v of his *Critische Dichtkunst* he warns the poet about the aesthetic effects of habit and custom. Their force is so great that, if they are not countered, they lull our senses and dull our minds, so that we lapse into "an inattentive stupidity" (*eine achtlose Dummheit*) (I, 107–8). Writing under the influence of Dubos, Breitinger maintains that there is nothing more unpleasant for a human being than to be in a state of torpor or inactivity. What human beings need first and foremost is to have their powers activated, for their greatest danger, that which they tolerate the least, is boredom. For this reason, Breitinger concludes with Dubos that a chief source of aesthetic pleasure consists in the stimulation of our vital powers. He then engages in the following reasoning: since the goal of poetry is not only to instruct but also to please, and since we get pleasure only when our faculties are aroused, the task of the poet is to break the force of habit and custom. The poet can do this, however, only through the new or surprising (*das Neue*), which consists in something strange, extraordinary, or wonderful. Novelty is not simply another form of beauty or sublimity, Breitinger argues, because even beauty and sublimity cease to move us when they become customary and commonplace (110). Hence even

[34] Breitinger, *Critische Dichtkunst* (Zurich: Orell & Comp., 1740), I, 111. All references in parentheses are to this edition.

a sublime vista of the sea does not affect people, he points out, once they grow accustomed to it. The implication of Breitinger's argument is that beauty can bore us; because of its very regularity, it can become customary and routinized.

The willingness, indeed eagerness, of the Swiss to move beyond the narrow confines of a neo-classical aesthetic of beauty is also apparent from Bodmer's analysis of the sources of aesthetic pleasure in his *Critische Betrachtungen*.[35] Here Bodmer identifies three forces in nature that the poet uses to achieve his end of arousing pleasure: the beautiful (*das Schöne*), the great (*die Größe*), and the violent (*das Ungestüm*). As we would expect, he equates the beautiful with the classical traits of proportion, regularity, and harmony. He is explicit, however, that neither the great nor the violent are reducible to such terms. The great is not simply a form of beauty, he argues, because we cannot fathom the order or proportion of its parts (153). The feeling we have in the face of the great is a mixture of consternation (*Bestürzung*) and serenity (*Stille*). We take pleasure in the face of greatness, Bodmer thinks, because the mind hates to be constrained, and the limitlessness of the sublime sets it free (212). The impetuous is so far from being a kind of beauty that it is the very opposite: it stands for the "offensive, fearsome and terrible" (*Widrigen, Furchtbaren und Erschrecklichen*). The violent is not the same as the great because it not only transcends the limits of the beautiful but it actually violates them, creating something ugly. In making the ugly the source of aesthetic pleasure Bodmer had turned the classical aesthetic of beauty upside down.[36]

One might well ask how Bodmer's and Breitinger's new aesthetic squares with their adherence to the classical principle of imitation. Since they insist that art should imitate nature, and since they, no less than Gottsched, regard nature as a sphere of order and regularity, one might ask how their aesthetic allows them to value the great, the new and the violent? After all, their aesthetic value rests on their apparently *breaking with* the order and regularity of nature. Breitinger wrestles with this question in his *Critische Dichtkunst*.[37] Here he argues that the wonderful, which is the most extreme form of the new and surprising, is only *the appearance* of something new. Although it is really based on the laws of nature, it appears to be new because it surpasses the spectator's normal expectations and experience. Hence the pleasure of the wonderful proves to be essentially subjective, arising from the spectator's *belief*

[35] Bodmer, *Critische Betrachtungen über die poetischen Gemählde der Dichter* (Zurich: Conrad Orell & Comp., 1741). All references in parentheses are to this text.

[36] Waniek is blind to the issue because he thinks that the Swiss brought the ugly, disgusting, and horrible into the realm of beauty. See *Gottsched und die deutsche Literatur*, p. 148.

[37] *Critische Dichtkunst*, I, 131. There are passages where Breitinger appears to admit that he is going against the principle of imitation. Cf. I, 110.

that the event transcends the normal order of nature. If the spectator were to discover this belief to be false—if he were finally to discern the order behind nature—then it would entirely lose its semblance of truth and so cease to be pleasant.

It is questionable, however, whether Breitinger's distinctions really avoid the inconsistency. The difficulty still remains even if the pleasure is entirely subjective, because the principle of imitation is supposed to explain all aesthetic pleasure. The aesthetic pleasure does not come from conformity with the laws of nature, which are regular and lawful, but from the *belief* in the lack of conformity with these laws. Even an appeal to a possible world does not help Breitinger, because a possible world imitates nature only if it is like nature in conforming to reason and obeying its own laws; here, however, the pleasure rests precisely on the belief in the *violation* of all order and lawfulness, and not from discovering or creating the laws of another world. The evident difficulty of the Swiss in squaring their new aesthetic with the classical principle of imitation shows the extent to which they were taking a new step beyond their own earlier neo-classicism.

We can now see more clearly another fundamental difference between Gottsched and the Swiss. Unlike the Swiss, Gottsched is a stricter enforcer of the law of imitation, which he sees as the basis of all aesthetic pleasure. Although Gottsched too allows the poet to construct a *possible* world, he still forbids its aesthetic pleasure to depend on the *violation* of order, whether of an actual or possible world. In other words, Gottsched holds that all aesthetic pleasure is ultimately bound by the principle of sufficient reason: whatever happens in the poet's universe must have some reason; it must fit into some regular and coherent whole. The Swiss, however, were breaking even with the principle of sufficient reason, at least as an aesthetic principle, for they held that the pleasure of the new, surprising, and wonderful came from believing that this principle is violated, that there were things on heaven and earth for which there is no sufficient reason.

If we are correct in our diagnosis of the dispute between Gottsched and the Swiss, then it is necessary to agree with those scholars who have stressed the cultural significance of the dispute, even if we do not agree with the precise terms in which they have formulated it. The fundamental cultural significance of the dispute is its break with the Enlightenment. Since the Swiss champion forms of aesthetic experience that derive from *violating* order and law, they take these forms outside the jurisdiction of reason, which is coextensive with the realm of order and law. They question, if only implicitly, the sovereignty of reason in the aesthetic realm, its claim to understand and judge all aspects of

aesthetic experience according to rules, its claim to reduce them to standards of clarity and distinctness, measure, and proportion. By questioning that beauty is the sole source of aesthetic experience, they take a crucial step beyond Leibniz's "je ne sais quoi", which was understood as only the indefinable grace and penumbra of beauty. Indeed, they make aesthetic pleasure rest upon the violation of one of Leibniz's most fundamental and cherished principles: the principle of sufficient reason.

It is necessary to stress, however, that the Swiss' break with the Enlightenment was largely implicit and inchoate. Never did they formulate it in such terms, and never would they have approved a break with the Enlightenment, whose ideology they had done so much to propagate in their native land. Their conception of taste, their ideal of poetry, their theory of the passions, their subordination of poetry to philosophy, and even their methodology show their abiding debts to the rationalist tradition. The Swiss were still very far from—and they would have strongly disapproved of—the Romantic celebration of ambiguity, confusion, and intuition.

It is fair to say that Gottsched himself did not rise to the profound challenge the Swiss posed for him. The dispute became too personal for him to see its deeper issues; and in 1740 he was already too settled and committed to the cause of the Enlightenment for him to fathom anything beyond it. Hence, for him, the Swiss standpoint was not the harbinger of anything new, but simply a relapse into something old, namely, pre-Enlightenment Protestantism.

Where Gottsched stumbled, a new generation took over. However vague and subconscious, the Swiss advocacy of irrational forms of aesthetic experience proved to be one of the fundamental challenges for the rationalist tradition after Gottsched. It was the task of the later generation—Baumgarten, Lessing, Mendelssohn, and Winckelmann—to meet the Swiss challenge directly, either by qualifying or broadening rationalism itself.

5

Baumgarten's Science of Aesthetics

1. The Father of Aesthetics?

It is common wisdom that the founder of modern aesthetics is Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten (1714–62). The birthday of this discipline is often set as the publication date of one of his two seminal works, his *Meditationes philosophicae de nonnullis ad poema pertinentibus* (1735) or his *Aesthetica* (1750). It is tempting to dismiss this commonplace as an anachronism, as an invention of literary or philosophical historians. But it is noteworthy that Baumgarten himself—never adverse to a little self-publicity—was among the first to propagate it. In his lectures he sketched a short history of his discipline, dating its beginnings to his doctoral dissertation, the *Meditationes*.[1] It is equally noteworthy that even some of Baumgarten's contemporaries and immediate successors—Sulzer, Meier, and Mendelssohn—believed his story.[2] For them too, Baumgarten was the father of aesthetics. So even if this commonplace is a fiction, it is hardly an anachronism.

But in what respect is Baumgarten *really* the father of aesthetics? We have already seen that Wolff has a stronger claim to that title (Chapter 2.1). It was Wolff who first formulated a philosophy of the arts, and who set it on the course later pursued by Baumgarten. Following Wolff, Baumgarten sees the arts as instruments for acquiring empirical knowledge; and such a

[1] See the *Handschrift*, lecture notes by an anonymous student, in *Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten: Seine Bedeutung und Stellung in der Leibniz-Wolffischen Philosophie und seine Beziehungen zu Kant*, ed. Bernhard Poppe (Borna-Leipzig: Noske, 1907), pp. 66, 70.

[2] See J. G. Sulzer, 'Aesthetik', in *Allgemeine Theorie der schönen Künste*, 4 vol. (Leipzig, Weidmann, 1792), I, 48; G. F. Meier, *Anfangsgründe aller schönen Wissenschaften*, 3 vols. (Halle: Hemmerde, 1754), §6, I, 9–10; Mendelssohn, 'A.G. Baumgarten Aestheticorum Pars altera', *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. IV, ed. Alexander Altmann (Stuttgart Bad Cannstatt: Frommann, 1977), p. 263.

conception of the arts is the source of his famous definition of aesthetics as "the science of sensitive cognition" (*scientia cognitionis sensitivae*).[3] Baumgarten also follows Wolff closely in his metaphysics, epistemology, and psychology. Wolff's formative influence on Baumgarten has still not been fully recognized, however. Scholars often give credit to Baumgarten for ideas already found in Wolff, or they caricaturize Wolff as a narrow rationalist to inflate Baumgarten's claim to originality.[4]

Nevertheless, even if his originality has been greatly exaggerated, Baumgarten deserves credit for taking a leading role in the foundation of modern aesthetics. He was the first to give the discipline its modern name, and to conceive it as a "science of the beautiful" (*Wissenschaft des Schönen*),[5] which is close to some modern understandings of the term. Furthermore, he was among the first to take steps toward the realization of the Wolffian ideal of a philosophy of the arts. What Wolff had left purely as an ideal Baumgarten began to turn into a reality. Tragically, however, he did not live long ago to complete his plans for the new science. At his death the *Aesthetica* remained a large fragment. It is really a very large *Poetica & Rhetorica* because it did not get beyond the treatment of poetics and rhetoric.

Setting aside all claims to historical priority, there are still great difficulties with the phrase "father of aesthetics", whether we attribute it to Wolff or Baumgarten. The phrase is misleading because it implies that Baumgarten's conception of his science has had an enduring validity, and that it has been the foundation for everything done under that name ever since. Almost the very opposite is the case. There is a vast discrepancy between how Baumgarten understood his discipline and what it later became in the eighteenth century, let alone how it is understood today. There are fundamental differences in conception, subject matter, and method.

- We think of aesthetics as the study of the fine arts, and most probably include among them painting, architecture, sculpture, poetry, dance, and music. This concept of the arts, however, became fully established and commonplace only later in the eighteenth century, after the publication of the *Aesthetica*.[6] Although Baumgarten does seem to have something like a concept of the fine

[3] See Baumgarten, *Aesthetica* (Frankfurt an der Oder: Kleyb, 1750; reprint: Hildesheim: Olms, 1986), §1.

[4] This is especially the case for some of the most recent work on Baumgarten. See Hans Rudolf Schweizer, *Ästhetik als Philosophie der sinnlichen Erkenntnis* (Basel: Schwabe, 1973), and Steffan Groß, *Felix Aestheticus: Die Ästhetik als Lehre vom Menschen* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2001).

[5] See Baumgarten, *Metaphysica* (Halle: Hemmerde, 1779), Editio VII, §533.

[6] See above, Chapter 2.1.

arts in the modern sense,[7] it plays no defining role in his aesthetics. He does not limit aesthetics to the fine arts but defines it as a "*theoria liberalium artium*", where he uses the terms "*ars liberales*" in its traditional sense to refer to all the skillful ways of using our higher intellectual powers.[8]

• We do not think of aesthetics as a part of epistemology, because we do not assume that it is the chief purpose of the fine arts to acquire knowledge. Baumgarten, however, has an essential epistemological conception of aesthetics. Aesthetics has for him a fundamentally cognitive task: to know things through the senses. The specific arts that fall under his concept of aesthetics are those necessary to acquire empirical knowledge.[9] Hence aesthetics involves the art of attention (*ars attendendi*), the art of abstraction (*ars abstrahendi*), the art of memory (*ars mnemonica*), and even the arts of prediction and prophecy (*ars praevidendi et praesagendi*). Among these arts is the art of imagination (*ars fingendi*), which includes many "fine arts", viz., myths, dramas, tragedies, and comedies. But these are only a subdivision of the art of imagination, which is only one of the ten kinds of arts Baumgarten includes under the term aesthetics.

• The growth of modern aesthetics went hand-in-hand with the concept of aesthetic autonomy. Aesthetics became a subject in its own right when the arts were understood to have their own intrinsic standards, independent of the sciences, morality, and religion. Baumgarten, however, has no conception of aesthetic autonomy, and even thinks along lines deeply opposed to it.[10] He demands that the artist should be subject to moral and religious constraints,[11] and he stresses the utility of his science, the value of it serving moral and political ends.[12]

[7] See the evidence cited in Ursula Franke, *Kunst als Erkenntnis: Die Rolle der Sinnlichkeit in der Ästhetik des Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten*, Studia Leibnitiana Supplementa Band IX (Wiesbaden: Steiner Verlag, 1972), pp. 29–30.

[8] See Baumgarten, *Aesthetica*, §§1, 4. He includes among the liberal arts philology, hermeneutics, exegetics, rhetoric, homilectics, poetics, and music.

[9] Baumgarten makes this explicit in two earlier writings, the 'Zweiter Brief' of the *Philosophische Briefe von Aletheophilus* (1741) and the fragment *Philosophia generalis* (1742). See *Texte zur Grundlegung der Ästhetik*, ed. Hans Rudolf Schweizer (Hamburg: Meiner, 1983), pp. 67–78.

[10] It is sometimes assumed that Baumgarten does have a concept of autonomy because he makes aesthetics independent of logic. See, for example, Theodor Danzel, *Gottsched und seine Zeit* (Leipzig: Dyke, 1848), pp. 217–18; Johannes Schmidt, *Leibnitz und Baumgarten* (Halle: Niemeyer, 1875), pp. 37, 59; and Leonard p. Wessel, 'Baumgarten's Contribution to the Development of Aesthetics', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 30 (1971–2), 333–42. This is, however, a very thin sense of autonomy, which hardly approximates the later thicker conception, according to which the autonomy of aesthetics implies its separation from morality, politics and religion.

[11] *Aesthetica*, §§45, 182–3. Cf. *Handschrift*, §§44, 99, 183–5.

[12] See *Aesthetica*, §3.

• We think of aesthetics as an entirely theoretical discipline, treating abstract or philosophical issues about the arts. Baumgarten, however, sees aesthetics essentially as a practical discipline, one that lays down the rules for the creation of a work of art. Hence most of the *Aesthetica* is a manual for poets, advising the fledgling poet about how to write a beautiful poem.

• Aesthetics is not only a practical but also an ethical discipline for Baumgarten. The purpose of aesthetics is not simply to create beautiful things but to educate human beings, to create what Baumgarten calls the ''beautiful spirit'' (*schöner Geist*, *ingenium venustum*). This will be someone who develops not only his reason, but also his powers of imagination, attention, memory, and sensitivity. The beautiful spirit will not only be a poet by vocation, but a fully developed and all-rounded human being, someone who has the sensitivity and refinement to write verse as well as the acuity and subtlety to write philosophy. The program of aesthetic education developed by Schiller in his *Aesthetische Briefe* already lies *in nuce* in Baumgarten's *Aesthetica*. Baumgarten's beautiful spirit is the father of Schiller's beautiful soul.

After all this we might well wonder what Baumgarten's aesthetics has to do with the modern discipline. The irony is that, despite it all, there is still a close connection. The affinity begins to emerge if we focus on one of Baumgarten's early formulations for his science. In his *Metaphysica* ((1739) he defines aesthetics not only as ''the science of the beautiful'', but also as ''the science of sensitive knowing and proposing'' (*Scientia sensitive cognoscendi et proponendi*) (§533). The term ''*proponendi*'' literally means proposing, putting forward, or setting forth. More specifically, Baumgarten means something like expounding, exhibiting, or showing something through sensible means. If we consider that the purpose of such expounding or exhibiting is beauty, as Baumgarten implies, then such a concept does cover the fine arts well, not only poetry and painting but also music and dance.

But we need not rest so much on the flavor of a single word. The affinity of Baumgarten's science with the modern discipline becomes even more evident when we consider his original aim and plan. Although the *Aesthetica* never got beyond poetics and rhetoric, Baumgarten originally planned to extend his new science to virtually all the fine arts. ''Aesthetics'', Baumgarten explicitly declared in his lectures, ''goes much further than rhetoric and poetics. . .''[13] He criticizes Aristotle for having divided philosophy into logic, rhetoric, and poetics, because such a classification does not cover all forms of thinking

[13] *Handschrift*, p. 76.

beautifully with the senses.[14] He asks: "If I want to think beautifully according to the senses, why should I think in prose or in verse? Where is painting and music?" In the 'Prolegomena' to the *Aesthetica* Baumgarten expressly poses the objection that his new science treats only poetry and rhetoric, to which he emphatically replies that it concerns what these arts have in common with all others. Among these other arts he includes painting, dance, and music.[15] So, if only programmatically, Baumgarten did seem to have in mind something like a general theory of the fine arts.

Within the rationalist tradition, Baumgarten occupies the middle ground. His core values are fundamentally rationalist. His ideal of knowledge is entirely intellectual: we know best what we clearly and distinctly conceive, or what we can demonstrate through reason alone. Reason always remains for him the *higher* faculty of cognition, the senses the *lower* faculty. Nevertheless, Baumgarten gives a much greater value than Wolff or Gottsched to the distinctive qualities of sensible cognition. His fundamental achievement in the rationalist tradition was that he gave a clear conceptual status and firm systematic place to these unique qualities. Baumgarten returns to the theme of the "je ne sais quoi"; but, unlike Leibniz and Gottsched, he does not waver in his commitment to it. The indefinable and unanalyzable is fully recognized as a constitutive element of aesthetic experience.

Having admitted the "je ne sais quoi" into the rationalist tradition, Baumgarten went no further. Although he was sympathetic to Bodmer and Breitinger in their dispute with Gottsched, he never went as far as they did in moving beyond the aesthetics of beauty. The *Aesthetica* is essentially an attempt to define "the art of thinking beautifully" (*ars pulchre cogitandi*), and it regards the sublime as only one of its subordinate forms. Though Baumgarten devotes several chapters to the sublime in the *Aesthetica*, he is always concerned that it be treated according to the standards of beauty.[16] When it came to a decision between something sublime portrayed imperfectly or something beautiful portrayed perfectly, Baumgarten said it was only a matter of determining whether there were more beauties contained within the sublime object.[17] The idea that the sublime could be distinct *sui generis* from the beautiful never occurred to him.

One of the most fraught aspects of Baumgarten's legacy has been his relationship to his student Georg Friedrich Meier (1718–77). Even before

[14] *Handschrift*, p. 69.

[15] *Aesthetica*, §5. Baumgarten makes references to music at §§4 and 69, to music and painting at §§780, and to music, dance and painting at §83.

[16] See *Aesthetica* §319: "*Sublime cogitandi genus est admodum pulcrum.*"

[17] See *Handschrift*, p. 166, §210.

the *Aesthetica* first appeared in 1750, Meier published an authorized popular exposition of its contents, his 1748 *Anfangsgründe aller schönen Künste*, which was based on notes from Baumgarten's lectures. Written in a simple and graceful German, Meier's work became quite successful, and was indeed more popular than Baumgarten's *Aesthetica*, which is written in a dense and crabbed Latin. The crucial question, of course, is whether Meier's work is a reliable guide to Baumgarten's. And here there are dissenting voices. Some regard Meier's work as a betrayal of the Baumgartian spirit and program, whereas others see it as its proper fulfillment.[18] In the end it all depends on what aspect of Meier's work one is talking about; but there can be no doubt that, in some respects, Meier distorted Baumgarten. These distortions have sometimes been fateful, because they gave rise to objections that damaged the reception of Baumgarten's own doctrine. We will have occasion to note some of them in due course.

2. A Philosophical Poetics

Anyone who wants to understand Baumgarten's aesthetics has to go back to its original conception and inspiration. This is Baumgarten's first philosophical writing, his *Meditationes philosophicae de nonnullis ad poema pertinentibus*,[19] which he wrote for his doctoral dissertation as a young man. This short tract contains *in nuce* Baumgarten's entire program and the first formulation of his science of aesthetics. The much larger and later *Aesthetica* simply realizes this program and refines this formulation. Baumgarten himself saw the *Meditationes* as his seminal work, the beginning of his new science of aesthetics.[20]

In the preface Baumgarten reveals much about his motives in writing the work. He confesses to having had from his earliest boyhood an attraction to poetry, and he takes very seriously the advice of wise men that this study should never be neglected; having to teach poetics to young men preparing for the

[18] Among those critical of Meier are Bäumler, *Kants Kritik der Urteilskraft*, p. 126, Schweizer, *Ästhetik*, p. 13, and Groß, *Felix Aestheticus*, pp. 49–50, 53, 56. The chief spokesman for the opposing view is Ernst Bergmann, *Die Begründung der deutschen Ästhetik durch Alex Gottlieb Baumgarten und Georg Friedrich Meier* (Leipzig: Röder & Schunke, 1911), pp. 35, 38–55, 144–5. Bergmann claims, pp. 192, 200, that Meier was a more effective spokesman for the new German literature.

[19] Literally, *Philosophical Meditations about Something Pertaining to a Poem*. All references to this work will be to the translation of Karl Aschenbrenner and William Holther, *Reflections on Poetry* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1954). The first numbers, marked with the German paragraph sign (§), refer to Baumgarten's paragraph numbers; the second reference is to the page number of this edition. 'S' designates a scholium, a remark to a paragraph.

[20] *Handschrift*, pp. 66, 70.

university kept alive his interest in this subject. But Baumgarten is defensive about his love for poetry. He notes that many philosophers nowadays think that it is a subject "too trifling and remote to deserve the attention of philosophers" (36). To counter this prejudice, he will try to demonstrate that poetics deserves a definite place in the system of philosophy. He will attempt to show that "philosophy and the knowledge of how to construct a poem, which are often held to be entirely antithetical, are linked together in the most amiable union" (36).

Despite its skimpy size, a mere forty pages, the *Meditationes* is a very ambitious work. Baumgarten wants nothing less than to make poetics a science. He hopes to establish what he calls a *philosophical poetics* (*philosophia poetica*) (§9; 39). Philosophical poetics is "the science of poetics" (*scientia poetices*), whose task is to lay down "the body of rules to which a poem conforms" (§9; 39). This poetics will be scientific in the Wolffian sense: it will follow rigorously the mathematical method, beginning from self-evident axioms and clear definitions and deriving from them as theorems the basic rules of poetry. Remarkably, although Baumgarten explicitly affirms Wolff's method, he does so through a citation from the pietist leader Phillip Jakob Spener: "Mathematics, through the safety and certainty of its demonstrations, provides an example for all sciences, which we emulate as far as we can" (§21; 46). This was a very strategic citation, one probably designed to silence Wolff's vitriolic Pietist opponents.

An essential aspect of Baumgarten's project is its attempt to provide a rigorous and systematic account of Horace's *De arte poetica*. For centuries, Horace's work had been a guide for young poets, and its advice was taken as gospel. The practice had not ceased in eighteenth-century Germany. Bodmer and Breitinger cited Horace constantly, and Gottsched was so convinced of his value that he prefaced his *Critische Dichtkunst* with a translation of *De arte poetica*. Such a hallowed tradition Baumgarten did not want to question but only to justify. He too constantly cites Horace, who is his "touchstone" on virtually every poetic question (§29S; 49). Now, however, Baumgarten will attempt to explain why Horace's advice has been so useful and authoritative. Thus Horace is to Baumgarten something like Aristotle is to Kant: just as Aristotle provides a "rhapsodic" account of the categories that Kant attempts to put into rigorous systematic form, so Horace gives casual advice about poetry that Baumgarten aims to demonstrate from first principles. The *Meditationes* is *De arte poetica* rendered *more geometrico*.

The irony here is that *De arte poetica* is in verse. Appropriately, it is a poem about poetry, so that exposition and subject coincide. But Baumgarten's philosophical poetics will have to be, to say the least, unpoetic. The spectacle of

a mathematical poetics raises the question whether Baumgarten's whole project is misconceived. If philosophy is a science, how can it ever understand poetry, which is not science? If the medium of philosophy is distinct concepts and judgments how can it explain poetry, which, on Baumgarten's own reckoning, consists in confused intuitions and feelings? Is there not the danger here that philosophy, by dissecting its subject alive, murders it? Baumgarten himself raises this very objection when he notes that many people think philosophy and poetry cannot ''perform the same office'' because ''philosophy pursues conceptual distinctness above everything'' (§14S; 42).

What, then, is his reply to it? Baumgarten admits that the discursive knowledge of philosophy is not poetic. A poem containing the distinct concepts of philosophy would not be really poetic (§14S; 42). To prove his point, he constructs a demonstration in verse form; though it scans perfectly, it lacks every poetic quality (§14S; 42). This admission does not trouble Baumgarten, however, because his aim is not to translate the contents of specific poems but to explain the characteristic qualities of poetic discourse in general. It is indeed one of the central theses of the *Meditationes* that the specific content of poetry is distinctive and *sui generis*, intranslatable into the distinct concepts of philosophy. There is nothing self-defeating, though, about having distinct concepts about the inherent confusion of poetic discourse. Behind this objection, then, there lurks a common fallacy: that because poetic discourse is confused it is impossible to have a distinct theory about it. Baumgarten himself warns about this pitfall in the *Aesthetica* (§18) when he writes that it is necessary to distinguish the beauty of things from the beauty of thoughts about them. We can have ugly thoughts about beautiful things, beautiful thoughts about ugly things.

Proceeding, for better or worse, according to his mathematical method, Baumgarten begins his philosophical poetics with the definition of a poem. From the mere concept of a poem he thinks one can derive all the characteristics that constitute its excellence or perfection; and once we understand these characteristics, we will be able to determine the rules to construct a good poem and to criticize a bad one. Attempting to derive so much from a mere concept seems like the proverbial attempt to squeeze blood from a turnip. We can begin to understand Baumgarten's confidence in his starting point when we recognize that he thinks the concept of poetry is functional or normative; in other words, built into its very definition is the idea of some purpose, end, or function, which tells what it should be. The concept of a poem is therefore something like that of a pruning knife or doorknob. Just as we can determine the characteristics of a good pruning knife or door knob from their definitions,

so we can do the same for a poem. A good poem will be one that performs its function well or that efficiently achieves its end.

So what is a poem? Baumgarten defines it as "perfect sensate discourse" (*oratio sensitiva perfecta*) (§7;39). Following his mathematical method, he gives precise definitions of each of these terms. Discourse consists in "a series of words that designate connected representations" (§1;37). "Discourse" here is a translation for "*Oratio*", which means simply speech or language. *Sensate* discourse is that involving sensate representations (*repraesentationes sensitivae*) (§4; 38). Sensate representations are sensations, representations that come from the five senses, or what Baumgarten, following Wolff, calls "the inferior faculty of knowledge", i.e., the faculty of sense as opposed to the understanding (§3;38). Finally, *perfect* sensate discourse is that whose parts—sensate representations, their interrelationships, and the words or sounds that designate them (§6)—are directed toward the cognition of sense representations (*cognitionem repraesentationum sensitivarum*) (§7;39).[21]

It is from this definition that Baumgarten attempts to derive many significant consequences. Something is poetic, he says, if it contributes to the perfection of a poem (§11; 40). Baumgarten has several formulations for such perfection. One is *knowing* things through sense representations (§7;39); another is *awakening* sense representations (§8;39); and yet a third is *communicating* sense representations (§12; 41). Although these formulations are neither synonymous nor coextensive, Baumgarten's chief criterion of perfection seems to be the first, knowing things through sense representations. The other criteria are subordinate to it: we should arouse and communicate sense representations because by that means we acquire better knowledge of things through the senses. That this is Baumgarten's main criterion becomes evident from his subsequent arguments.

Assuming that the perfection of a poem consists in cognition of things through the senses, Baumgarten argues that the first requirement of a poem is that it contain *clear* representations (§8; 39). In Leibniz's and Wolff's terminology, a clear representation is one that is sufficient to recognize a thing and distinguish it from other things; it is contrasted with an *obscure* representation, which is *not* sufficient to recognize a thing or to distinguish it from other things. Since the perfection of a poem consists in knowing things through the senses, and since we obviously know things better through clear rather than obscure representations, it follows that a poem is more perfect the

[21] The genitive is ambiguous. Baumgarten means cognition of things by means of sense representations, not cognition of sense representations themselves; in other words, sense representations are the medium rather than object of knowledge.

more it has clear rather than obscure representations (§13; 41). From this simple point Baumgarten draws a significant critical conclusion. He opposes those poets who revel in obscurity, who "wrongly suppose that the more obscure and intricate their effusions the more 'poetic' their diction" (§13S; 41).

The second requirement of a poem is that it contain *confused* representations (§15; 42). According to Leibniz's and Wolff's terminology, a confused representation is opposed to a distinct representation. A distinct representation is one where I not only can recognize a thing and distinguish it from others, but where I can also further enumerate and analyze each of its distinguishing features. A confused representation is one where I cannot enumerate or analyze each of its distinguishing features but where they are all thought together. The perfect sensate discourse of a poem does not consist in distinct representations, Baumgarten assumes, because they are not characteristic of the senses at all. What we perceive through our senses is clear but it is not distinct because the senses do not analyze the distinguishing properties of a thing but perceive their elements as all intermingled and jumbled together. The activity of enumerating and analyzing these representations into their distinct components requires an act of the understanding or the intellect, the higher faculty of knowledge.

Having concluded that a perfect poem consists in clear but confused representations, Baumgarten further examines the nature of these representations. The term he devises for their confused clarity or clear confusion is *extensive clarity*. One confused representation has more extensive clarity than another, he explains, when it represents *more* than the other (§16; 43). Extensive clarity is in direct proportion to confusion, the *number* of marks represented together in a single representation (§18; 43). Such clarity comes from thinking together and at once many marks (*notae*) of a thing, and not from thinking them separately or at different times. We should keep in mind the original Latin meaning of *confus*. It derives from the verb *confundere*, which is a compound of the prefix "*con*-", which means together or with, and the verb *fundere*, which means to pour, stream, gush forth, spread out and extend. Confusion is therefore spreading out or extending—hence Baumgarten's choice of the term *extensive*—many different things all together and at once.[22]

Baumgarten contrasts extensive clarity with intensive clarity. While extensive clarity depends on the number of marks, intensive clarity depends on the clarity of each single mark. Extensive clarity comes from representing many things together at once; but intensive clarity comes from analyzing a representation into its elements and representing each of them discretely at separate moments (§16S; 43). Whereas extensive clarity is characteristic of sense representations

[22] Cf. *Metaphysica* §79: "*Diversitas in coniunctione plurium est confusio*".

or sensibility, intensive clarity is characteristic of intellectual representations or the understanding, whose specific function is analysis, the dissection of a representation into its distinct elements.

Baumgarten now comes to the not very surprising conclusion, already implicit in his previous theorems (§§13, 16), that a poem is excellent according to the degree of its extensive clarity (§17; 43). This is because the greater the extensive clarity, the more the poem represents the things of our sense experience. These things are determinate, and so we represent them more accurately the more our representations contain. Hence the richer the representation—the greater its extensive clarity—the more it represents the determinate things or individuals of sense experience (§18; 43). And so Baumgarten comes to the conclusion that the more particular the representation—the more it represents something in our sense experience—the more poetic it is (§18; 43).

Altogether a perfectly dry, drab, and dusty academic argument! Yet with it Baumgarten reaches—without flourish or proclamation—one of his most significant conclusions. He has effectively introduced a completely new criterion of cognitive perfection or excellence into the Leibnizian-Wolffian philosophy. There are now two very different, and indeed incommensurable, criteria: the intensive clarity of the understanding and the extensive clarity of the senses. While we know abstract intellectual things through the intensive clarity of the understanding, we know concrete sensible things through the extensive clarity of the senses. There are now two forms of light to aid the cause of Enlightenment: one that has depth, another that has breadth; one that penetrates into the inmost recesses of things, another that spreads over their entire circumference.

This profound result is somewhat mitigated by Baumgarten's retention of the term "confused" to characterize extensively clear knowledge. "*Confusus*" has negative connotations in Latin as "confused" in English, since *confundere* also means to disorder, jumble, upset, ruin, and obscure.[23] It is indeed for this reason that Baumgarten says that sensate cognition belongs to the "inferior faculty of knowledge". Still, despite such lingering rationalism, Baumgarten also seems intent on revalorizing the term, giving it a more positive connotation, making a virtue out of what would have been a vice to Leibniz or Wolff. This seems to be the whole point behind defining confusion in terms of extensive clarity. If the virtue of intensive clarity is analysis, the virtue of extensive clarity is synthesis, the power to unite what the intellect would divide.

[23] See *Oxford Latin Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), p. 403. The translators of the *Meditationes*, Aschenbrenner and Holther, state that Baumgarten's term means something more like *fusion* rather than *confusion* in the derogatory sense (21). They are partly correct because Baumgarten does want to elevate the status of the senses. However, it is also impossible for him to escape the negative connotations of *confundere*, which are inherent to his intellectualist epistemology and psychology.

Another significant but silent result of Baumgarten's argument is that it appropriates for poetry a vast ontological realm: all individual or particular things. While philosophy is assigned the domain of universals because its stock-in-trade is concepts, poetry gets the realm of individuals because its stock-in-trade is concrete images and figures. Baumgarten will develop this result in much more detail in the *Aesthetica*; but it is already implicit in the *Meditationes*. Like Wolff, Baumgarten thinks that the realm of the senses consists in individual things, which are things that are completely determinate in every respect (§19; 43).[24] If this is so, the concrete images of poetry will better depict these things than the abstract concepts of philosophy. Hence Baumgarten's proposition that extensive clarity more accurately represents the determinacy of the things of sense experience (§18; 43). He is in effect saying that poetry alone has the power to represent the wealth of the sensible world, the very realm from which the philosopher, in his striving for more universal principles, abstracts.

Baumgarten's concept of extensive clarity is also his solution to the problem of taste that had so plagued the rationalist tradition before him. We have already seen that thinkers in this tradition confronted an apparently insuperable dilemma in dealing with this problem: if judgments of taste were not to be mere expressions of personal likes, they had to be, at least in principle, translatable into the clear and distinct concepts of the intellect. This made it possible for judgments of taste to be universal, though at the expense of their *sui generis* qualities, which turn out to be only implicit, inchoate, and confused forms of intellectual cognition. Baumgarten saves the distinctive qualities of aesthetic judgments through his concept of extensive clarity, because it is an intellectual virtue distinct in kind from the intensive clarity of the understanding; but he also upholds their universality because judgments of taste are still cognitive judgments about sense experience, which, like all cognitive judgments, are universalizable.

Baumgarten's defense of extensive clarity therefore marks an important shift within the rationalist tradition. In one respect Baumgarten is simply going back to Leibniz and fully recognizing—though now with no hesitation or equivocation—the importance of the "Je ne sais quoi". Extensive clarity is his technical formulation for that tricky theme, which is now finally domesticated within the constraints of rationalism. This theme had been nearly lost in Wolff, who claimed that aesthetic experience improves through analysis, and in Gottsched, Bodmer, and Breitinger, who had made not only clarity but

[24] See Baumgarten, *Metaphysica*, §148. Cf. Wolff, *Philosophia Prima sive Ontologia*, §227: "Ens singulare, sive Individuum esse illud, quod omnimodo determinatum est", *Werke* II/3, 188.

also distinctness their poetic ideal. In stressing the *sui generis* intellectual value of extensive clarity, Baumgarten departs from all his rationalist forbears.[25] It is not surprising to find, therefore, that the *Gottschedianer* and the Swiss alike disapproved of Baumgarten's concept of extensive clarity, which seemed to them to be merely a celebration of intellectual confusion and sensuality.[26]

We might applaud Baumgarten's new direction but still wonder what his theory has to do with poetry in the first place. His definition of poetry as "sensate discourse" seems not only strange but very narrow. It applies to epic and pastoral poetry, perhaps, but nothing more. Part of the rationale for the definition is clear: Baumgarten wants to emphasize the point that the characteristic medium of poetry is concrete images rather than abstract concepts. Hence he attempts to defend his definition by giving many examples of how concrete terms are more poetic than abstract ones (§19S; 43–4). Baumgarten's definition becomes even more comprehensible—if no more defensible—when we recognize that it came from a venerable tradition that saw poetry as a picture in words (§39; 52). He follows Simonides' famous dictum that a poem is a picture in words and that a picture is a poem in shapes and colors. Like so many thinkers in this tradition, he cites Horace's famous lines "*Ut pictura poesis*" (§38; 52).[27]

One apparent problem with Baumgarten's definition is that it does not seem to account for the expressive dimension of poetry. Since he makes cognition the primary purpose of poetry, he seems to give little importance to the expression of feeling. But such an impression is very mistaken. Adamantly and repeatedly, as if he were the most high-blown romantic, Baumgarten stresses the importance of feeling in poetry. Hence he maintains that that it is highly poetic to arouse affects or feelings (§§25–6; 47); and he even defends the stunning proposition: "it is highly poetic therefore to excite the most powerful affects" (*Ergo excitare affectus vehementissimos maxime poeticum*) (§27; 48). He gives three arguments for the poetic qualities of strong affects. First, since affects involve degrees of pleasure or pain, they arouse the clear and confused representations characteristic of poetry (§25; 47). Second, since we represent more in things when they are good or bad for us, feelings have more

[25] Danzel is mistaken, therefore, in claiming that the Swiss were the inspiration for Baumgarten's aesthetics. See his *Gottsched und seine Zeit* (Leipzig: Dyke, 1848), pp. 222–3, 224–5. It is noteworthy that in the very text Danzel cites as the source of Baumgarten's project the Swiss insist that poetic discourse should be not only clear but also distinct. See J. J. Bodmer and J. J. Breitinger, *Von dem Einfluß und Gebrauche der Einbildungs-Krafft* (Frankfurt, 1727), pp. 15, 24–5, 40–1.

[26] On the reaction of the Gottschedians, see Danzel, *Gottsched und seine Zeit*, pp. 220–1.

[27] See *De Arte Poetica* 361. We might translate this as "How like a picture is a poem!". It has often been remarked that Horace does not mean what later commentators took him to mean. Horace says that a poem is like a picture because it can be seen in different ways or from different perspectives.

extensive clarity than other representations, and hence are more poetic (§26; 47). Third, since affects are stronger impressions, and since stronger impressions are clearer, it is highly poetic to excite the most powerful affects (§27; 48). In all these arguments Baumgarten makes the value of the affective aspect of the poem a function of its cognitive aspect. Poems should excite affects because through them they acquire extensive clarity, and so better represent truth. The expression of emotion and the representation of reality are not, therefore, exclusive. Baumgarten is able to stress the importance of feeling without abandoning his cognitive conception or poetry because his analysis of the emotions makes them into cognitive states. Following Wolff,[28] Baumgarten defines an affect or feeling as a confused form of cognition of good or evil, which are themselves objective states of being.[29]

Another problem with Baumgarten's definition is that it seems to leave no place for fantasy or imagination. If poetry is the cognition of things through the senses, it seems to turn into little more than history in verse. But this impression too is mistaken. Baumgarten is very eager to endorse the poetic qualities of the imagination. Far from thinking that the poet should simply describe the sensible world, Baumgarten champions his right to make fictions (§58; 58). A fiction is a confused representation derived from elements separated and recombined by the imagination (§§50–1; 55). Since images are clear but confused representations and formed from simple sensations, they are poetic, even if they are less poetic than the sense impressions themselves (§29; 48). Baumgarten further argues that the poet's fictions excite wonder (§56; 56), and that wonder is poetic because it arouses feelings and has many confused ideas (§44; 53). It is not that Baumgarten admits all manner of fictions. He makes a distinction between two kinds of fiction: utopian and heterocosmic (§§51–2; 55). While utopian fictions are about something impossible, heterocosmic fictions are about something possible. The former Baumgarten forbids, the latter he allows. The reason he rejects utopian fictions and allows heterocosmic ones again reveals his cognitivist conception: while we can have many lively sense representations of the possible, we cannot have any of the impossible (§§53, 55–6; 55, 56).

Granted Baumgarten *wants to* acknowledge the role of the imagination, the question remains whether he *can* do so given his commitment to the cognitive purpose of poetry. It seems impossible according to our modern post-Kantian conception of knowledge, which limits knowledge to what exists

[28] Wolff *Psychologia empirica*, §605: "Affectus ex confusa boni et mali repraesentatione oriuntur." *Werke*, II/5, 459.

[29] See Baumgarten, *Metaphysica*, §§94–100.

(past, present, or future). It would beg the question, however, to apply this conception to Baumgarten, who is working within the rationalist tradition of Leibniz and Wolff, which advocates a very different standard of knowledge. According to Leibniz, an idea is true if its notion is possible, and it is possible as long as it does not involve a contradiction; it is not necessary that the idea refers to something that exists in experience.[30] According to Wolff, science consists in knowledge of *possible* being, whether it exists or not.[31] We know the truth when we know the reasons for things, and it does not matter whether these things are real or possible.[32] Metaphysical truth means conformity to the principles of sufficient reason and non-contradiction; and not only existing but possible things conform to such rules.[33] As we have already seen (2.5), this broader definition of truth has the most important implications for the arts: it means that the poet can engage in flights of the imagination and still know the truth.

We have no more space to examine the details of Baumgarten's poetics in the *Meditationes*. It is sufficient to have shown the importance and plausibility of its general program and conception. Something should be said, however, about the final portentous paragraphs of the *Meditationes*, where Baumgarten introduces his general conception of aesthetics. After laying down the basis for his poetics in a little more than a hundred short paragraphs, Baumgarten envisages a new kind of logic or science which might "direct the lower cognitive faculty in knowing things sensately" (§115; 78). He contrasts a higher cognitive faculty, which knows things through the intellect or reason, with a lower cognitive faculty, which knows things through the senses. While the science that deals with the higher cognitive faculty is *logic* (in the narrow or strict sense), the science that deals with the lower cognitive faculty will be *aesthetic* (§§115–16; 77–8). An astonishingly bold proposal, especially for such a young man! For Baumgarten was suggesting, contrary to Wolff, that logic is the organon not for all forms of knowledge but only for one form of knowledge, that which depends on the higher cognitive faculty.[34] The organon of knowledge acquired through our senses would require a completely distinct organon, which would be aesthetics. Hence the philosophy of arts would no

[30] Leibniz, 'Meditationes', IV, 425; *Philosophical Essays*, ed. Roger Ariew and Daniel Garber (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1989), p. 26.

[31] Wolff, *Logik*, §1; I/1, 115.

[32] Wolff, *Metaphysik*, §§142, 145; I/2, 74, 76. Cf. *Logik*, §6; I/1, 213.

[33] Baumgarten, *Metaphysica*, §92.

[34] In the *Discursus praeliminarius* Wolff is explicit that logic governs all forms of cognition, both intellectual and sensitive. See §154: "In Logica quoque doceitur, quomodo principia certa tum per experientiam stabiliantur, tum per ratiocinia eruantur . . ." *Werke*, II/1.1, 82. Cf. §§61, 117Scholium; *Werke*, I/1.1, 30, 54.

longer be simply one part of physics, or one aspect of every empirical discipline, as Wolff conceived it; rather, it would now be the organon of one half of the entire system of philosophy. Baumgarten would now have to spend much of the rest of his life in a struggle—against ill-health and academic duties—to realize his ambitious program.

3. A Science of Beauty

Kant always had a great—though scarcely acknowledged—debt to Baumgarten's aesthetics. He took from Baumgarten the very conception of aesthetics as a science of sensitive cognition distinct from intellectual cognition or logic. The debt to Baumgarten is especially apparent in the Inaugural Dissertation; but it is still evident in the first *Kritik* when Kant calls his science of the a priori principles of sensibility 'Transcendental Aesthetic'.[35]

Kant's debt to Baumgarten does not diminish, however, his basic differences from him. One of these concerns the very possibility of a science of beauty. Since Kant limits science to the sphere of cognition, and since he distinguishes sharply between cognition and taste, he does not think that there can be a science of beauty. Although Kant too thinks that aesthetics can be a science of sensitive cognition, he forbids its extension to the sphere of beauty, since beauty falls entirely within the realm of taste and outside the realm of cognition. What Baumgarten called aesthetics, Kant insists, should be really called the critique of taste. Science and critique are, however, completely independent activities.

This difference between Kant and Baumgarten appears in full force in a famous footnote to the Transcendental Aesthetic of the first *Kritik* (B 35). Here Kant takes exception to Baumgarten's attempt to establish a science of beauty or taste. Baumgarten's project is misguided in principle, he argues, because there cannot be an a priori basis for judgments of taste, all of which must be based upon experience. Any attempt to establish general principles of taste, he argues, suffers from a vicious circle: that specific judgments of taste are the basis for general principles, which therefore cannot be in turn the basis for

[35] On Kant's debts to Baumgarten, see Baeumler, *Kant's Kritik der Urteilskraft: Ihre Geschichte und Systematik* (Halle: Niemeyer, 1923), pp. 308–32. Baeumler overstates the similarities, however, and fails to pay sufficient attention to Kant's critique of the rationalist tradition for failing to make a sufficient distinction between understanding and sensibility. For Baeumler, it is almost a datum that Baumgarten makes a sufficient distinction; but this is much too simplistic, as we shall see below (sec. 7). The question of Kant's debts to, and differences from, Baumgarten are complex and subtle, and cannot be explored here.

such judgments. Since a science of taste is impossible, Kant insists on limiting the term 'aesthetic' to designate strictly a science of sensitive cognition.

Is Baumgarten's conception of a science of beauty mistaken in principle? Of course, this is a grand question, and we cannot investigate all of its aspects here. We will consider Baumgarten's theory of the cognitive dimension of aesthetic judgment in later sections (4–5). The only aspect of interest now is whether Baumgarten's science is impossible for the specific reasons Kant gives in the first *Kritik*. Is it the case that a science of aesthetics, in the sense of a science of taste, is caught in a vicious circle?[36]

Fairness demands that we examine Baumgarten's own response to this difficulty, of which he was keenly aware. In the early paragraphs of the *Aesthetica* he considers the general issue raised by an objection like Kant's, specifically the question of how we establish principles of taste. It is striking that he explicitly refuses to take Kant's advice about limiting aesthetics to criticism. The common problem of criticism, he notes, is that critics judge according to principles that they fail to articulate, and so they often misapply them. The great advantage of a science of aesthetics is that it makes these principles clear and distinct, so that the critic is more apt to apply them correctly, and so that disputes about taste can be resolved.[37] The task of aesthetics is therefore to provide a foundation for criticism, to lay down the guiding principles behind all critical judgment.

Prima facie Baumgarten's response to the Kantian objection just begs the question. He assumes that the critic presupposes principles when Kant denies there are any. This raises the question why Baumgarten thinks that the critic must have principles in the first place.

Baumgarten's rationale for general principles in aesthetics derives from his adherence to an even more fundamental principle, one that he attempts to prove in the *Metaphysica* and that is foundational to his rationalism as a whole: the principle of sufficient reason.[38] Although he accepts the Kantian point that

[36] Kant's objection to Baumgarten's project is treated by both Baeumler, *Kants Kritik der Urteilskraft*, pp. 270, 272, and Hans Schweizer, *Ästhetik als Philosophie der sinnlichen Erkenntnis* (Basel: Schwabe & Co., 1973), pp. 24–5. They claim that Kant's critique misses its target because Baumgarten's main purpose is not to establish general principles for aesthetic judgment. But in this respect Kant correctly understood Baumgarten, who expressly conceived his aesthetics as a systematic grounding for aesthetic norms. See *Handschrift*, §1, p. 66. Baeumler and Schweizer forget Baumgarten's defense of general norms. See his *Aesthetica* itself, §§11–12, 57, 62–3, 71, 74, 99. In his emphasis on Baumgarten's account of experience as a *sui generis* source of knowledge, Schweizer underplays the rationalist side of his thinking and brings him too close to the empiricist tradition.

[37] *Aesthetica*, §§11–12, 57, 62–3, 71, 74, 99.

[38] See *Metaphysica*, §§14, 21, 22. While Baumgarten does not apply this principle specifically to judgments of taste, it is a general principle of his philosophy that all true judgments must have a reason for their truth.

aesthetic judgments state the pleasure we take in certain objects,[39] Baumgarten still thinks that we should be able to give the reasons for these judgments, for why we take pleasure in certain objects rather than others. The purpose of a general principle is to formulate these reasons and to provide some explanation for them. From Baumgarten's viewpoint, the problem with empiricist aesthetics is that it allows aesthetic judgments to violate the principle of sufficient reason: it makes pleasure alone a sufficient test of aesthetic value, without permitting the question *why* someone should feel pleasure.[40] If we begin to formulate the reasons behind aesthetic judgments, Baumgarten assumes not too optimistically, then we will begin to find similarities between them. These similarities will be the basis for our general principles.

For all his insistence on the value of general principles, Baumgarten admits that we can sometimes make judgments of taste without articulating the general principles behind them. He even goes so far as to argue that no principles are better than false ones (§73). Nevertheless, he insists that, on certain occasions, it is necessary to formulate these principles. These occasions arise whenever there are disputes, whenever one person finds pleasure in a work but not another. In these cases, Baumgarten argues, it is clear that appealing to experience alone will not work, for the simple reason that people have conflicting experiences (§73). The only way to resolve the dispute is for a person to provide a reason for his judgment, to articulate the more general principles behind it. Someone can explain, for example, that he likes a specific composition because of its formal structure, the harmony of its many elements, the play of its colors, and so on. While none of these reasons can guarantee that the other person will feel pleasure, they at least ensure the *possibility* for agreement. When the other person, in the light of these considerations, looks at the composition again and finds the same structure, it is possible that his "eyes will be opened", so that there will be agreement after all. Hence the general principles do not attempt to work independently of our experience but to deepen it. They serve as a guide to look at the painting again, to examine its features more closely, so that we begin to see what we did not see for the first time. This is standard procedure in "art appreciation", whose business is to get people to experience works in the light of the wisdom of past experience, which always embodies, if only vaguely and inchoately, general principles.

[39] *Metaphysica*, §§655, 661–2. Baumgarten holds that beauty consists in a perfection perceptible to taste, and that pleasure arises from the perception of a perfection.

[40] See *Aesthetica*, §5: ". . . huic praenotio quaedam aesthetices reliquae paene necessaria est, nisi velit in diiudicandis pulcre cogitatis, dictis, scriptis disputare de meris gustibus." For a gloss on this important passage, see Jäger, *Einführung*, pp. 105–27.

Hence one value of general principles, in Baumgarten's view, is that, by providing reasons for aesthetic judgments, they help to secure agreement about them. If, however, we renounce general principles entirely, relying on experience alone, we have no basis to secure the claim to universality of aesthetic judgment. We have to rely upon chance alone and to hope for agreement; there is no basis for discussion at all. Baumgarten would claim against Kant, then, that the value of having a science of aesthetics is that it alone secures the *possibility* of the universality of aesthetic judgment. In denying the possibility of these principles, Kant undermines the very universality that he so strongly endorses.

It is necessary to address some other Kantian misconceptions about Baumgarten's aesthetic principles. Kant sometimes writes as if it were Baumgarten's intention *to prove* judgments of taste, as if this could be done a priori from first principles independent of the pleasure of the spectator.[41] Baumgarten does not believe, however, that aesthetic judgments are derivable from first principles; rather, he holds that, as specific empirical judgments about particular objects, they are simply contingent (i.e., not deductively derivable) for all the fundamental principles of reason. He also does not assume that we could determine aesthetic value simply by applying a principle to an object, regardless of the pleasure we receive from it. The point of the principle is not *to replace* pleasure as a test of aesthetic value—as Kant suggests[42]—but *to explain* it, to determine in what that pleasure consists and why we have it.

Assuming that general principles are necessary to criticism, the question remains how we establish such principles, and whether we can do so without circularity. Baumgarten does not deny, and indeed emphatically affirms, the point that aesthetic experience must precede, and be the basis for, general principles of taste. Hence in the Prolegomena to the *Aesthetica* he explains that the task of aesthetics is to make explicit, distinct, and self-conscious what is implicit, confused, and subconscious within ordinary experience. If these principles are not somehow already implicit within experience itself, he argues, we have no basis for the principles themselves (§7). As he puts it in one of his rare metaphors, we arrive at the daylight of noon only by first going through the depths of night and the glimmerings of dawn (*Ex nocte per auroram meridies*).

Baumgarten realizes, however, that we cannot form general rules on the basis of experience alone (§73). Experience provides only specific examples of beauty, which are an insufficient basis on which to establish a universal rule; furthermore, not everyone agrees about the aesthetic worth of the examples.

[41] *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, §§17, 33, 34; V, 231–2, 284–5, 285–6.

[42] See *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, §34, V, 285.

The only way to avoid the difficulty, he argues, is to establish general principles that determine the nature of beauty in general. This concession makes it seem, however, as if Baumgarten were caught in Kant's circle after all. For he claims both that we determine general principles from reflecting on specific cases in experience, *and* that we judge the validity of the specific cases from the principles.

While Kant's circle is indeed inescapable, the question remains whether it is vicious. It is no more vicious than any we find in hermeneutics. We understand the whole text from its parts, and its parts from the whole. We resolve the apparent impasse by constantly moving back and forth between part and whole, using a more specific knowledge of the part to increase knowledge of the whole, a better knowledge of the whole to improve knowledge of the part. The same in the case of aesthetic experience. We establish aesthetic principles, Baumgarten thinks, by analyzing and generalizing from specific cases in experience; we then use the principles to help us understand particular cases, which in turn leads us to modify or refine the principles. Of course, there is no a priori guarantee that these principles are correct. They are valid only if they conform to experience; and they would be invalid if they made us approve works in which we no one ever takes any pleasure. Conformity to experience remains at least a negative test of the truth of the principles.

It is important to see, however, that Baumgarten thinks that, besides our experience of particular works of art, there is another source of general aesthetic principles. This source comes from the role these principles play within the system of philosophy as a whole, more specifically from their derivation from the higher general principles of empirical psychology. Aesthetics can be a science, Baumgarten explains, because psychology comes to its aid with general principles.[43] In the *Metaphysica* Baumgarten had already sketched these general psychological principles. There he puts forward the thesis that aesthetic pleasure consists in the perception of a perfection (§§655, 662), where perfection consists in the harmony of many things into one (§§94, 141). Now if we find that we can explain all instances of aesthetic pleasure according to such principles, and if we can further explain such principles according to the general nature of our sensitive faculty, they can then serve as standards by which we judge specific cases in experience. Such principles give reasons why we take pleasure in some works and not in others; and so they serve as standards in judging works of art.

[43] *Aesthetica*, §10. Cf. *Meditationes*, §116; 78. Here Baumgarten is confident that there can be a science of aesthetics because psychology "affords sound principles". Most probably, he is referring to Wolff's *Psychologia empirica*, where Wolff had also placed his treatment of aesthetic experience. Hence Baeumler is very mistaken when he maintains that Baumgarten attempts to provide a strictly logical rather than psychological foundation for aesthetics. See *Kant's Kritik der Urteilskraft*, p. 114.

Baumgarten's general aesthetic principles are "a priori", but not in the absolute sense that they derive from reflection alone, independent of all experience, but only in the relative sense that they derive from higher psychological principles, which determine the place of aesthetic experience within our general mental economy. What makes Baumgarten's principles a priori, then, is their place within his system, not their derivation from some source entirely outside experience. This disarms Kant's objection against such principles, which presupposes that they must be a priori in the absolute sense, as if *per impossible* aesthetic principles, like mathematical ones, had a completely a priori source.[44]

4. Theory of Sensation

What is so striking about Baumgarten's conception of aesthetics, from a later and much broader historical perspective, is that it is fundamentally cognitive. He appears to assume, as if it were self-evident and needed no justification, that aesthetic perception is a form of knowledge, and more specifically sensible as opposed to intellectual knowledge. The very first sentence of the *Aesthetica* announces, without explanation or demonstration, that aesthetics is "the science of sensitive *cognition*" (§1). It is precisely this assumption, however, that seems so questionable from a later perspective. In the first paragraph of the *Kritik der Urteilskraft* Kant makes a sharp distinction between aesthetic and cognitive judgment. If we accept Kant's distinction, Baumgarten's entire science rests on a mistake.

That raises the intriguing and inescapable questions: Why does Baumgarten think that aesthetic experience is a form of knowledge? What premises support such a controversial assumption? To answer these questions we have to turn to Baumgarten's central work, the foundation for all his later thinking, his *Metaphysica* (1739).[45] This work expounds several premises behind Baumgarten's cognitive conception of aesthetics, premises that are simply presupposed in the *Aesthetica* itself.

In the *Metaphysica* Baumgarten locates aesthetics within one definite part of his system, empirical psychology (§533). He defines psychology as the science of the general predicates of the soul (§501). *Rational* psychology examines the very notion of the soul according to reason (§503), whereas *empirical* psychology treats the soul according to its experience, insofar as it exists within

[44] *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, §34, V, 286; §44, V, 304–5; and §60, V, 354–5.

[45] All citations will be to the seventh edition, *Metaphysica* (Halle: Hemmerde, 1779).

the world and is tied to a physical body. In placing aesthetics within empirical psychology, Baumgarten largely follows the lead of Wolff, who had discussed aesthetic pleasure and beauty in his *Psychologia empirica*.

One of the central principles of Baumgarten's empirical psychology—and one of the crucial premises behind his cognitivist aesthetics—is his definition of the soul. Like Descartes, Baumgarten conceives of the soul (*anima*) as a thinking or conscious being (*res cogitans*) (§504). Since he holds that thinking or consciousness consists in having representations, he understands the soul essentially as a being that has the capacity for representation. Hence, following Wolff, Baumgarten defines the soul as a power of representation (*vis repraesentativa*).[46] Representation consists in a state of awareness of some part of the universe, whether that is inside or outside me (§§506–7).

Such a psychology means, of course, that the very essence and purpose of the soul is cognition. Representation is a cognitive state (*cogitationes*) (§506), and so the soul, as a power of representation, is a power to know. Like Wolff, Baumgarten interprets the other aspects of mental life along these lines. Desires and feelings are simply different aspects or forms of the power of representation. The faculty of desire consists in the striving to produce something that is represented as good or judged to be perfect (§§606, 663, 689–90); and feeling (*affectus*) consists in the confused representation of the good (§678).[47] Baumgarten understands taste too as a cognitive faculty, the power to discriminate between perfect and imperfect things (§607). It is striking that Baumgarten, unlike Kant, thinks that even pleasure has cognitive significance. Pleasure (*voluptas*) is that state of the soul which intuits perfection (*status animae ex intuitu perfectionis*) (§655).

Such a psychology is, however, only the general premise behind Baumgarten's cognitivist aesthetics. Baumgarten needs a more specific premise about the nature of sensation itself. Sensation is of great importance to Baumgarten because he thinks that it is the specific kind of representation that defines the characteristic subject matter of aesthetics. The form of cognition involved in aesthetics is primarily sensitive, and so it consists first and foremost in sensations (*sensationes*). However, this raises the question: Why are sensations cognitive? It is not enough to state the general theory that all representations are cognitive; we need to know more specifically why sensations are so.

This, however, is a controversial issue, and it was especially so in the eighteenth century. Some philosophers, most notably Descartes and Locke,

[46] Baumgarten, *Metaphysica*, §506: "... *anima mea est vis repraesentativa*." Cf. Wolff, *Metaphysik*, §§753–6.

[47] Cf. *Meditationes*, §25.

regarded sensations as "secondary qualities", viz., color and sound, which vary from one perceiver to the next, and therefore give knowledge of the subject's psychological or physiological state rather than the object itself. They opposed such secondary qualities to "primary qualities", viz., shape, size, and weight, which are precisely measurable and invariable from one perceiver to the next, and therefore give insight into the object itself. This distinction was indeed one of the crucial premises behind the subjectivist turn of eighteenth-century aesthetics. Since aesthetic experience consists primarily in sensations, which are only secondary qualities, some thinkers held that such experience tells us more about the subject than the object, more about the perceiver than the perceived.[48]

So the question is now even more pressing: Why does Baumgarten think that sensation gives knowledge? What do I know about the world through sensation? To answer this question we have to turn to Baumgarten's theory of sensation in the *Metaphysica*. Following Wolff, Baumgarten defines a sensation as the representation of my present state or the present state of the world (§534).[49] The main form of sensation takes place in my consciousness of the external world through my five senses. This is not, however, its sole form. There are for Baumgarten two kinds of sensation. He divides sense (*sensum*) into two faculties, internal and external. While external sense represents the state of my body (*status corporis mei*), internal sense represents the state of my soul (*status animae meae*) (§535).

It is remarkable that in his definition of sensation Baumgarten seems to equate the representation of my present state with the representation of the external world, as if they were alternative descriptions of one and the same representation. He states explicitly: "Representations of my present state or sensations (apparitions) are representations of the present state of the world."[50] This seems to be a confusion, a conflation of external and internal sensations. We want to ask: Which one is it? It does not seem that sensation can be awareness both of myself and of the world. It is crucial to see, however, that for Baumgarten these are not exclusive alternatives. He is not confusing

[48] See, for example, Hutcheson, *An Inquiry into the Original of Our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue* (London, 1726), section I, xvii; and Hume, 'Of the Standard of Taste', in *Essays Moral, Political and Literary* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1985), pp. 220–49, esp. 230: "no sentiment represents what is really in the object."

[49] See Wolff, *Logick:* "Ich sage aber, daß wir etwas empfinden, wenn wir uns desselben als uns gegenwärtig bewußt sind. So empfinden wir den Schmertz, den Schall, das Licht und unsere eigene Gedanken" (§1; I/1, 123).

[50] *Metaphysica*, §534: "Cogito statum meum praesentem. Ergo repraesento statum meum praesentem, i.e., SENTIO. Repraesentationes status mei praesentis seu SENSATIONES (apparitiones) sunt repraesentationes status mundi praesentis."

external and internal sensations but pointing out two interwoven aspects of external sensations. What is characteristic of the sensations of external sense, in his view, is that they are at once both a fact about me and about the world. They are a fact about me, because they are *my* states of awareness, and because they represent nature *from my standpoint*. They are also a fact about the world, however, because they are the effect of all nature acting upon me, and because they are what nature becomes in and through me. Sensation therefore has both a subjective and an objective aspect. Its subjective aspect views the sensation from "the inside out", i.e., it begins from the standpoint of the subject and considers how the world appears to him. Its objective aspect regards the sensation from "the outside in", i.e., it begins from the world and views the sensation as another event in it, as the effect or appearance of the whole world as it acts upon the subject.

Baumgarten's analysis becomes perfectly intelligible once we see it in the light of his general metaphysical theory. The two aspects of external sensations appear as soon as we place them in their general cosmic context. For Baumgarten, the universe is a systematic unity, a harmonic whole, and each event happens only in virtue of the *entire* universe acting through it. Hence he defines any present state of the universe, the "*status mundi*", as "the whole of its [the world's] state in its simultaneous parts" (*totum omnium statuum in partibus eius simultaneorum*) (§369). It is precisely this "*status mundi*" that is represented in a sensation. The sensation is not simply an event within me but the entire universe as it manifests itself through me. Hence it shows me, in the Leibnizian phrase, "the entire universe from my point of view".

The net effect of Baumgarten's analysis is therefore to question the Cartesian dualism between consciousness and world. Baumgarten refuses to see representation as a conscious state that somehow mysteriously represents or corresponds to an extended being in the world outside it. All representations, not least sensations, are events within nature as a whole; and, as the product of nature, they represent the entire universe from the standpoint where my body is situated. Hence Baumgarten's striking definition of the human soul: "*vis repraesentativa universi pro positu corporis humani*" (§741).

In the *Metaphysica* Baumgarten stresses the objective aspect of sensation, and so its cognitive dimension. It is the fundamental law of sensation (*lex sensationis*), he writes, that representations succeed one another as do the states of the world and the soul (§541). Knowledge of sensation is indeed "the truest in the world" (*verissimae totius mundi*) (§546). Error arises not from sensation itself but simply from judgment upon it, when we make a false inference from the data present to us (§§545–6).

Nevertheless, despite Baumgarten's emphasis on the objectivity of sensation, it is important to see that the general principles of his ontology forbid him to hold that sensation gives us knowledge in the strict metaphysical sense. These principles mean that sensation cannot provide us with knowledge of reality in itself, i.e., the world as it exists apart from and prior to sensation. For, like Leibniz, Baumgarten maintains that the ultimate things in the world are monads, which are unextended simple substances (§§230, 241). Sensation, however, reveals to us a world of extended things. What we know through the senses, therefore, are only phenomena, composite substances formed by the aggregation and activity of the monads. These phenomena are the effect of the monads acting together and upon us. The monads themselves, however, are insensible.

Now the sensible knowledge of Baumgarten's aesthetics seems more mysterious than ever. If ultimate reality is insensible, how do the senses give us knowledge at all? It seems that what we know through the senses—something tangible and extended in space—is very unlike reality itself, which is intangible and unextended. Baumgarten's problem is only one version of a more general problem that had troubled all early modern philosophy. Namely, how do the senses give us knowledge of reality if the ultimate constituents of things are not sensible themselves? What we see is a composite body having a certain size, shape, and color; but its ultimate constituents are insensible units, whether atoms or monads. Hence there seemed to be a radical heterogeneity between the appearances of the sensible world and the explanation of these appearances provided by modern science. It was on the basis of just such considerations that Locke concluded in his *Essay concerning Human Understanding* that sense qualities such as colors, sounds, and tastes do not give us knowledge of reality at all. Such secondary qualities do not give us knowledge of the objects themselves, Locke argued, because they in no way resemble the objects that cause them.[51] There is no resemblance between the idea of color, for example, and the motion of the very fine particles in the body that cause it. For similar reasons Kant stated in the first *Kritik* that colors are not objective qualities of bodies but only "modifications of the sense of sight, which is affected by light in a certain way" (A 28, 29/B 44, 45). Kant's adherence to the distinction between primary and secondary qualities is fundamental, of course, to his later distinction between cognitive and aesthetic judgment.

All this raises the question: Why does Baumgarten not draw the same conclusion as Locke and Kant? Why does he think that the senses give us knowledge at all? Baumgarten himself does not explicitly address this issue;

[51] Locke, *Essay concerning Human Understanding*, II, vii, 15.

but his response to it becomes clear if we go back to the ultimate source of so much of his philosophy, namely, Leibniz. In this regard there is an especially interesting and instructive exchange between Theophilius and Philalethes in Leibniz's *Nouveaux Essais*.[52] Theophilius (Leibniz) warns Philalethes (Locke) that, because secondary qualities are the effects of insensible fine bodies acting on our physiology, we should not infer they have no resemblance to their objects. Although these qualities are indeed unlike their objects in one respect, they are like them in another. They are unlike their objects in their content or matter, the specific qualities that we sense; but they are like their objects in their structure or form. Hence Theophilius likens their resemblance to where "one thing expresses another through some orderly relationship between them" (131). He gives as an example the similarity between an ellipse projected on a plane and the circle that projects it. Judging from this example, the resemblance seems to rest on the form or structure rather than the content of the sensation. According to Leibniz, sensation is a composite phenomenon having an inherent structure that results from the activity of its elements and their manner of combination. What makes the sensation like its cause is that it conforms to the same fundamental laws as its cause. Hence the formal or structural similarity between the sensation and its object is essentially nomological.

Applying this Leibnizian theory to Baumgarten makes his metaphysics and aesthetics consistent. It permits Baumgarten to say that, even though reality in itself is insensible, the senses still give us knowledge of reality. Hence aesthetics can be a science of cognition in more than the common or banal sense that identifies reality with ordinary or everyday objects; it will provide us with knowledge, even if very implicit and confused, of those ultimately real objects, the monads themselves. What the senses grasp of reality, though "through a glass darkly", is nothing less than its formal structure, its unity-in-diversity. The perception of that unity-in-diversity, for reasons we shall now see, is nothing less than beauty itself.

5. Analysis of Beauty

Baumgarten's account of sensation is only one part of his general cognitivist theory of aesthetic judgment. It is necessary but not sufficient to provide a complete foundation for that theory. For even if we admit that sensations are

[52] Leibniz, *Schriften* (Gerhardt), V, 118–19.

objective, giving knowledge of reality itself, it does not follow that aesthetic judgments themselves are objective or cognitive. It is obvious that these judgments do more than report sensations or ascribe sense qualities to objects; they also claim that an object is beautiful, which implies, at the very least, that it is *pleasing* to the senses. Pleasure, however, seems to be the least objective of qualities. While colors, sounds, and shapes are plausible candidates for the title of objectivity, pleasure seems no worthy contender at all. Pleasure is not an identifiable quality of objects; and it seems to be nothing more than a feeling in the perceiver. It was indeed for just this reason that Kant made aesthetic judgments subjective.[53]

Although he is a cognitivist, Baumgarten does not underrate or conceal the role of pleasure in aesthetic judgment.[54] No less than Kant, he holds that something can be beautiful only if it is pleasing to perceive it. Both his definitions of beauty imply a connection with pleasure.[55] "Beauty", he states in the *Metaphysica*, is "the perfection of a phenomenon" (§662), where the perception of perfection gives pleasure (§655). Beauty, according to the formulation of the *Aesthetica*, consists in "the perfection of sensitive cognition" (§14). Pleasure is the sign or *ratio cognoscendi* that such perfection has been achieved. Following Aristotle, Baumgarten holds that the perfection of any characteristic activity leads to and involves pleasure, which is the completion of such activity.[56] Apart from his explicit definitions of beauty, Baumgarten's general conception of aesthetics gives an important place to pleasure. If the purpose of aesthetics is to instruct us how to make beauty, the main purpose of beauty is to create pleasure in the perceiver. Hence Baumgarten declared in his lectures: "The chief end of beauty, and especially the best and most noble, is that one wants to please."[57]

From the fundamental role of pleasure in aesthetic experience, Baumgarten never drew Kant's conclusion that aesthetic judgment must be merely subjective. Rather, true to his cognitivism, he holds that even pleasure is a cognitive state. Hence in the *Metaphysica* he defines pleasure (*voluptas*) as "the state of the soul from the intuition of perfection",[58] where an intuition is a direct knowledge of a particular through the senses, the opposite of indirect

[53] *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, §1, V, 203–4.

[54] *Pace* Riemann, *Die Aesthetik Alexander Gottlieb Baumgartens* (Halle: Niemeyer, 1928), p. 35.

[55] The connection of beauty with pleasure is more evident in Wolff: "Hinc definiri potest Pulchritudo, quod sit rei aptitudo producendi in nobis voluptatem . . ." See *Psychologia empirica*, §545; II/5, 421. As Baeumler points out (*Kants Kritik der Urteilskraft*, p. 114), Wolff's *observabilitas perfectionis* became Baumgarten's *perfectio phaenomenon*.

[56] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book X, ch. 4, 1174^b.

[57] *Handschrift*, §196; 160.

[58] Baumgarten, *Metaphysica*, §655: "Status animae ex intuitu perfectionis est (complacentia) VOLUPTAS".

knowledge through signs alone (§620). And perfection is not simply a quality attributable to the perceiver's senses when they are functioning well; it is what Baumgarten calls a "transcendental" attribute, i.e., one belonging to the very essence of things (§98). Hence his dictum "*omne ens est perfectum*" (§99). Perfection consists in the harmony of many things into one (§§94, 99, 100). It is inherent in each individual thing because each is the unity of many properties (§§40, 94, 99). And it is fundamental to the structure of the cosmos in general, which consists in the unity of many things into one harmonious whole (§§357, 360).

Having considered Baumgarten's concepts of pleasure and perfection, we are now in a position to understand his theory of beauty. The starting point of Baumgarten's theory is Wolff's brief account of "*pulchritudo*" in the *Psychologia empirica*.[59] Following Wolff, Baumgarten's central thesis is that beauty consists in the intuition of perfection. Much careful thought went into that definition. Every feature of it is strategic, accounting for some aspect of aesthetic experience or some desideratum of aesthetic judgment. Such a thesis attempts to explain both the subjective and objective aspects of beauty.[60] In making perfection essential to beauty, it makes beauty partially objective. If there were no unity-in-variety in the object, there would be no beauty. But in making intuition also crucial to beauty, it also makes beauty subjective. If there were no sensible perception of perfection, there also would be no beauty. The advantage of the objective component of beauty is that it is possible to justify aesthetic judgment, to give some reasons for it, where these reasons point to some features of the object itself, chiefly features of its formal structure. Furthermore, it is possible to make a distinction between good and bad taste: good taste is that which takes pleasure in perfection, and poor taste that which takes pleasure in imperfection. The advantage of the subjective component is that it stresses the decisive role of pleasure in beauty, and indeed the constitutive role of the senses. Pleasure is always the ultimate test of aesthetic merit, the test of whether a perfection has been perceived, no matter how much something appears to depart from the rules. Baumgarten's emphasis on *intuition* as the specific form of the subjective aspect of beauty is also strategic. Its point is to account for the "je ne sais quoi", the ineffability and indeterminacy of aesthetic experience, the fact that we cannot precisely identify and determine what it is that makes an object so pleasant or appealing. As a direct awareness of a particular, intuition has an extensive clarity and liveliness that cannot be fully elaborated or explained

[59] See above, Chapter 2.4.

[60] It is a common mistake to see Baumgarten's definition of beauty as simply objective. See, for example, Bergmann, *Begründung*, pp. 153, 155.

by concepts. This feature of aesthetic experience, which had been stressed by Leibniz and Kant, was no less important for Baumgarten.

However strategic, Baumgarten's theory has been charged with incoherence. Many scholars have noted that his definitions of beauty seem inconsistent.[61] Whereas the definition in the *Metaphysica* makes beauty a property of its object, its unity-in-diversity, the definition in the *Aesthetica* makes it a property of the subject, its performing well at sensitive cognition. The discrepancy between these formulations has raised questions about the general coherence of Baumgarten's aesthetics, not to mention speculations about whether there was a break in his philosophical development. It is important to see, however, that there is no inconsistency at all, and that the definitions are mutually reinforcing. The difference between them arises solely from Baumgarten's perspective: in the *Metaphysica* his concern is theoretical, with determining what we *know* through the senses, whereas in the *Aesthetica* it is practical, in how we perfect the senses.[62] Never, though, did Baumgarten mean to separate these two aspects of beauty: he is perfectly explicit that we perfect sensate cognition only when it corresponds with the perfection of things themselves (§§19–20). His general thesis is that these forms of perfection are interdependent: the perception of perfection in the object gives rise to the perfection of sensible cognition, whose highest manifestation and expression is the pleasure of the perceiver. The underlying idea seems to be that when we perceive an object having a harmonious structure, this stimulates the activity of the senses, leading them to function well in their characteristic activities. Perceiving harmony repeatedly makes the senses more acute, alive, and responsive; their functioning well gives rise to pleasure.

Now that we have considered the broad outlines of Baumgarten's theory of beauty we can begin to see the weaknesses of Kant's polemic against it. All too often in the third *Kritik* Kant presents his reader with exclusive alternatives regarding the basis of aesthetic judgment: it is either pleasure or principle, the feeling of the subject or the conformity of the object to rule.[63] Kant insists that we must adopt the former over the latter alternative, which he attributes to his rationalist predecessors. It is easy to see now, however, that Baumgarten would never have accepted such exclusive options, because for him beauty consists in pleasure, which arises from perfection, the conformity of the object

[61] Riemann, *Aesthetik Baumgartens*, pp. 37–8; and Armand Nivelle, *Kunst und Dichtungstheorien zwischen Aufklarung und Klassik* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1960), pp. 20, 30.

[62] For attempts to rescue Baumgarten from the charge of inconsistency, see Franke, *Kunst als Erkenntnis*, pp. 88–9; Schweizer, *Ästhetik*, p. 83; and Mary Gregor, 'Baumgarten's *Aesthetica*', *Review of Metaphysics* 37 (1983), 357–85, esp. 376–82.

[63] Kant, *Schriften* §§8, 17, 33, 34; V, 215–16, 231–2, 284–5, 285–6.

to some rule. Again, as we have seen above (5.3), the purpose of the rule is not to replace pleasure as the criterion of beauty but to explain and justify it. It was never Baumgarten's position, as Kant implies, that there can be beauty where there is no pleasure and where an object simply conforms to the rules. If an object appears to conform to the rules and still arouses no pleasure in the perceiver, that is because either the rules are not accurate accounts of perfection or because the perceiver does not have sufficient taste to feel the perfection. Simply accepting pleasure alone as the arbiter of taste, as Kant does, makes it difficult to distinguish between good and bad taste and to deal with differences in taste.

Often in the third *Kritik* Kant writes that aesthetic judgments cannot be cognitive because they do not apply a determinate concept to their object.[64] He seems to think that the theory of perfection is mistaken on these grounds too, as if it were committed to holding that aesthetic judgments apply such determinate concepts. This completely overlooks, however, Baumgarten's insistence that aesthetic experience consists in extensive rather than intensive clarity, that it is unanalyzable into distinct concepts. Baumgarten attempts to account for the ineffable or indeterminable aspect of aesthetic experience no less than Kant. However, he gives a very different account of that indeterminability: for Baumgarten, it consists in the confusion of concepts; for Kant, it consists in the possibility of alternative interpretations, where each interpretation might consist in clear and distinct concepts. Whatever account of indeterminacy is preferable, the fact remains that Baumgarten never assumes that aesthetic experience is reducible to determinate concepts. Simply pointing to the indeterminacy of aesthetic experience, its irreducibility to determinate concepts, is not a sufficient reason for the rejection of the cognitivist theory, which always held that the cognition of aesthetic experience is indeterminate.

An essential part of Kant's polemic is that we simply do not need the concept of perfection to determine whether something is beautiful or not.[65] At least in the case of free rather than adherent beauty, we require to know only whether an object has a pleasing appearance for us; and for that we do not need to know its purpose, or what it means to be perfect in its kind. I find a rose beautiful, for example, even if I have no idea whatsoever about the purpose of its petals. In the case of arabesques, and figures *à la Grècque*, birds, or foliage on borders and wallpaper, I react entirely to the design or pattern regardless of the purpose of the object. The crucial assumption behind Kant's argument—one made

[64] Ibid., §§4, 8, 15, 20; V, 207, 215–16, 226, 238.
[65] Ibid., §§4, 16; V, 207, 229.

perfectly explicit by him—is that the concept of perfection implies that of intrinsic purposiveness.[66] He thinks that the perfection of an object is measured in terms of whether, and the extent to which, it conforms to its purpose. The kind of purposiveness involved in perfection, Kant explains, is *intrinsic* rather than *extrinsic* purposiveness: intrinsic is where the purpose is internal to the object, crucial to its very concept; extrinsic is where the purpose is external to the object, imposed on it from outside, where the object is made to serve some alien end.

Kant's interpretation of the theory of perfection in these terms is plausible. Furthermore, it helps to explain why he thinks that the perfectionist is committed to applying determinate concepts to aesthetic experience: the concept of a purpose would be a determinate concept, and judging whether an object is beautiful would then be only a matter of applying the concept to the object. But there is still a major problem: this is a mistaken interpretation of Wolff or Baumgarten. Neither Wolff nor Baumgarten understands perfection so narrowly that it is limited to intrinsic purposiveness. By perfection Wolff and Baumgarten mean something very general: unity-in-diversity, the conformity of many into one.[67] What unites the many into one is some sufficient reason, where the sufficient reason is *any* reason from which we can understand why a thing exists or acts as it does.[68] Understood in this broad sense, perfection is mainly a structural or formal feature of an object; and it has no necessary reference to an underlying purpose. There is no reason why the sufficient reason has to be a purpose at all; it can be any kind of cause, whether efficient, formal, material, or final. In general, Baumgarten and Wolff give no special role to final causes in their metaphysics. While they think that teleology is a legitimate part of metaphysics, they assign it more to the realm of theology after the development of ontology and cosmology. It was Leibniz who, by attributing a *nisus* to each monad, gave a much greater role to teleology in his cosmology. Hence Kant's interpretation of the concept of perfection in terms of purposiveness came from an understandable blunder: reading Leibniz into Wolff and Baumgarten. He was encouraged in this blunder, as we have already seen (2.5), by Meier, who, contrary to Baumgarten, explicitly identifies the unity of an aesthetic object with its purpose.[69]

[66] Kant, *Schriften* §15; V, 227.

[67] Baumgarten, *Metaphysica*, §§94, 141; and Wolff, *Ontologia*, §§503, 505.

[68] Baumgarten, *Metaphysica*, §§94–5; and Wolff, *Ontologia*, §505.

[69] See his *Anfangsgründe aller schönen*, §§24, 471, 473; I, 40 and III, 511, 517. For some of the important differences between Baumgarten and Meier, see Bergmann, *Begründung*, pp. 141–86. Bergmann, pp. 161–2, is probably correct that Kant preferred the more readable *Anfangsgründe* to Baumgarten's *Aesthetica*.

The issues dividing Kant and Baumgarten become much clearer once we realize that there are two very different concepts of perfection at stake. There is a weak and a strong concept of perfection. The weak concept is just unity-in-variety, which is only the formal structure of an object. The strong concept is intrinsic purposiveness, which involves some norm or idea about what the object should be. The strong concept implies the weak, because intrinsic purposiveness involves unity-in-variety; but the weak concept does not imply the strong, because unity-in-variety need not involve any norm or idea about the purpose of the object. Essential to Kant's critique of perfection is his—perfectly correct—observation that aesthetic judgment does not require perfection in the strong sense; hence he argues that we can determine the beauty of an object without having any conception of its inner nature.[70] But this point is still insufficient to give Kant the conclusion he wants: that aesthetic judgment is not cognitive. If an aesthetic judgment involves the concept of perfection only in the weaker sense, that is still sufficient for it to be cognitive, because formal structure is an objective feature of the object; indeed, we can measure it even in mathematical terms without having to make any argument for the objectivity of sensible qualities.

6. Status of Aesthetics

The most controversial question concerning Baumgarten's aesthetics is whether he makes it a truly autonomous discipline, giving it a status equal to and independent of logic. The traditional view is that Baumgarten's great advance over Leibniz and Wolff—and his chief contribution to philosophy in general—was to make aesthetics an independent science, as legitimate a part of philosophy as logic.[71] Supposedly, Baumgarten gives aesthetics its own laws, independent of the laws of reason, and, in doing so, explodes the limits of Leibnizian–Wolffian rationalism. However, this interpretation has been contested by others, most

[70] Kant, *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, §§4, 16; V, 207, 229.

[71] See, for example, Hermann Hettner, *Geschichte der deutschen Literatur im achtzehnten Jahrhundert* (Berlin: Aufbau, 1979), I, 387–8. For some recent statements of this view, see Kai Hammermeister, *The German Aesthetic Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 4, and Groß, *Felix Aestheticus*, pp. 48–64. The most influential statement of the traditional view is that given by Baeumler, *Kants Kritik der Urteilskraft*, pp. 189, 191, 192, 208. He protests strongly against a rationalistic interpretation of Baumgarten on the grounds that it was his main intention to give equal and independent status to the logic of sensibility (pp. 224, 225). However, Baeumler failed to weigh carefully the evidence for the opposing interpretation; and, as a result, his interpretation begs the question against Croce and Cassirer. The same criticism applies to Schweizer and Groß, who uncritically follow Baeumler.

notably by Benedetto Croce and Ernst Cassirer.[72] They argue that Baumgarten did not really establish an autonomous discipline but remained stuck in the limits of Leibnizian–Wolffian rationalism. Rather than making aesthetics independent of logic, Baumgarten saw it as an inferior form of truth and cast it entirely in logical terms. Hence Croce's damning verdict:

> he [Baumgarten] proclaims a new science and presents it in conventional scholastic form; the babe about to be born receives the name of Aesthetic by premature baptism at his hands: and the name remains. But the new name is devoid of new matter; the philosophical armour covers no muscular body.[73]

Which of these interpretations is correct? There is strong evidence for the traditional one. First of all, there is Baumgarten's definition of his discipline as "*scientia cognitionis sensitivae*". The definition implies that aesthetics has equal status to logic, because each discipline is assigned its own faculty of knowledge: aesthetics is the science of sensitive cognition as logic is the science of intellectual cognition. Second, Baumgarten maintains that the criteria of perfection for sensitive cognition are different in kind from those of intellectual cognition. He has two formulations for the difference between these standards of truth. In the *Meditationes* he distinguishes between the *intensive* clarity of the philosopher and the *extensive* clarity of the poet: intensive clarity consists in the *analysis* of a clear representation into its distinct elements; but extensive clarity consists in the *synthesis* of many clear representations, so that one has a lively and complete representation of an individual. In the *Aesthetica* he distinguishes between formal and material perfection of knowledge: while the logician strives for formal perfection of knowledge—greater and greater abstraction and universality—the aesthetician aims at material perfection—greater and greater concreteness and individuality (§§558–60). Whatever formulation we prefer, it is clear that Baumgarten thinks these faculties have unique and incommensurable standards of perfection or excellence. We therefore cannot measure sensitive cognition by the standards of intellectual cognition, as if it were only a lesser form of intellectual cognition. That these standards are distinct from one another is crucial for Baumgarten's whole conception of aesthetics. Hence he writes in the very first sentence of the main text of the *Aesthetica*: "The end of aesthetics is the perfection of sensitive cognition, as such" (*Aesthetices finis est perfectio cognitionis sensitivae, qua talis*) (§14).

There is also, however, weighty evidence for the opposing interpretation. Although Baumgarten assigns logic and aesthetics to distinct faculties of

[72] Croce, *Aesthetic*, trans. Douglas Ainslee (Boston: Nonpareil, 1978), pp. 214–19; and Ernst Cassirer, *Freiheit und Form: Studien zur deutschen Geistesgeschichte* (Berlin: Casssirer, 1916), pp. 79–80.

[73] Croce, *Aesthetic*, pp. 218–19.

knowledge, the fact remains that these faculties themselves are not equal in their epistemic status. In his *Metaphysica* Baumgarten explicitly describes sensibility as "the inferior faculty of knowledge" (*facultas cogniscitiva inferior*), because its constituent representations, sensations, do not provide the clear and distinct knowledge of the intellect (§§519–20).[74] He indeed characterizes the extensive clarity of sensibility in negative intellectual terms: the thinking together and at once of many distinct elements is nothing less than confusion. The reason for the inferiority of sensible cognition *vis-à-vis* intellectual cognition becomes clear as soon as we ask: Which faculty, sensibility or reason, gives knowledge of reality? And here Baumgarten's answer is very clear: sensibility provides a very inferior form of knowledge. Indeed, according to the general principles of his epistemology, it is more accurate to say that sensibility, *as such*, does not give us knowledge of reality at all. The sole cognitive worth of sensation, as we have seen, comes entirely from its subconscious and implicit intellectual structure, not from its distinctive qualities as sensation. Reality in itself is something simple, unextended, and intangible, whereas the senses represent things as aggregates, extended, and tangible. What we grasp through the senses, Baumgarten maintains, are only hypostasized or reified phenomena (*phaenomena substantiata*) (§§191, 193, 425).[75] They are hypostasized because we think that what we perceive is a substance, whereas in reality it is only an effect or accident of a substance that lies beneath and beyond the realm of the senses.

The traditional interpretation could be upheld, one could further argue, only if there were true parity between sensibility and reason, sensate and intellectual cognition. There could be such parity only if either of the following were the case: (1) Sensations and intellectual representations give equal and independent *perspectives* of one and the same thing. (2) These forms of representation give knowledge of distinct kinds of things, where they have the same ontological status, i.e., each is a substance in its own right. But Baumgarten's general metaphysics and epistemology exclude both possibilities. Against the first possibility, there is Baumgarten's theory of sensation, according to which it consists in a confused form of knowledge of reality, and where all its cognitive significance rests on its underlying intellectual structure. Against the second possibility, Baumgarten maintains that the senses give knowledge only of phenomena or the appearances of things, which do not exist independently

[74] Schweizer's claim, in *Ästhetik*, pp. 21–2, that Baumgarten abandoned this hierarchical conception in the *Aesthetica* is false. See, for example, *Aesthetica*, §§1, 12, 41. Baumgarten also retains the conception of the *ars analogi rationis*, §§7, 9, 74, 424. Schweizer himself later admits the persistence of these conceptions, in *Ästhetik*, p. 26, but then claims that there is an inconsistency in accommodating them.

[75] This is a Wolffian view. See Wolff, *Cosmologia generalis*: "In mundo adspectabili sensu non percipimus nisi quae sunt composita" (§66; II/4, 62).

of the things themselves. The apparent equality between reason and sensibility would stand if Baumgarten were more of a dualist, i.e., if he held something like a two-worlds theory, where reason knows noumena and sensibility knows phenomena, and where noumena and phenomena are distinct kinds of substances. But he never holds, and indeed explicitly denies, such a theory. Phenomena are for him not distinct substances but only how substances appear to beings with a sensibility; in other words, they are how noumena appear to the senses; or, in Leibniz's phrase, they are *phaenomena bene fundata*, i.e., appearances whose foundation consists in strictly intellectual or intelligible entities.

That Baumgarten dooms the artist to a very inferior kind of knowledge becomes evident in the final sections of the *Meditationes*, for here he implies that the nature the poet imitates consists in "a substantialized phenomenon" (*phaenomena substantiata*) (§110). This makes the subject matter of art something deceptive or illusory. For we substantialize a phenomenon when we make something that has a dependent existence (an accident) appear to have an independent existence (substance); in other words, we falsely assume that they are substances.[76] It therefore appears as if the artist is caught in this web of illusion, making us believe that appearances are entities in their own right. Hence, it seems, Baumgarten has not successfully escaped, but only unwittingly endorsed, Plato's indictment of the arts in Book X of the *Republic*. Since the artist only imitates appearances of reality, his creations are twice removed from it; they are only appearances of appearances. When we consider this point, Croce's damning verdict seems justified after all.

7. An Ambiguous Legacy

Yet Croce is but one half of the whole picture. For the question remains whether it is appropriate to measure the status of aesthetics in such narrow metaphysical terms. This is the silent assumption of Croce and Cassirer, who arrive at their judgments by asking whether sensitive cognition provides knowledge of reality in itself. It is important to see, however, that Baumgarten himself expressly protests against measuring sensitive cognition in such strict terms. He thinks that sensibility and the intellect follow not only distinct standards of perfection but also distinct standards of truth, and that it would be unrealistic, indeed inappropriate, to measure sensibility by the standards of truth of logic.

[76] See *Metaphysica*, §193.

Such, at any rate, is the thrust of some of the culminating chapters of Pars I of the *Aesthetica*. Here Baumgarten sketches a complete theory of aesthetic truth whose sole purpose is to determine the standard of truth appropriate for aesthetics. It is necessary, then, to take a brief look at this theory.

Baumgarten begins his theory with a classification of the various forms of truth. There is first of all *objective* or *metaphysical* truth, which is inherent in things themselves. This consists in their conformity to the fundamental laws of reason, viz., the principles of contradiction and sufficient reason (§423). There is then *subjective* truth, which consists in objective truth insofar as it is represented by the subject (§424). There are two forms of subjective truth: *logical* truth, where I have distinct intellectual cognition of the object; and *aesthetic* truth, where I have a clear sensible cognition of it (§424). Aesthetic truth is therefore "truth insofar as it is known through the senses" (*veritas, quatenus sensitive cognoscenda est*) (§423). The totality of all forms of subjective truth is what Baumgarten calls "aesthetico-logical truth" (§427). Most of what we know in ordinary life is a mixture of aesthetic and logical truth, and so falls within the domain of aesthetico-logical truth. Baumgarten then explains that, within the domain of aesthetico-logical truth, each kind of truth has its distinct form of perfection. While the standard of logical truth is *formal* perfection, the standard of aesthetic truth is *material* perfection. Formal perfection consists in the power to generalize, to prove a proposition, and to analyze a concept into its distinct components; and material perfection consists in the reproduction of individuality, closeness to the concrete content, and variety of experience (§§558–9). Within the domain of aesthetico-logical knowledge, Baumgarten argues, we cannot achieve perfection in one respect without creating imperfection in the other. The more we achieve the formal perfection of logical truth, the less we attain the material perfection of aesthetic truth, and conversely. All the perfection of formal truth involves a loss of material truth because formal perfection demands abstraction from the concrete content and richness of ordinary experience. What we gain in universality we lose in individuality (§560). The task of the aesthetician is therefore to compensate for the shortcomings of logical truth: to reproduce the individuality that has been lost and left out of account in striving for the perfection of formal truth (§564).

The chief result of Baumgarten's theory of aesthetic truth is that the strict standards of logical truth should not be applied to the sensitive knowledge of everyday life. The standards of logical truth require demonstration and reducibility to self-evidence (§§481–2). But none of the beliefs of everyday life—limited and conditioned as they are by a finite human sensibility—meet

such standards. Indeed, the distance between perfect rational knowledge and the sensitive knowledge of everyday life is infinite (§557). Perfect rational knowledge is the privilege of God alone, and we humans have to reconcile ourselves to perfecting the only kind of knowledge we can attain here on earth. Recognizing that most of our beliefs are not capable of strict proof, Baumgarten insists that we must resign ourselves to verisimilitude (*verisimilitudo*) (§§481–3). Verisimilitude consists in the justification of a belief by all available evidence, where evidence for a verisimilar belief should exceed that against it; although a verisimilar belief cannot be demonstrated, it also cannot be refuted (§483).

Although Baumgarten is eager to establish the equal rights of aesthetic truth, it is important to see that he limits its title to equality to the aesthetico-logical domain. Because it is infected with sensitive cognition, aesthetico-logical truth still falls far short of knowledge of reality in itself; at best it gives us knowledge of the realm of appearances or phenomena. Baumgarten is indeed perfectly explicit that the highest form of truth is purely logical, and that it transcends the aesthetico-logical domain (§557). For all his eagerness to give aesthetic truth its full due, Baumgarten never surrenders his basic rationalist ideals. Truth consists in conformity with the fundamental principles of cognition (§481), and in reducibility to self-evidence (§482). The very category of verisimilitude—what is *like* truth but not truth itself—shows that aesthetic truth falls below the highest standards.[77]

Hence, in the end, both Baumgarten's defenders and his detractors have right on their side. Neither do complete justice to the complexity and subtlety of Baumgarten's thought. His detractors are correct insofar as Baumgarten's ultimate standards of knowledge are rationalist, and he thinks that the senses provide knowledge of an inferior sort. But they fail to note Baumgarten's refusal to measure aesthetics by such standards, his insistence that aesthetics must have its own *sui generis* standard of truth. So his defenders are correct too, insofar as Baumgarten holds that aesthetics and logic have distinct and equal standards of truth. They go astray, however, when they neglect the crucial qualification behind such equality: that it holds only within the aesthetico-logical domain.

Ultimately, then, the portrait of Baumgarten as "a silent revolutionary" is very one-sided.[78] We would do better to call him a conservative revolutionary or a revolutionary conservative. If Baumgarten was revolutionary in freeing

[77] All these passages are compelling evidence against Schweizer's view that Baumgarten abandoned or mitigated his rationalism in the *Aesthetica* and championed instead experience as the *dynamisches Prinzip der Erkenntnis*. See Schweizer, *Ästhetik*, pp. 24–5.

[78] Thus Baeumler, *Kants Kritik der Urteilskraft*, p. 229.

aesthetics from the hegemony of logic, he remained deeply conservative in upholding the ideals of Leibnizian–Wolffian rationalism. If he bestowed upon the senses the power to grasp the intelligible structure of reality, he granted them such status only insofar as they were an "*ars analogi rationis*", having an implicit rational form; their own characteristic qualities were only the source of confusion. The equality of aesthetics with logic proves to be uneven. While there is a true equality in form—because they have distinctive standards of truth—there is no equality in subject matter—because the senses know only phenomena and reason alone knows reality in itself. It would be the mission of Baumgarten's more radical successors—Hamann and Herder—to complete the revolution he so boldly began but so meekly restrained. They would do so, however, only by taking a step unthinkable for Baumgarten himself: rejecting the epistemic ideals of rationalism.

6

Winckelmann and Neo-Classicism

1. Winckelmann as Philosopher

One day in the summer of 1739, when Baumgarten was still *Professor extraordinarius* in Halle, a poor theology student made an unexpected call at his home. The student told the servant who answered the door that he was in search of a reference, a volume of the *Annalen* of the Paris Academy of Sciences, which he thought the professor might by some chance own. He had already walked miles to find the book, but to no avail; and so in desperation he plucked up the courage to call on his professor. Struck by such zeal for learning, Baumgarten duly received the student and conversed with him. He was very impressed by this student, who had faithfully attended all his lectures. Perhaps, Baumgarten suggested, he too would like to become a professor someday.[1]

Such was the first meeting—and perhaps the only one—between two founders of modern aesthetics. The young student who visited Baumgarten was Johann Joachim Winckelmann (1717–68). As it happened, he did not become a professor; but he did become one of the most celebrated writers of his day, a thinker of no less stature than Baumgarten himself. If Baumgarten has been called the father of aesthetics, Winckelmann is generally regarded as the father of art history.

How much did Winckelmann learn from his professor? It is difficult to say.[2] Having just finished his dissertation, Baumgarten was still formulating the ideas that eventually went into his *Ästhetik*. Some of them found their way into the lectures Winckelmann attended; and so, not surprisingly, we can trace Baumgartian themes in Winckelmann's later writings. Still, Baumgarten's

[1] The incident is told in Wolfgang Leppmann, *J. J. Winckelmann* (London: Gollancz, 1971), pp. 42–3.

[2] On Winckelmann's relation to Baumgarten, see Carl Justi, *Winckelmann und seine Zeitgenossen*, 3 vols. (Cologne: Phaidon, 1956), I, 89–95.

influence on his student was checked by a powerful barrier: Winckelmann's deep and abiding contempt for the scholastic methodology of Wolffianism, to which Baumgarten was fully committed and a consummate practitioner. During his university years in Halle (1738–40), Winckelmann also visited Wolff's lectures, which utterly repelled him. He found Wolff's methodology pedantic, involuted, and barren, a tiresome technique for weaving pointless subtleties about artificial problems. It was said that, even in his later years, whenever the name Wolff was mentioned, Winckelmann would grow heated and launch into a diatribe.

It was a reaction that would prove decisive for Winckelmann's career. For it led him toward a very different methodology, toward a completely different way of looking at art from that prevalent in the rationalist tradition. Rather than focusing upon the problem of taste or aesthetic judgment, like all his rationalist forbears, Winckelmann's chief interest lay in the historical and cultural sources of art. He saw art as the product of a culture, as the expression of a nation's characteristic way of life. His aim was not to assess the *cognitive* worth of aesthetic experience but to determine its *cultural* value, i.e., why a people attributed such importance to it. When it came to methodology, Winckelmann was more the student of Voltaire and Montesquieu than of Wolff or Baumgarten. We can see in his methodology the beginnings of the new historical attitude so characteristic of German philosophy in the nineteenth century. When Hegel later wrote that Winckelmann had created a completely new organon for looking at works of art he was chiefly referring to his historical approach.[3]

Given his historical interests, and his contempt for the mathematical method, Winckelmann hardly seems to belong to the rationalist tradition. Allegiance to this methodology, and a specific position regarding the problem of taste, were defining characteristics of the rationalist tradition from Wolff to Baumgarten. It would still be a great mistake, however, to place Winckelmann outside this tradition. For, in other respects, he is closely affiliated with it: he endorses its aesthetic of beauty; he accepts its account of beauty as perfection; he is utterly devoted to its Platonic sources; and he too is committed to the cause of enlightenment. Although he follows an historicist methodology, Winckelmann never takes it to the relativist conclusions of later historicists and never doubts the rationalist tradition's belief in universal aesthetic values; indeed, he thinks that his method, properly used, will confirm the rationalist aesthetic. Far from breaking with the rationalist tradition, then, Winckelmann expands, enriches, and strengthens it. He gives it a new historical method to justify its account of

[3] Hegel, *Vorlesungen über Ästhetik*, in *Werke in zwanzig Bänden*, ed. E. Moldenhauer and K. Michel, 20 vols. (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1970), XIII, 92.

beauty; he connects it with the classical tradition, so that it appears to be the guardian of ancient values and beliefs; and he returns to the chief source of its inspiration, the erotic doctrines in Plato's *Symposium* and *Phaedrus*. Never was there a more faithful and fervent disciple of Diotima!

Winckelmann's devotion to art history, and his rejection of the mathematical method, have also led some scholars to question his merits as an aesthetic theorist. Some regard his aesthetics as derivative, an offshoot of Baumgarten's rationalism,[4] while others think that it is too fragmentary, inchoate, and incoherent to be much of a theory at all.[5] Still others hold that he had no interest whatsoever in the theory of beauty.[6] All these opinions are false. Although it is indeed fragmentary and inchoate, and although it does borrow much from Baumgarten and the rationalist tradition, Winckelmann's aesthetic theory remains of great philosophical interest and historical importance. Winckelmann gave original analyses of basic aesthetic concepts, such as grace, beauty, and expression, all of which later became important for Lessing, Mendelssohn, and Schiller. While the problem of taste was not his primary concern, Winckelmann still attempted to stake out an original position regarding it. His historical method did not take him away from the problems of aesthetics but gave him a new approach to them. The fundamental goal of that method, he stressed, was to explain the nature of beauty itself.

Those who question Winckelmann's status as a philosopher usually measure him by the wrong standards. Winckelmann's philosophical attributes cannot be judged by scholastic benchmarks, such as the strict analysis of concepts, or the formulation of precise arguments. Winckelmann was no Wolff or Baumgarten; but then again he never wanted to be. Since he had rejected their scholastic method, to judge him by their standards only begs the question. Winckelmann must be measured by completely different criteria: not those of the scholastic tradition, which ultimately goes back to Aristotle, but those of the competing Platonic tradition. Of all the great ancient philosophers, Winckelmann had the greatest affinity with Plato, whom he had read constantly from an early age, and whom he called his "old friend". In aesthetics he explicitly declared himself to be a disciple of Plato.[7] All the writings on general aesthetic theory since Plato, he once said much to the annoyance of his contemporaries, are

[4] This is the view of Benedetto Croce, *Aesthetic*, trans. Douglas Ainslie (Boston: Nonpareil, 1978), pp. 262–4.

[5] See Hugh Honour, *Neo-Classicism* (London: Penguin, 1977), p. 58; and Bernard Bosanquet, *A History of Æsthetic* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1904), pp. 241, 250.

[6] Alfred Baeumler, *Kants Kritik der Urteilskraft: Ihre Geschichte und Systematik* (Halle: Niemeyer, 1923), p. 105.

[7] See *Abhandlung von der Fähigkeit der Empfindung des Schönen*, in *Kleine Schriften, Vorreden, Entwürfe*, ed. Walter Rehm (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2002), p. 217.

"empty, uninstructive, and of base content".[8] It was Winckelmann's mission to revive the spirit of Plato, which, he complained, had been buried in the dust of centuries of scholasticism.[9] It is the spirit of the *Phaedrus* and *Symposium* that breathes through all Winckelmann's writings on aesthetics.

It is important to see that Winckelmann's Platonism was not simply one of doctrine but also one of method. We should imitate the ancients, he believed, not only in their art but even in their entire manner of thinking.[10] Nowhere is Winckelmann's adherence to Platonic methods more apparent than in his early Dresden writings. After his brief declaration of principles in his 1755 *Gedancken über die Nachahmung der griechischen Wercke in der Mahlerey und Bildhauerkunst*, Winckelmann wrote an anonymous critique of the work, his *Sendschreiben über den Gedancken*, and then a reply to the critique, *Erläuterung des Gedancken*. No fundamental thesis of the *Gedancken* is left unscathed in the *Sendschreiben*. Winckelmann's writing of the *Sendschreiben* has been dismissed as a promotional tactic; but that is to put it too cynically.[11] It had a much deeper philosophical point. It was Winckelmann's attempt to publicize the Platonic method and to vindicate the Platonic spirit in philosophy. True philosophy, Winckelmann was saying, is not the demonstration of a doctrine but the investigation of an issue; it demands that the thinker keep some critical distance on all his views, that he realize taking any position is problematic, and that he recognize taking a position is ultimately the result of weighing alternatives and deciding for "the most likely story" among them.[12]

This reassessment of Winckelmann as a philosopher should be extended to every aspect of his thought. We will find in the course of this chapter that Winckelmann's aesthetics is much more coherent, plausible, and interesting than many scholars have assumed. More specifically, we shall see that Winckelmann's classicism was not limited to copying ancient models, that his historical approach to art has been unjustly overshadowed by the Kantian legacy, and that his account of Greek culture has not been superseded by Nietzsche's. Before we reassess Winckelmann, however, we need to take stock of his influence.

[8] Ibid., p. 214.

[9] Justi tells us that in his early days in Rome he thought of writing a commentary on Plato's writings. See *Winckelmann und seine Zeitgenossen*, I, 166–7.

[10] See 'Reifere Gedanken über die Nachahmung der Alten in der Zeichnung und Bildhauerkunst', *Kleine Schriften*, p. 145.

[11] According to Justi, the later essays "bringen wenig oder nichts zur Bestätigung oder Beleuchtung der 'Gedanken' " (*Winckelmann und seine Zeitgenossen*, I, 497). While Winckelmann does not substantially change his views in these essays, he does explain and defend himself in much greater detail. They are indispensable for any understanding of the *Gedancken*.

[12] Plato, *Timaeus*, 29d.

2. Historical Influence

Winckelmann's influence on his age was, by all accounts, enormous. He had become almost a cult figure in his own lifetime. With the possible exception of Klopstock, no German writer was held in such high regard.[13] Winckelmann was admired by every major thinker of his generation—Lessing, Abbt, Nicolai, Mendelssohn, and Herder—and he was virtually canonized in the *Goethezeit*. In the early 1800s Goethe made him the patron saint of his own paganism and neo-classicism, invoking his memory to taunt the emerging Romantic movement.[14] But the romantics too sanctified him. Even after his rebellion against neo-classicism, Friedrich Schlegel still revered "*der heilige Winckelmann*".[15]

How do we explain Winckelmann's immense influence? The life had all the stuff of legend: a poor cobbler's son who, through a sheer love of learning, surmounts all obstacles and eventually becomes an international authority on classical art. Such a life held out hope for all those with literary aspirations living in similar obscurity.[16] It was also important that Winckelmann was a German, a local lad made good. To many, he proved Germany's right to take its place in the pantheon of classical learning. Winckelmann himself helped to fuel this budding nationalism by his withering contempt for the French, who, he declared, could never become Greeks. It was also very galling and disappointing to learn, however, that, after his arrival in Rome, he could be very snooty about his fellow Germans.[17]

Winckelmann deserves not a little credit for the revival of interest in Greek culture in eighteenth-century Germany. Thanks to his example, many people were inspired to learn Greek and to read Greek classics in the original; eventually, *Gymnasia* began to introduce Greek into their curricula. The interest in Greek literature at the end of the century was in marked contrast to that in mid-century. Since the end of the Thirty Years War, the study of Greek philosophy and literature had been in sharp decline in Germany. The prevailing French taste, and the emphasis on Latin, had made the study of Greek philosophy and literature moribund. The Greek language was learned

[13] Such is the conclusion of Henry Hatfield, *Winckelmann and his German Critics 1755–1781* (New York: King's Crown Press, 1943), p. 1.

[14] Goethe, *Winckelmann und sein Jahrhundert*, in *Samtliche Werke, Briefe, Tagebücher und Gesprache*, ed. Dieter Borchmeyer et al. 40 vols. (Frankfurt: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1986), XIX, 177–232.

[15] See *Ideen* 102, *Friedrich Schlegel Kritische Ausgabe*, vol. II, ed. Ernst Behler (Munich: Schöningh, 1982), p. 266.

[16] For some examples, see Hatfield, *Winckelmann*, pp. 26–7.

[17] This was a common complaint. See ibid., pp. 21–47.

simply for New Testament studies. Such was the lack of interest in the Greek classics that the last German edition of Plato dated from 1602, and Homer was published only once between 1606 and 1759.

Any account of Winckelmann's influence has to reckon with his main literary accomplishment, his *Geschichte der Kunst des Alterthums*, which first appeared in Dresden in 1764.[18] The work quickly established itself as a classic, as the best available account of the art of antiquity.[19] What Baumgarten's *Aesthetica* was to aesthetics, Winckelmann's *Geschichte* was to the history of art. The *Geschichte* was a comprehensive account of the visual arts of antiquity, which covered Egyptian, Etruscan, Greek, and Roman art. The interest in and value of the work does not lie in its specific empirical findings—many of its results were quickly disproved by later archaeological research—but in its methodology. There are four characteristic features of Winckelmann's methodology, all very influential and some very controversial. First, Winckelmann saw art in the context of an entire culture, stressing that it is inseparable from its government, religion, customs, and natural environment. He therefore broke explicitly with the Renaissance tradition of Vasari and Bellori, which made art history a compilation of the biographies of individual artists. For Winckelmann, art was not the creation of individual genius, but the achievement of an entire culture. Second, Winckelmann attempted to provide not a simple narrative but a complete system (*eine Lehrgebäude*) (9).[20] This system would take a specific form: it would consist in a schema of organic development, according to which each period of art history has its birth, growth, flowering, and decline. Third, Winckelmann made the chief subject of art history the development of style, of which each individual artist is only one episode. Each style develops according to its own inner logic so that it must develop in specific ways. Last and most controversially, Winckelmann refused to separate art history from aesthetics; the chief end of art history, in his view, is to determine the essence of art itself (9). He insisted that, to know what he is talking about, the art historian needs to have the eyes of the artist.

For all the importance of his *chef-d'œuvre*, Winckelmann's influence is scarcely confined to the historiography of art. He also became a prominent figure in art history itself, helping to create the very subject he wrote about.

[18] All references within parentheses to this work are to *Geschichte der Kunst des Altertums* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1993). There is a new critical edition, volume 4.1 of *Johann Joachim Winckelmann, Schriften und Nachlaß*, ed. Adolf Borbein et al. (Mainz am Rhein: Phillip von Zabern, 2002—).

[19] For an account of the reception of the work, see Alex Potts, *Flesh and the Ideal: Winckelmann and the Origins of Art History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), pp. 11–46.

[20] Grimm, *Deutsches Wörterbuch*, 33 vols. (Leipzig, 1854), VI, 572, defines *Lehrgebäude* as "das ganze einer wissenschatlichen lehre einem gebäude verglichen".

For Winckelmann became famous in the revival of classicism in the mid-eighteenth century. His spirited attack on baroque and rococo taste, and his passionate defense of Greek art, in his *Gedancken uber die Nachahmung der griechischen Wercke in der Malerei und Bildhauerkunst* (1755) has been regarded as a starting point of the neo-classical movement in Germany. After moving to Rome in 1755 and becoming a cicerone for young aristocrats, Winckelmann made himself into the icon of a new style, the guardian of a new taste. No one should claim that Winckelmann's neo-classicism was revolutionary; for he was not the first or last to insist upon a return to ancient taste. Nevertheless, he played an important role in defining the new taste. "The defining characteristics of Greek masterpieces", he wrote in some famous lines from the *Gedancken*, "is their noble simplicity and serene grandeur". Though hardly original,[21] these lines became the shibboleths of neo-classicism in Germany.

Winckelmann's influence goes even further, extending far beyond the realms of historiography and neo-classicism. What he suggested to the younger generation was a completely new cultural ideal, a radical alternative to the corrupt culture of their own day. Whether Winckelmann intended it or not, the next generation interpreted his neo-classicism as a call for not only a new art but also for a new ethics, religion, and politics. Thanks to Winckelmann, the Greeks became the standard of criticism for every aspect of the modern age. Writing for an age that had grown weary and wary of Christian dogma and enlightened absolutism, Winckelmann reminded the younger generation of the ancient alternatives: the humanism and republicanism of ancient Greece and Rome. So the young read a powerfully subversive message into Winckelmann's texts: that we can achieve full humanity only if we become like the Greeks. Hence imitation of the Greeks became not only an aesthetic, but a political, religious, and ethical imperative. In this respect, Schiller, Herder, Wilhelm von Humboldt, Friedrich Schlegel, and the young Hegel were all *die Kinder Winckelmanns*.

The question remains to what extent Winckelmann himself had such a radical agenda. At the very least, it was implicit in his texts. It seems to be the underlying message behind the *Geschichte*, for if Greek art is inseparable from its ethics and politics, it is impossible to revive it without having a Greek ethics and politics too. As if to drive the point home, Winckelmann stressed time and again in the *Geschichte* that freedom is the patron of the arts, and that Greek art flourished only during the democratic Periclean age.[22] What we know

[21] On the earlier history of these terms, see Gottfried Baumecker, *Winckelmann in seinen Dresdner Schriften* (Berlin: Junker und Dünnhaupt, 1933), pp. 57–8.

[22] See, for example, *Geschichte*, pp. 42, 88, 130, 295, 308, 319, 332, 377.

about Winckelmann's personal attitudes reveal his contempt for the culture of his day. He despised Prussian and Saxon absolutism, which he regarded as tyranny; and he was critical of Christian ethics because, in his view, it had no place for "friendship". Winckelmann once declared that there were two great passions in his life: freedom and friendship.[23] If the German state violated the first, Christianity cast a taboo over the second. Like so many of the younger generation, Winckelmann fell in love with classical Greece because it was the antidote and alternative to the repressive ethics, politics, and religion of his age. Nothing more inspired his Grecophilia, and nothing more fuelled his contempt for the repressive morals of his age, than his homosexuality. After all, it was the Greeks who had permitted this "vice", and who had made a cult of male beauty. Not least, the Greeks were Winckelmann's model for a liberated sexuality.

3. Imitating the Ancients

Winckelmann's first major work is his *Gedancken über die Nachahmung der griechischen Wercke in der Malerei und Bildhauerkunst*, which appeared in July 1755. The first edition consisted of only fifty copies without the name of the author. It was dedicated to the King of Poland and Prince of Saxony, August III. The occasion and stimulus for the work were Winckelmann's conversations with Adam Friedrich Oeser, a painter in the Saxon court, in whose house Winckelmann dwelled during the composition of the work.[24]

The *Gedancken* is a short work, consisting in only fifty pages quarto. The result of much editing and drafting, it was written with great clarity, economy, and simplicity. Such a style was a self-conscious imitation of the ancients, who, Winckelmann liked to say, knew how to say a lot with a little, unlike the moderns, who could only say a little with a lot.[25] It is noteworthy, though, that the original draft of the work was much larger. Since he intended to publish the work himself, Winckelmann had to prune it drastically to limit expenses. Simplicity and economy, it seems, was as much a financial as aesthetic imperative.

[23] See to Berendis, July 25, 1755, *Briefe*, ed. Walther Rehm, vol. I (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1952), p. 181.

[24] Winckelmann pays tribute to Oeser at the close of the *Erlauterung*, p. 144. The role of Oeser in Winckelmann's intellectual development has been the subject of speculation since Herder. See Herder's 'Denkmal Johann Winkelmann', in *Werke*, vol. II, ed. Günter Grimm (Frankfurt: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1993), p. 637. On Oeser, see Justi, *Winckelmann und seine Zeitgenossen*, I, 397–408. It was Oeser who taught Winckelmann how to draw and appreciate the paintings in Dresden galleries. Oeser anticipated, and probably influenced, Winckelmann's partisanship for the classics; he declared: "Die Statuen und größeren Bildwerke der Alten bleiben Grund und Gipfel aller Kunstkenntnis" (Justi, p. 405).

[25] *Geschichte der Kunst des Altertums*, p. 168.

Despite its classical clarity and simplicity, Goethe found the *Gedancken* a remarkably baroque work.[26] It was so obscure, he complained, that he could hardly wrest any sense from it. Though this is somewhat extreme, Goethe had a point. The price of Winckelmann's stylistic economy was philosophical obscurity. Because he had condensed so much into so little, some of his central ideas became vague and unsupported. This was a flaw Winckelmann soon recognized himself. He wrote the *Sendschreiben* and *Erläuterung* to clarify and defend many of the ideas that he had thrown out in such staccato fashion in the *Gedancken*.

The *Gedancken* is the heart of Winckelmann's program. It was, as Herder put it, "the whole germ of Winckelmann's soul", "the point from which Winckelmann proceeded and to which he constantly returned until the end of his life".[27] The tract can be read on many levels. On one level, it is a passionate manifesto for a neo-classical aesthetic, a withering diatribe against the entrenched Baroque and Rococo taste of the Dresden court. On another, it is an apology for the visual arts against Plato's classical indictment of them in *Republic* Book X. On still another, it is a discourse on method that prescribes the means by which the artist achieves his proper end: knowledge of reality itself, the forms underlying appearances. All these levels merge in Winckelmann's central thesis, which he announces in a single sentence: "The only way for us to become great, indeed, if it is possible, inimitable, is through the imitation of the ancients . . . " (29).[28]

Winckelmann's thesis is intentionally paradoxical. The apposition of the terms "inimitable" (*unnachahmlich*) and "imitation" (*Nachahmung*) more than suggests this. The thesis is a striking instance of Winckelmann's Socratic method. The point behind the paradox is to provoke the reader into thinking for himself. There is also an element of Socratic irony here, not because Winckelmann thinks that his thesis is questionable, but because he realizes it is controversial and demands further discussion. Nowhere in the *Gedancken*, however, does Winckelmann explicitly unravel the paradoxes that he throws in his reader's path. Ultimately, Winckelmann is the victim of his own irony: to understand his text at all, we have to engage in those scholastic exercises he so despised.

Winckelmann's thesis is paradoxical in at least two different ways. First, we are asked to achieve the inimitable through imitation. This is absurd,

[26] Goethe, *Winckelmann und sein Jahrhundert*, in *Sämtliche Werke*, XIX, 188.

[27] Herder, 'Denkmal Johann Winkelmanns', II, *Werke*, ed. Martin Bollacher et al. (Frankfurt: Deutsche Klassiker Verlag, 1993), II, 643.

[28] All references are to *Kleine Schriften, Vorreden, Entwürfe*, ed. Walter Rehm, 2nd edn. (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2002). Line numbers appear in italics.

because the inimitable, by definition, cannot be imitated. If we attempt to imitate it, we create only something imitable, so that the means (imitation) frustrates the end (creating the inimitable). Second, Winckelmann associates the inimitable with something unique and original; but if we imitate it, we make something replicable and unoriginal. So it seems Winckelmann's thesis boils down to a tangle of self-defeating imperatives: 'Become inimitable through imitation!', 'Imitate the inimitable!', 'Be original and spontaneous by following someone else!'.

According to the most simple and straightforward interpretation, Winckelmann's doctrine of imitation simply advises artists to copy ancient works of art. It seems to recommend that painters and sculptors take a classical model and reproduce it on canvas or in stone. Copying ancient models was already common practice in Winckelmann's day, as it had been indeed for centuries. Art academies throughout Europe would begin to educate their students by having them reproduce antique models. So, on this reading, Winckelmann is only encouraging this practice, making it the *main* point of artistic education; all that he questions is the common modernist belief that imitation of the ancients should be only the *first* step of an artistic education.[29]

This interpretation is sometimes dismissed as impossibly naive, as if Winckelmann could not have condoned mere copying. Yet it was in fact part of Winckelmann's meaning. He does regard ancient works as models for young artists, and he does think they should learn to copy or replicate them faithfully. He finds it admirable, for example, that the Laocöon was the prototype for artists in ancient Rome (30). Winckelmann explicitly contrasts imitating the ancients with directly imitating nature, claiming that the former method alone will teach the artist how to create great works of art.

Sure enough, though, a more exact copying of ancient models is not *all* that Winckelmann means by imitation; and, indeed, it cannot be the main point behind his thesis. For Winckelmann warns us in the *Gedancken* against any slavish following of the ancients; and he makes it clear that he very much prizes originality, creativity, and spontaneity in the creation of works of art. With evident approval he cites Michelangelo's dictum: "Whoever follows others will never get ahead, and whoever cannot make anything good for himself will never make good use of what others have done" (38, *17–20*)[30] In the

[29] This is the reading of Justi, *Winckelmann und seine Zeitgenossen*, I, 444.

[30] Giorgio Vasari, Vasari, *Lives of the Artists*, trans. George Bull, 2 vols.(London: Penguin, 1987), I, 427.

It is noteworthy that Michelangelo said this about Bandinelli's copy of the *Laocöon*, the very work Winckelmann recommends as a prototype. Winckelmann was perfectly aware of the context of the remark.

Geschichte Winckelmann's slight opinion of mere copying is even more evident in his attitude toward Roman art. Roman art never came to anything because it attempted to do nothing more than copy the Greeks. Against following the Roman example, he warns: " . . . at all times the imitator remains below the imitated" (225).

So if imitation does not mean just copying, what does it mean? Some scholars do not face this question squarely, evading it with something vague and pat. They say it means something like "creation in the Greek spirit".[31] But this is an explanation *obscurum per obscurius*. We need to be more precise.

To understand Winckelmann's meaning, it is necessary to take a closer look at the *Gedancken* itself, especially those passages where Winckelmann expounds the method of the ancient artists. There are two possible ways for the artist to imitate nature, he explains (37). The first is to reproduce exactly a single individual given to us in sense experience; the second is to collect observations from many similar particulars in experience and to form them into a single prototype. While the former method gives us a copy or portrait, the latter attempts to create an ideal beauty. The method of the Greek masters, Winckelmann claims, was decidedly the latter rather than the former. Their aim was not to copy something given to the senses, but to embody in sensuous form some ideal of perfection. Rather than directly reproducing some particular object in experience, they would abstract from all the perfect features in experience, welding them into a single ideal of perfection (30, *30–4*; 34, *32–3*).

It is in this context that we should set Winckelmann's doctrine of imitation. On this reading Winckelmann is saying that what the modern artist should imitate is not simply ancient *models* but also ancient *methods*, not merely the *products* but even more the *activities* of the ancient artists. Just as the ancient Greek artists refused to imitate objects given to them but created an ideal according to the intellect, so modern artists should do the same. Alternatively, Winckelmann is saying that modern artists should follow the *form* rather than *content* of ancient works. What is decisive is not the subject matter of ancient art—Greek nymphs, gods, and heroes—but the manner of portraying it, its simple, clear, and graceful style. Hence Winckelmann praised the classical qualities in Raphael's paintings, even though their subject matter was sacred rather than classical.

Seen in this light, the doctrine of imitation ceases to be paradoxical; it is not only compatible with, but indeed requires, spontaneity, originality, and

[31] See Henry Hatfield, *Aesthetic Paganism in German Literature* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1964), p. 7.

independence of mind. For we imitate the Greeks only by creating an ideal of beauty or perfection, or only by learning a clear and simple style; but we can create such an ideal, and learn such a style, only through the spontaneous activity of our own intellect.

That we should read Winckelmann's doctrine of imitation along these lines is further confirmed by another short essay he wrote in 1759, 'Erinnerung über die Betrachtung der Werke der Kunst'. Here Winckelmann not only plainly abjures all slavish copying of ancient models (151), but he is explicit and emphatic that one of the fundamental criteria by which to distinguish between good and bad art is independence of mind, thinking for oneself (149–51). He then makes a distinction between imitation (*Nachahmung*) and copying (*Nachmachung*), explaining that, while independence of mind is incompatible with copying, it is perfectly compatible with imitation. Copying means not only reproducing some model, but also working according to some prescribed formula (151). In both respects it is incompatible with independence of mind, thinking for oneself, which shows itself in spontaneity, invention, and originality. The artist should not simply reproduce what is given to him, Winckelmann insists, but he should transform it according to his own activity, so that it takes on a distinctive quality all its own (151).

In seeing idealization rather than imitation as the true method of the ancients, Winckelmann was not making a novel claim. This had been common doctrine since the Renaissance, and there were plenty of ancient sources to support it. The *locus classicus* for the doctrine was the preface to Giovanni Bellori's 1672 *Vite de pittori, scultori et architetti moderni*.[32] Basing his account on Cicero, Seneca, and Quintilian, Bellori argued that the ancient Greek artists—he mentions Zeuxis, Lysippus, and Phidias—did not directly imitate the imperfect particulars of nature but worked from perfect prototypes formed by the intellect. Bellori's thesis found widespread acceptance, becoming the official doctrine of the French Academy and the Roman Academy of Saint Luke. It was then reaffirmed by many classicists, such as Nicolas Poussin and André Félibien.

But if Winckelmann was not saying anything new, he was saying something controversial, and indeed partisan. He was attacking those modernists who believed that modern art was superior to ancient because it could more accurately reproduce nature. His foremost opponent in this regard was the French aesthetician Roger de Piles (1635–1709), who, in his *Dissertation sur les ouvrages des plus fameux peintures* (1681), defended the principle that "La peinture

[32] Reprinted in *A Documentary History of Art*, ed. Elizabeth Holt, 2 vols. (New York: Doubleday, 1958), II, 94–106.

est la parfaite imitation des objets visibles. Sa fin est de tromper la veûe."[33] While de Piles praised the ancients too, he still affirmed that the moderns had surpassed them in their power to achieve complete realism. In this respect the ancients were much too crude and simplistic; and only in such modern masters as Rubens was it possible to believe that one was really seeing nature itself.

Although Winckelmann's affinity with the Bellori tradition has sometimes been noted, it has been said that he still departed from it in one fundamental respect: in making idealization the prerogative of the ancients alone.[34] While thinkers in this tradition held that modern artists too could idealize—so the interpretation goes—Winckelmann was more severely classical than them in insisting that *only* the ancients could achieve such an ideal. It was indeed for this reason, we are told, that Winckelmann held that *only* the ancients should be imitated.[35]

But this reading rescues Winckelmann's originality only by burdening him with inconsistency and implausibility. If the ancients alone could create ideals of perfection, then modern artists could only copy the ancients. But then Winckelmann's distinction between imitating and copying becomes pointless. Furthermore, it is patently not the case that Winckelmann believes that only ancient artists have achieved perfection; he adores the simplicity and serenity of Raphael; and he even concedes that, in point of design and perspective, modern painters have surpassed the ancients.

It should now be clear that there is both a progressive and a reactionary reading of Winckelmann's doctrine of imitation. The progressive reading maintains that modern artists can achieve the same ideals as the ancients, and that imitation is a matter of following only their methods or creating the same formal qualities as them, regardless of subject matter. The reactionary reading holds that only the ancient artists could create ideals of perfection, and that therefore modern artists must imitate the ancients merely in the sense of copying them; they should therefore follow the ancients not only in form but also in content. The evidence above shows clearly, however, that we must adopt the progressive reading. It is only fair to add, however, that the regressive reading has had its eminent spokesmen. The most famous among them was Hegel, who took that interpretation to its ultimate conclusion: declaring the end of art! But Winckelmann would have disapproved of that thesis as much as Hegel's contemporaries.

Admitting the progressive reading of Winckelmann, we are then left with the nagging question: What point is there to copying ancient models at all?

[33] As cited in Baumecker, *Winckelmann in seinen Dresdner Schriften* p. 24.

[34] This is Baumecker's interpretation, ibid., p. 45.

[35] Ibid., p. 41.

As we have seen, Winckelmann approves of the practice and it is part of his meaning; but it seems to violate the spirit behind his doctrine of imitation. If to imitate the ancients is to follow their methods, the artist should not bind himself to their models at all; rather, he should be free to choose his own subject matter and to create whatever he wants. After all, since the model too is only a particular object, like anything else in nature, to draw from it would be to copy rather than idealize.

The apparent inconsistency disappears, however, when we consider that Winckelmann thinks there is still a pedagogic purpose to the imitation of ancient models. They are a tool for the artist to learn the technique of idealization, a ladder that he will eventually discard when he learns to stand on his own. The point of copying ancient models, rather than directly imitating nature, is that it gives the young artist a feeling for the ideal beauty hidden in Greek models; by studying the ancient models he will learn how to idealize himself and will not fall into the trap of simply copying some object given in nature. Once the modern artist begins to shape his own ideals, he will be able to proceed on his own, free from the apron-strings of classical models.

Prima facie Winckelmann's doctrine of imitation abandons the classical theory of imitation, according to which art should reproduce, copy, or imitate nature.[36] It seems as if Winckelmann is advising the artist to idealize rather than to imitate, to create an ideal rather than to copy something in nature. There are indeed passages in the *Gedancken* where Winckelmann contrasts imitation of the ancients with the imitation of nature (38–9) He castigates Bernini, for example, precisely because he wants to imitate nature directly rather than to follow ancient methods.

It is important to recognize, however, that Winckelmann does not reject but simply reinterprets the classical theory. In one passage of the *Gedancken* he is explicit that if the artist learns to imitate the Greeks, then he finally will be "on the true path toward the imitation of nature" (38, *6–7*). In another passage in the *Erläuterung* he states firmly that the purpose of poetry no less than of painting is the imitation of nature (118, *1–3*). Winckelmann retains the classical theory, but reinterprets the concept of nature or reality along Platonic lines. True to the Platonic tradition, Winckelmann understands reality to be not the particulars of the sensible world but the forms or archetypes of the intelligible world. It is this reality or nature that Winckelmann wants the artist to imitate, not simply the pale shadow world of the senses. Hence Winckelmann is not demoting but elevating the truth-claims of the arts. They should strive for

[36] This conclusion is often drawn. See, for example, Honour, *Neo-Classicism*, p. 61.

insight into the intelligible structure of reality itself, not simply replicate the appearances of this reality in sense experience.

Winckelmann's advocacy of the method of idealization, and his critique of direct imitation, was his attempt to justify the calling of art against Plato's challenge in Book X of the *Republic.* To an important extent, Winckelmann accepts Plato's argument: if painting and sculpture are simply a direct imitation of things given in sense experience, then they amount to nothing more than deception, the appearance of an appearance, pawned off as if it were reality itself. The problem with de Piles' theory of painting is precisely that it was vulnerable to this venerable Platonic objection. But, taking his cue from the *Phaedrus* and *Symposium*, Winckelmann passionately believes that the artist need not be confined to such a task. Rather than merely imitating particulars, he can have an intuitive grasp of the forms themselves; and the task of the visual arts is to embody such an intuition on canvas or in stone. Only by this means would the arts become what Plato promises in the *Phaedrus*: the incarnation of beauty, the sensible appearance of the forms on earth.

Did Winckelmann abandon his theory of imitation in his later years? A case has been made for this view.[37] The theory of art history in the *Geschichte der Kunst des Altertums*, we are told, undermines the theory of imitation, because it shows how Greek art arose from the unique climactic and political circumstances of ancient Greece. Since these circumstances are unrepeatable, it is impossible to revive Greek art today under our very different circumstances. Hence it is said that Winckelmann abandoned his hopes for a reform of the arts and resigned himself to become a wistful spectator of a glorious past.

It is questionable, however, that there is really an inconsistency between Winckelmann's classicism and historicism. Although the modern artist perhaps cannot create works as perfect as Greek masterpieces, which were dependent on unique circumstances, he can still follow Greek methods, and he can still produce works having the same general qualities of simplicity and clarity. There is an inconsistency here only if we assume that imitation means recreating the same kind of masterpieces as the Greeks, following them not only in method but also in content or subject matter. In any case, Winckelmann himself felt no such inconsistency, and he never abandoned his theory of imitation. It is noteworthy that even in the *Geschichte* he reaffirms the theory. The whole point behind his historical study of the Greeks was indeed to determine the essence of beauty itself.[38]

[37] See Ingrid Kreuzer, *Studien zu Winckelmanns Ästhetik* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1959), pp. 65–6, 95, 100.

[38] See *Geschichte der Kunst des Altertums*, p. 9.

4. A Neo-Classical Aesthetic

The heart of Winckelmann's neo-classical aesthetic appears in his famous lines in the *Gedancken*: "The universal distinguishing feature of Greek masterpieces is a noble simplicity (*eine edle Einfalt*) and a serene greatness (*eine stille Grösse*)" (43). The figures in Greek sculptures always show, Winckelmann explained, "a great and composed soul" (*eine grosse und gesetzte Seele*). No matter what their afflictions or predicaments, they reveal self-restraint and composure, the power of the soul to rise above misfortune. Never are these figures depicted in wild, extreme, or impetuous states or postures, which would be for the Greeks a fallacy, what they called *Parenthyrsis*, i.e., exaggerated and inappropriate pathos.

Winckelmann's statement was a reaction against Baroque taste, whose aesthetic was the diametrical opposite of his own. The Baroque aesthetic prized the expression of passion, and it put a premium upon emotional intensity. To Winckelmann, of course, this was just the fallacy of *Parenthyrsis*. The hero of this Baroque aesthetic was Winckelmann's nemesis, Bernini, whom he bluntly called "*der Kunstverderber*". In the *Gedancken* Winckelmann declared war against Bernini and all his epigones. They wanted to portray the human figure in extreme and uncommon positions, because these seem to reveal fire in the soul (44). Their favorite technique was therefore *Contrapost*, whose purpose was intensity of effect through sharp contrasts. But, for Winckelmann, this completely violated the spirit behind Greek art, which was not to reveal passion but the power of the soul to rise above and control it.

The paradigm of Winckelmann's new aesthetic was the Laocöon, which he saw as a veritable "rule of Polyclitus, a perfect rule of art" (30). This sculpture, which was unearthed in Rome in 1506, was a Roman copy of a work attributed to the Rhodian sculptors Hagesander, Polydorus, and Athanodorus, who completed it in the second half of the first century AD. The sculpture shows the priest Laocöon and his sons as they are strangled by two serpents. Winckelmann fixed upon this sculpture not simply because it was generally regarded as a masterpiece of Greek art, but because it was the perfect test case to prove his aesthetic against the Baroque. For generations, Baroque artists had regarded this sculpture as the perfect expression of grief and suffering,[39] the extreme kind of emotions that Winckelmann wanted to banish from art. By taking this favorite of the Baroque tradition, Winckelmann made a very strategic decision indeed: he believed that he could both disarm the

[39] See Germain Bazin, *Baroque and Rococo Art* (New York: Praeger, 1964), p. 24.

strongest evidence against his theory and show its power to explain all the appearances.

Prima facie the sculpture does seem to be evidence against Winckelmann's aesthetic of serenity and restraint. Since he is struggling against the serpents, who are crushing him, Laocöon does not seem serene; indeed, he appears to be in agony as death approaches. Here, it would seem, is real pathos. But Winckelmann demands that we take a closer look. Laocöon is not screaming; his face is not distorted; he seems to suffer in silence. Even when close to death, Laocöon's face reveals composure, dignity, and control. Although it seems to fly in the face of the visual evidence, it was a reading that proved compelling for many; it would be the starting point of Lessing's *Laocöon*.[40]

It is a mistake to think of Winckelmann's protest against the Baroque aesthetic as revolutionary.[41] This greatly exaggerates his originality, which is really limited to his Saxon context. Winckelmann's critique of the Baroque was fundamentally an attack on the taste of the Saxon court, which had filled its museums and galleries with Baroque works. One of the few antique sculptures it acquired, the so-called *Vestal Virgins*, was never exhibited and remained in storage; the virgins were, as Winckelmann complained, "housed like herrings in a box". Saxon taste was hardly ahead of the fashion curve; it was indeed downright provincial, well behind the times. By the middle of the century the reaction against Baroque and Rococo had been well underway in France and Italy. In Rome painting began to return to neo-classical values, rejecting *Seicento* Baroque and Venetian Rococo. The French had never really fully adopted Baroque style; and already by the reign of Louis XIV they were developing their own form of neo-classicism. Poussin had led the reaction against Bernini; and he had become a fashionable figure in France where "Poussinism" was all the rage. Winckelmann was well aware of these developments, and it is unlikely that he would claim for himself the originality that posterity has sometimes foisted upon him. But he still felt, given Saxon taste, that he had good reason to attack the remnants of Baroque. Bernini, though no longer the dictator of style he once was, continued to find imitators in the mid-eighteenth century; and Charles Le Brun, virtual dictator of the French academy, had formalized the techniques for expressing all the passions of the soul.[42]

[40] On the reception of Winckelmann's reading of the statue, see H. B. Nisbet, 'Laocöon in Germany: The Reception of the Group since Winckelmann', *Oxford German Studies* 10 (1979), 22–63.

[41] See, for example, E. M. Butler, *The Tyranny of Greece over Germany* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1958), p. 18, who claims that Winckelmann was "the foremost leader" of the reaction against Baroque, which she implies was just beginning.

[42] This was in Le Brun's famous *Méthode pour apprendre à dessiner les passions* (Paris, 1698). Winckelmann singled it out for criticism in his *Geschichte*, p. 169.

The crucial question remains: Why does Winckelmann admire simplicity and serenity? Why does he banish the expression of extreme emotion? To dismiss the question on the grounds that Winckelmann's aesthetic is simply a matter of taste would be a mistake. For, true to the rationalist tradition, Winckelmann insisted that the critic should never rest content with the claim that something is beautiful, and that it is his special task to determine why it is so.[43] Following his own advice, we need to pose the same question about Winckelmann's aesthetic.

Winckelmann did provide some explicit arguments for his aesthetic. One of them appears in the following dense sentence in the *Gedancken*: "The more peaceful the position of the body, the more apt it is to portray the true character of the soul; in all positions that depart too much from the state of repose, the soul is not in its most proper state but in a forced and constrained condition" (43–4). The are several crucial premises here: (1) that repose is the proper state of the soul, (2) that anything violent or extreme forces or constrains it, and (3) that beauty is incompatible with force or constraint. These premises presuppose the underlying principle that the natural is the beautiful. Although that principle is perhaps plausible, one might well ask why repose is natural for the soul. To claim that tranquility and serenity are natural is to make a normative claim: that the soul *ought to be* in this state. But Winckelmann provides no further explanation why this should be so.

Winckelmann provides another argument for his aesthetic in a later work, his *Abhandlung von der Fähigkeit der Empfindung des Schönen in der Kunst* (1763). Here he contends that tranquility is a necessary condition of aesthetic pleasure and contemplation. "True enjoyment", he says, is attained only through "repose of mind and body" (219). If we perceive an emotion that is too extreme, or an action that is too violent, we find that our own equilibrium is disturbed and we turn away from the sight in displeasure. We take aesthetic pleasure in perceiving harmony and proportion and seeing extreme states of the soul unsettle the necessary balance. It is noteworthy that this argument makes serenity not only a quality of the work itself but also of its perception. It attempts to connect the two: the perceiver will enjoy serenity if he sees serenity. Such an argument seems to falter, however, in the face of the problem of tragic pleasure: that we enjoy seeing people suffer.

Both these arguments are problematic. They raise more problems than they solve, or they presuppose premises they do not fully explain. Neither, however, reveals the ultimate basis for Winckelmann's aesthetic. Though he is never very explicit, the main rationale for his aesthetic is fundamentally

[43] See 'Beschreibung des Torso im Belvedere zu Rom', *Kleine Schriften*, p. 169.

ethical. Winckelmann values simplicity and serenity because he sees them as the incarnation of an ethical ideal: the Greek ethic of *Sophrosyne*. This is the ideal of self-control, of moderation in all things, of rational self-restraint, which allows a person to enjoy tranquility and calm self-possession amid all the perturbations of passion and vicissitudes of fortune. The simplicity and serenity of Greek sculptures were simply the pleasing sensible expression or appearance of this ideal. Winckelmann knew this ideal from Greek philosophy and literature, and he duly read it into Greek sculpture. In the *Gedancken* he justifies such an interpretation on the grounds that it was the practice of the Greeks themselves: the Greek artists were philosophers who carved their ideals into stone (33). In any case, joining Greek art and ethics is perfectly in keeping with Winckelmann's historical methodology, according to which art is only one part of a culture, the expression of its highest values and ideals.

The precedent for such a moral view of Greek art was, of course, Plato. Nowhere does Winckelmann more clearly reveal the influence of Plato upon him than in his apotheosis of serenity and self-control. Like Plato in the *Republic*, Winckelmann expected art to instruct and educate its public; and he too would banish that art from the republic whose effect was to undermine self-restraint and to permit self-indulgence. Winckelmann's disapproval of Baroque sculpture is reminiscent of Plato's censure of the Greek tragedians in Book X of the *Republic*. Both were at fault for encouraging people to give vent to their feelings when they really should be learning how to control them.

Winckelmann's battle with the Baroque was ultimately a struggle between competing ethical ideals, and indeed clashing worldviews. Winckelmann saw the Greek ethic of *Sophrosyne* in terms of its underlying humanism, as an expression of the Greek belief in human self-sufficiency, the belief that the highest good could be attained in this life through our natural powers alone. Whether Stoic or Epicurean, the Greeks held that the highest good consists in happiness, tranquility of soul, which is the reward for the self-mastery of virtue. Baroque art, however, grew out of the Counter-Reformation, and as such had an apologetic or propaganda mission appointed by the Church. It attempted to establish the glory of faith and the authority of the Church, and so marks a return to the original Christian viewpoint, according to which the highest good cannot be achieved in this life and has to be found in eternal salvation alone. Nowhere is this neo-Christian spirit better expressed than in Bernini's masterpiece, *Ecstasy of Saint Teresa*. We could perhaps describe Teresa's ecstasy as serenity; but it is a serenity that transports her beyond this world. Her upward-turned head, closed eyes, and open mouth show that she is no longer among us. By contrast, Winckelmann's reading of Laocöon is the epitome of a

worldly aesthetic: even in the midst of the worst horrors that life has to offer, Laocöon retains his essential dignity.

5. Ancients versus Moderns

Winckelmann's defense of classical art in the *Gedancken* was his contribution to the famous *Querelle des anciens et des moderns*.[44] This dispute, which began in the 1680s in France, essentially concerned the question whether ancient art and science should still be canonical for modern intellectual life. The attitude of the Renaissance had been that the achievements of the ancient Greeks and Romans were normative, the foundation for all future art and science. This attitude finds its clearest statement in Erasmus, who had famously declared that everything worth knowing in the arts and sciences had already been written in Greek and Latin. By the early seventeenth century, however, this view was rapidly becoming undermined by the startling success of the new sciences, which seemed to show that the moderns had surpassed the ancients. The methods of the new sciences held out the giddying idea of progress, the prospect of continually improving on the ancients and approaching a new kind of knowledge of which Plato and Aristotle had never dreamed. By the early eighteenth century this dispute seemed to have been decided decisively in favor of the moderns. The triumph and spread of Newtonianism had completely defeated, indeed virtually buried, the science of the ancient world.

But the crucial question remained: If it is possible to surpass the ancients in the sciences, is it possible to do so in the arts? If Galileo had vanquished Aristotle, and if Harvey had triumphed over Galen, did it follow that Shakespeare was a better dramatist than Sophocles, or that Voltaire was a better poet than Homer? Here the embers of the old quarrel glowed brightly well into the eighteenth century. While most champions of the ancients were willing to admit defeat with the sciences, they firmly stood their ground with the arts.

Although it originally focused upon poetry, the *Querelle* affected all the arts, not least among them painting and sculpture. By the early eighteenth century the battle lines between ancients and moderns in the visual arts

[44] For useful epitomes of this dispute, see G. Lanson, *Histoire de la littérature française* (Paris: Hachette, 1960), pp. 595–602; Ira Wade, *Intellectual Origins of the French Enlightenment* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), pp. 624–31; Werner Krauss, 'Der Streit der Altertumsfreunde mit den Anhängern der Moderne und die Entstehung des geschichtlichen Weltbildes', in *Antike und Moderne in der Literaturdiskussion des 18. Jahrhunderts* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1966), pp. ix–lx; and Joseph M. Levine, *The Battle of the Books* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), pp. 121–47.

had clearly formed.[45] Among the champions of the ancients were Rolland Chambray, André Félibien, and Jonathan Richardson. They defended a method of idealization, stressed the importance of design over coloring, and sang the praises of Raphael and Poussin for reviving the spirit of the ancients. The chief spokesman for the moderns was Roger de Piles, *conseiller honoraire* of the French Academy, who took virtually the opposite position.[46] He championed the direct imitation of nature, valued coloring over design, and insisted that Rubens had surpassed Poussin and Raphael.

Before he wrote the *Gedancken* in 1755, Winckelmann had closely studied this dispute. He had read and excerpted many of the writings of Chambray, Félibien, Richardson, and de Piles. It is clear from his Dresden writings that he had firmly allied himself with the classicists against the modernists. On point after point Winckelmann closes ranks with the classicists: he too defends a method of idealization, stresses the importance of design over coloring, and values Raphael and Poussin over Rubens.[47] De Piles, whose *Dissertation* Winckelmann cited in the *Sendschreiben* (79), became his main enemy and chief target.[48]

Once we place the *Gedancken* in this context, its whole argument seems routine, almost ritualistic. Still, there is still something new about it. Its originality lies less in the details of Winckelmann's position than in how he defends it. Winckelmann would attempt to defend his classicism by a completely new strategy, one using weapons that the moderns themselves had devised. While admitting the superiority of the new sciences, he would apply their methods to demonstrate the superiority of the ancient arts. The method in question was the historical approach developed by Montesquieu in his *Esprit des lois*. According to this method, art, like government, should be seen as one part of the spirit of a nation, the inevitable product of its historical circumstances, its traditions, language, laws, and religion. In the new sciences this approach is naturalistic, stressing how the spirit of a nation is formed by its natural circumstances, especially its geography, climate, and air.

[45] On this dispute, see Baumecker, *Winckelmann in seinen Dresdner Schriften*, pp. 9–34.

[46] On De Piles, see Thomas Puttfarken, *Roger de Piles' Theory of Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985).

[47] Winckelmann's attitude toward Rubens is much more complex than his party affiliation allows. In 'Vom mündlichen Vortrage der neueren Geschichte' he placed him among the modern masters (21); in the *Gedancken* he reckons him among the greats in allegorical painting (37); and in the *Erlauterung* he praises "der unerschöplichen Fruchtbarkeit seines Geistes" (112). Still, he did not like Rubens' proportions or coloring, least of all those fleshly nudes. See *Von der Fähigkeit der Empfindung des Schönen* (231).

[48] See Winckelmann's account of the modernist position in his *Sendschreiben*, Rehm, pp. 65–6, 70–1.

That Winckelmann had been inspired by Montesquieu there can be no doubt; for in early 1755 he had read and excerpted Montesquieu's *Esprit des lois*.[49] Montesquieu, it is fair to say, was the guiding spirit behind his own conception of history.

More specifically, Winckelmann's strategy was to apply Montesquieu's method to substantiate one fundamental thesis: that the political institutions and climactic circumstances of ancient Greece were more in accord with nature than the political institutions and climactic circumstances of the modern world. They were more in accord with nature in the sense that they encouraged and stimulated a more complete and full expression of our natural human powers. The chief reason for Greek superiority in the arts—and the main reason why they provide such a model for imitation even today—is that their works were the product of a completely uninhibited and fully developed human nature, one that has not been since so free or completely realized.

In the *Gedancken* and *Erläuterung* Winckelmann developed two distinct arguments for this thesis. First, the constitutions and political institutions of ancient city-states gave their citizens freedom, which is the precondition for the full development of our natural powers. Second, the climate, air, and geography of Greece are more favorable to the development of health and beauty than the climate, air, and geography of northern countries. In both arguments Winckelmann presupposes—like most thinkers of the Enlightenment—that there is a fixed, constant, and definite human nature, one whose capacities are developed only under specific physical and political conditions.

Winckelmann's first argument is merely suggested in the *Gedancken*. He writes that the civil state of freedom among the Greeks allowed them to develop their nature to the fullest, and that their artists did not suffer from the restrictions of law and custom (33). The point is made much more emphatically and explicitly, however, in his *Geschichte*, where he repeatedly insists that the political institutions of Athens gave its citizens the freedom to develop all their human powers, first and foremost among them their aesthetic creativity. Freedom was "die Pflegerin der Künste" (88), and it was indeed "the chief cause of the superiority of art" (130; cf. 295). The happiest time for the arts in Athens, he explains, was during the forty years when Pericles dominated the affairs of the republic. In Part II of the *Geschichte* Winckelmann argues that there is a perfect correlation between the rise and fall of the arts and the rise and fall of Athenian democracy (319, 332). His complex periodization of Greek art history correlates its zenith, the beautiful style, with the Periclean age.

[49] On Montesquieu's influence on Winckelmann, see Justi, *Winckelmann und seine Zeitgenossen*, I, 247, 250–9.

Precisely why there is this correlation between the arts and freedom Winckelmann does not entirely explain. He assumes, plausibly enough, that severe laws and censorship will suppress creativity and talent. The Egyptians did not develop great art, he claims, because their strict laws and customs forbade all innovation (49). The reason the Phoenicians, Persians, and Egyptians did not develop the arts to such a high level as the Greeks, he contends, was because of their monarchical constitution (84). But why, we want to ask, is a republic necessary for the flourishing of the arts? Cannot the same effect be achieved by a liberal monarchy, where the ruler grants freedom to the arts and sciences? A closer look at the *Geschichte* shows us, however, that much more is at work than the simple intuition that civic freedom does not impede creativity and innovation. Winckelmann explains that the egalitarian spirit of Athenian democracy meant that every citizen would be valued for his achievements rather than simply his birth (133–4). This gave rise to a healthy competition among the Athenians to achieve honors, which were given for artistic as much as athletic achievements. Since the Greeks would immortalize someone for his accomplishments in the arts, sciences, and athletics, the average Greek citizen was motivated to achieve greatness. Winckelmann contrasts this tradition with a monarchy, where the king and his court make themselves the sole source of greatness and are jealous of any honors bestowed upon others (84, 88).

Although Winckelmann's argument seems plausible enough, it seems naive from the perspective of later intellectual history. Just five years earlier Jean-Jacques Rousseau had thrown it into question in the most passionate manner in his first *Discours*. Rousseau was as passionate in his republicanism as Winckelmann; but he insisted that the growth of the arts and sciences was detrimental to the civic spirit of a republic. A republic demanded that a citizen devote himself to its civic affairs and sacrifice himself for the public good; but, by rewarding artistic and scientific achievement, the arts and sciences fostered vanity and individualism. The very competition that Winckelmann saw as essential to the growth of the arts and sciences Rousseau regarded as a mortal danger to the republic. The sharp contrast between Rousseau and Winckelmann—despite their common republican sympathies—makes one wonder how Winckelmann would respond to Rousseau; but, for whatever reason, he never rose to the challenge.[50]

Winckelmann's second argument stresses the physical rather than political conditions behind Greek superiority. Among all the physical factors,

[50] There are few references to Rousseau in Winckelmann's writings or correspondence. There is a slighting reference to the fashion for reading his novels in *Sendschreiben*, p. 192. Rousseau rose to fame after Winckelmann went to Rome, where he was somewhat isolated from French and German letters.

Winckelmann laid special emphasis upon climate, which involves not only temperature but also quality of air and soil. The moderate Greek climate and productive soil put less stress on the organism, and it provided ideal conditions for the development of delicate features and nerves (100, 102, 108). Such ideal physical conditions were especially favorable to the development of beauty, so that Greeks were actually physically more beautiful than moderns: "The most beautiful body among us would not be closer to the most beautiful Greek body than Iphicles was to his brother Hercules" (30). Winckelmann notes that not all Greeks were beautiful (112); and he does not even think that the Greeks were the most beautiful race, a title he was willing to concede to the Georgians, who apparently enjoyed even better physical circumstances than the Greeks (32). Still, he does think that, on average, the Greeks were much more beautiful people than their modern counterparts, who had to live under much less favorable circumstances.

In his earlier essays Winckelmann vacillates over the relative importance of environment versus education in the formation of Greek beauty. In the *Gedancken* he gives equal weight to the Greek system of education. The Greeks were so beautiful, he realizes, not simply because of their climate, but also because of their system of education, which was devoted to a cult of beauty. To maintain their physical appearance the Greeks followed a rigorous diet, engaged in gymnastic exercises, and wore loose, unrestrictive clothing (31–2). While Winckelmann stresses especially the role of education in the *Gedancken*, in the *Erläuterung* he went into much more detail about the formative role of the environment (99–100, 102–5). But before he did so he also admitted that the superiority of the Greeks "perhaps" rested more on their education than on nature or "the influence of the heavens" (99).

It is noteworthy that, of all the factors contributing to the formation of Greek beauty, Winckelmann gives no role whatsoever to race in the modern sense, i.e., genetically inherited characteristics. The Greeks were no master race for him. Although he complains that modern Greeks have lost some of their stature by interbreeding with many different races,[51] he does not regard this as decisive for their development. For him, the really crucial factor is the environment, which has the power to determine racial and physical characteristics. Hence he notes that Greeks who left the area of Athens lost their Attic character and true health, whereas immigrants who came into their homeland acquired the native characteristics (104).

Whatever weight Winckelmann gives to education and environment, we might well question the relevance of his argument to aesthetics. We might

[51] Cf. *Erläuterung*, p. 105 and *Geschichte*, p. 39.

grant Winckelmann's conclusion that the Greeks had such beautiful bodies, but then ask how this proves the superiority of their art. Simply because the Greeks were more beautiful it does not follow that their art should be so. Here Winckelmann's argument rests upon premises too widely shared for him to bother with a full explanation. Like all his contemporaries, he assumes that the purpose of art is imitation, and that the best imitation has the closest resemblance to its subject matter. This means that the subject matter of art should be beautiful, and that the most beautiful art consists in the most accurate imitation of the most beautiful body. The argument assumes that beauty is more a function of subject matter than of form, of what we imitate rather than of how we imitate. For this reason the beauty of the subject matter is essential. Beautiful Greek bodies, accurately imitated, therefore yield beautiful art. However questionable this assumption might be, it was still widely shared and defended in Winckelmann's day. It was indeed defended at length in a work much admired by Winckelmann: Jean Baptiste Du Bos' *Réflexions critiques sur la poësie et sur la peinture*.[52]

Winckelmann's second or naturalistic argument for the superiority of the Greeks is now bound to strike us as naive and speculative. But in the 1750s it would have appeared to be the latest science. In his *Esprit des lois* Montesquieu had traced differences in laws and institutions to different climates and terrains;[53] and in his *Réflexions critiques* Dubos had formulated his own climactic theory to explain differences in artistic genius.[54] Among all the climactic factors Dubos specifically stressed the influence of air quality, an emphasis that reappears in Winckelmann's phrase about the "influence of the heavens". While this climactic theory now strikes us as primitive and exaggerated, the underlying motivation behind it was perfectly respectable: it was an attempt to explain cultural, ethnic, and racial differences on a naturalistic basis by seeing them as a response to distinct environmental circumstances.

Whatever its merits, the environmental argument was crucial to Winckelmann's contribution to the dispute between ancients and moderns. The precise role of the argument becomes apparent when we see it as a reply to a famous remark of Fontenelle, one of the most resolute champions of the moderns. In his *Digression sur les anciens et les modernes* (1688) Fontenelle believed that he had a knock-down argument against the alleged superiority of the ancients: the trees in the ancient world were no larger than they are today![55] Behind

[52] Jean Baptiste Du Bos, *Réflexions critiques sur la poësie et sur la peinture* (Paris: Pissot, 1750), I, 52–7.

[53] *Esprit des lois*, XIV, ch. 2, 10.

[54] See *Réflexions critiques*, II, 249–328, sections xiv–xix.

[55] Fontenelle, *Œuvres Complètes*, ed. G.-B. Depping, 3 vols. (Geneva: Slatkine Reprints, 1968), II, 353.

this joke there was a serious point (as well as some dubious reasoning). If the ancients were superior to the moderns, Fontentelle argued, they would have had larger brains; but if they had larger brains, the trees in their world would have been larger too, because man is a creature of nature and a product of his environment. Since, however, the natural world has remained the same, people must have the same basic capacities. In other words, a naturalistic approach shows that our human nature has been the same, so that the moderns cannot be less talented than the ancients. Winckelmann's response to Fontenelle is that, tree size notwithstanding, the natural world has not always been the same. Though human nature is a constant, some circumstances are more favorable than others to its full development. Living in a better climate and under better political institutions, the ancients developed their natural powers to the fullest, while we moderns remain stunted in growth. Fontenelle had naively and falsely assumed that because our nature is the same, it will develop to the same degree under all political and climactic circumstances.

6. Aesthetic Theory

Winckelmann's fundamentally historical approach to art might make one think that he had little interest in providing a general aesthetic theory. But even a glance at the contents of the *Geschichte der Kunst des Altertums* belies this impression. The heart of the book is its fourth chapter on Greek art, whose longest section is devoted to a treatment of beauty in general. Indeed, in the preface Winckelmann declares that the whole point of the book is to determine the essence of beauty. Without knowing the essence of beauty, he explains, the art historian will not even discover, let alone understand or appreciate, the objects of his investigation.

But Winckelmann's general aesthetic theory cannot be understood from the *Geschichte* alone; it is also necessary to consider several shorter writings devoted to problems of aesthetic theory. Among these are two short essays published in 1759 for the *Bibliothek der schönen Wissenschaften und der freyen Künste*, 'Von der Grazie in Werken der Kunst' and 'Erinnerung über die Betrachtung der Werke der Kunst', and two more substantial later pieces, the *Abhandlung von der Fähigkeit der Empfindung des Schönen in der Kunst* (1763) and *Versuch einer Allegorie* (1766).[56]

[56] 'Von der Grazie in Werken der Kunst', *Bibliothek der schönen Wissenschaften und der freyen Künste* I (1759), 13–23, Rehm, pp. 157–68; and 'Erinnerung über die Betrachtung der Werke der Kunst',

Winckelmann provides his most general account of the nature of beauty in the second part of the fourth chapter of the *Geschichte*. He begins by warning us about the limitations of all aesthetic theory. Beauty, he writes, is one of the great secrets of nature, whose effects we feel but whose nature we cannot explain or define (139). It is easier to provide a negative rather than positive account of beauty, because it is simpler to say what it is not rather than what it is (148). Flatly contrary to Wolff, Winckelmann denies the applicability of the mathematical method to aesthetics. We cannot provide, he insists, a mathematically precise concept of beauty (139). Rather than proceeding according to the mathematical method, where we begin from general principles and derive specific conclusions, we must content ourselves with examining beauty from particular cases in experience and deriving general conclusions from them (148). Since the highest beauty exists in God alone, we cannot acquire a clear and distinct concept of it, given that all concepts are conditioned and relative, whereas divine beauty is unconditioned and absolute (149).

Despite his scruples about aesthetic theory, Winckelmann still put forward some very general—if not mathematically precise—statements about the nature of beauty. These show his debt to the rationalist tradition. Wise men, he says, probably referring to Baumgarten, have found the nature of beauty to consist in the conformity of a creature with its end, and in the conformity of its parts among one another and the whole (149). Such conformity Winckelmann, again following Baumgarten, equates with perfection (149). He likens beauty to "a spirit raised from matter by fire", a spirit that attempts to create something according to the image of the prototypes in the divine understanding. These images of the prototypes, he then adds, are simple and continuous, creating harmony among their different parts. And so, true to the rationalist slogan, Winckelmann states that beauty consists in unity in diversity, simplicity in multiplicity (149).

And despite his doubts about a mathematical definition of beauty, Winckelmann is careful not to take his skepticism about mathematics too far. For it is with the aid of mathematics that he responds to an even more extreme skepticism, one that questions the very existence of universal beauty. Winckelmann knew all too well that he could not simply assume the existence of such beauty, that there were skeptics ready to contest it. Without mentioning

Bibliothek der schönen Wissenschaften und freyen Künste 1 (1759), 1–13, Rehm, pp. 149–62; *Abhandlung von der Fähigkeit der Empfindung des Schönen in der Kunst, und dem Unterrichte in derselben* (Dresden: Walther, 1763), Rehm, pp. 211–33; and *Versuch einer Allegorie* (Dresden: Walther, 1766). Citations of these writings will be to the Rehm edition.

names, he notes the relativistic view that there cannot be any universal beauty because each nation has its own standards of beauty based on its characteristic racial features (146). Some skeptics might say, for example, that the slanted eyes of the Chinese and Japanese are just as beautiful as the straight or even eyes of the Greeks. Such was Winckelmann's commitment to the normative status of the Greeks in all matters of beauty, however, that he could not allow any deviation from them, not even in racial prototype. The more the features of a race deviate from simplicity and regularity of form, he argues, the less beauty they have. He attempts to demonstrate the point through a mathematical analogy. The form of the human face is that of a cross within a circle; but if we were to draw a line from the angle of a slanted eye, it would intersect the cross at an odd angle, detracting from the simplicity and regularity of the form (146). Although Winckelmann's argument is suspect—it assumes rather arbitrarily that simplicity and regularity has only one very plain form—it is at least interesting for revealing the reasons for his belief in a universal beauty. If beauty is based on certain laws of proportion, and if these laws are mathematical, then beauty is as universal as mathematics itself.

Winckelmann later articulates the general principles behind this analogy. Citing the Pythagorean dictum that everything is made according to number, he maintains that the human body is framed according to certain general laws of proportion, and that the artist must follow these rules to recreate its beauty (168, 173). These laws of proportion are based on Plato's principle that the best union is that which binds one thing to another through a third (168). Applied to the human body, this principle means that the whole body, and each part of it, can be divided into three equal parts (168–9). There will then be a perfect symmetry of the whole, and of each part within the whole. Ultimately, it was this Pythagorean–Platonic principle that sustained Winckelmann's faith in the universal status of beauty. It was what protected him from the relativism of his own methodological approach to the history of art.

The rationalist strain of Winckelmann's theory becomes even more apparent when we consider another argument buried in the cramped exposition of section two. In the midst of his statement of general principles, Winckelmann makes an astonishing move: he attempts to subordinate the sublime to the beautiful.[57] Baumgarten never felt the challenge of the sublime, and always took it for granted that aesthetics was a science of the beautiful. For Winckelmann too, beauty alone should be the proper object of aesthetics. But now that

[57] This important passage is overlooked by Potts, whose analysis of Winckelmann's response to Greek sculpture is based on the assumption that Winckelmann gives equal status to the sublime and beautiful but assigns them a different sexuality than Burke. See *Flesh and the Ideal*, pp. 113–44, esp. 132.

Mendelssohn had imported Burke into Germany, he probably had at least some inkling of the challenge of the sublime.[58] Contrary to Burke, Winckelmann does not think that the sublime is an equal and independent partner to beauty but rather only one form of it. Through unity and simplicity all beauty becomes sublime, he argues, because the sublime is simply whatever is great that is executed and presented with simplicity (149). The sublime loses nothing of its greatness, he maintains, if it is subordinated under one concept and we grasp it in a single view. Everything that we see partially, or that we cannot see at once in one view, loses some of its greatness, and so some of its sublimity. A grand palace is small when it is overladen with ornaments; and a small house is sublime when it is made simply (180). It was a quick and easy argument, one dispatched with no fanfare in the middle of a dense paragraph; but it was rich in its implications. With this argument the sublime was reduced down to size, down to nice rationalist proportions: the sublime is great, to be sure, but great only in virtue of its reducibility to a single concept, to the parameters of beauty itself.

So far Winckelmann's aesthetic seems entirely rationalist. Winckelmann adheres to some of the basic principles of the rationalist aesthetic—that beauty consists in perfection, mathematical proportion, unity in variety—and even defends them against the challenge of the sublime. It is necessary to stress, however, that this is only one side or aspect of his aesthetic. For all his rationalism, Winckelmann never failed to insist on the sensible side of beauty, its irreducible empirical aspect. All the rational aspects of beauty could provide at best a necessary, but not sufficient or complete account of beauty. If beauty were to be understood by the intellect, it still had to be felt by the senses.[59] It is in this respect that Winckelmann shows himself to be the true student of Baumgarten, who had stressed the *sui generis* status of sensibility within aesthetic experience.

The rational side of Winckelmann's aesthetic is most evident in his early work, especially the *Gedancken*. The empirical side appears more in his later work, especially the 1763 *Abhandlung*. This is not to say, however, that the empirical side is entirely a later development; it was already implicit in some of his earlier work, primarily the short 1759 essays 'Erinnerung über die Betrachtung der Werke der Kunst' and 'Von der Grazie in Werken der Kunst'.

[58] Although there is no evidence that Winckelmann knew of Burke, it is probable that he read Mendelssohn's review of the *Inquiry*, which appeared in 1758 in the *Bibliothek der schönen Wissenschaften*, Band III, Stück 2. Winckelmann was an admirer of Mendelssohn. See his letter to Marpurg, April 13, 1765, *Briefe*, III, 95; and to L. Usteri, September 14, 1763, *Briefe*, II, 344.

[59] See *Geschichte:* "Beauty is felt through sense, but it is known and conceived through the understanding" (147).

The more empirical side of Winckelmann's aesthetic surfaces when he argues that beauty does not perfectly conform to regular laws and proportions. Winckelmann states in the 'Erinnerung' that even if we could reduce beauty down to a formula, it would mean nothing to us without the power of feeling to grasp it. The line of beauty, he then adds, is not straight but elliptical (152). The same thesis resurfaces in the *Geschichte*, when Winckelmann states that the forms of a beautiful body are formed by curving lines that constantly change their center and are therefore elliptical (151–2). The empirical aspect of the theory is even more explicit in the *Abhandlung*, where Winckelmann argues that we perceive beauty according to sentiment or feeling, which is based on sensibility. Here he explains this sentiment in some detail, borrowing much of the vocabulary of Hutcheson's theory of internal sense. Our feeling for the beautiful derives from our power of inner sense, which represents and shapes the impressions given to our outer senses (218). Inner sense is like a second mirror in which we see the profile or essential features of what is given to outer sense (218).

In his short essay 'Von der Grazie in den Werken der Kunst' Winckelmann brings together both the rational and sensible aspects of beauty in his concept of grace (*Grazie*). He defines grace as that which pleases us rationally (157). Although the laws and rules of reason provide the substructure of such a pleasure, grace is not simply what follows rules and laws because its pleasing feeling or sentiment itself has its distinctive *sui generis* qualities, which are irreducible to analysis. Winckelmann then makes a distinction between grace and beauty, one akin to that between the heavenly and earthly Venus: the heavenly Venus is purely intellectual and cannot be grasped by the senses, whereas the earthly Venus is how the purely intellectual beauty appears to the senses.[60]

The concept of grace that Winckelmann introduces in his 1759 essay was soon to play a pivotal role in his classification of the periods of Greek art in his *Geschichte*. There Winckelmann makes grace the distinguishing feature of Greek art in its highest phase, which he calls the beautiful style (219). During this phase Greek art avoided the sharp and angular contours characteristic of its old style, and began to draw more flowing and curving lines that are more pleasing to the senses. While the old style was severely rationalistic, the beautiful style incorporates its contours without appearing to be constrained by them. Winckelmann explains the general idea behind his classification with

[60] See Winckelmann to Wilhelm von Stosch, October 28, 1757, *Briefe*, I, 312. The distinction is more complicated and confused because Winckelmann also explains it as a distinction between two forms of grace and beauty. He uses grace in a specific sense as a form of beauty, and in a more generic sense in which it is equivalent to beauty. See *Geschichte*, p. 222.

a political metaphor: just as the state must begin with severe laws but gradually relax them to account for the multiplicity of cases, so art must begin with strict laws but eventually soften them to make its shapes more true to nature (221).

Besides its rationalist and empiricist aspects, there is yet another side to Winckelmann's aesthetic theory. This is its historical aspect, which is perhaps its most innovative and influential. We know beauty, Winckelmann believed, not simply by perceiving an object through the senses and by contemplating it according to the intellect. For the understanding and appreciation of a work of art also involves something else: namely, interpretation, locating the work within its specific cultural context and seeing it as the expression of the characteristic values and beliefs of a nation. This means that beauty does not consist only in pleasing sensible or intellectual qualities, but also in expressive ones. We measure the expressive qualities of a work in terms of how well and much they embody the characteristic values and beliefs of the culture. Nowhere is this aspect of Winckelmann's aesthetic more in evidence than in his famous essay on the Belvedere Torso.[61] Here Winckelmann has for his object only a ruin, the torso of a male body, which he assumes came from a statue of Hercules. As it presents itself to our senses, this torso seems deformed, like nothing more than "the trunk of an oak deprived of all its branches". Nevertheless, despite its lack of pleasing sensual qualities, Winckelmann still finds it beautiful. What makes the work so beautiful for him is what he imagines its body to express; each aspect or part of the torso embodies some of the deeds of the ancient hero, viz., the shoulders carried the heavenly spheres, the chest crushed the giant Antaeus (170). We must use not only our senses and intellect but also our imagination to understand a work of art, Winckelmann claims, where the imagination has to be guided by our knowledge of the culture itself. Here it is entirely Winckelmann's understanding of Greek mythology and literature, not just the given visual qualities of the object itself, that determines his interpretation and appreciation of it.

If this historical aspect of Winckelmann's theory is underdeveloped, it is also implicit in his entire approach. It was fully appreciated by Herder, and it was eventually developed and practiced by Hegel, who would look upon beauty as the expression of a culture's identity. It was just this historical aspect of Winckelmann's legacy, however, that was most in danger of extinction as the century wore on. For it was Kant's aesthetics that would dominate the final decades of the eighteenth century; and it placed aesthetic judgment in a transcendental realm above and beyond the sphere of history. Although

[61] 'Beschreibung des Torso im Belvedere zu Rom', Rehm, pp. 169–74. See also the various sketches for this essay, pp. 267–86.

Kant had a much deeper grasp of the epistemological subtleties involved in the justification of aesthetic judgment, he had little or no understanding of its cultural context. Winckelmann had recognized something that Kant's architectonic did not allow him to appreciate: that the justification of aesthetic judgment depends on its interpretation, which ultimately must be based upon a specific cultural context.

7. Painting and Allegory

It seems to be a general truth about the history of aesthetics that thinkers base their theories upon a single art that they make paradigmatic for all the arts. If Wolff's paradigmatic art was architecture, and if Baumgarten's was poetry, Winckelmann's was sculpture. In the *Gedancken* he bases his argument about the central characteristics of Greek art chiefly upon his analysis of its sculpture; and in the *Geschichte* he saw the Apollo Belvedere as the supreme extant example of the Greek ideal. Winckelmann's focus on sculpture had, in part, an archeological basis: while there were remnants of ancient sculptures, or at least reliable copies of them, there were no extant ancient paintings. But it also reflects his belief that sculpture was the more important ancient art. He explains in the *Geschichte* that sculpture developed prior to painting in ancient Greece, and that it played a more prominent role in temples, theatres, and stadiums.[62] More significantly, in a striking passage from the *Gedancken*, Winckelmann frankly admits that the Greeks did not achieve in painting the same high ideals of excellence as they did in sculpture (54–5). For all his Grecophilia, he accepts Vasari's argument that modern painting had gone beyond the ancients in its use of perspective and coloring; he acknowledges that the Greeks and Romans knew the laws of composition only imperfectly; and he even pays tribute to the modern use of oils, which gives modern paintings a power, life, and sublimity beyond anything achieved by the ancients.

Still, for all the importance that Winckelmann gave to sculpture, in his early Dresden writings he would devote as much attention to painting as sculpture. The very title of the *Gedancken* places the imitation of Greek painting alongside Greek sculpture; and in the *Erläuterung* he spends much more space and energy on painting than sculpture. The equal focus on painting was in large measure simply strategic: Winckelmann could reform modern art only if he accommodated himself to the greater importance that moderns gave to painting.

[62] See *Geschichte*, pp. 137–8.

It would seem that with painting Winckelmann's doctrine of imitation comes to a dead end. If Greek painting had already been surpassed by the moderns, what point is there to imitating it? But, even worse, since there were no extant Greek paintings, not even reliable copies of them, what was there left to imitate? Winckelmann readily admits this problem in the *Gedancken*. He notes that everything that one says about Greek sculpture should apply with equal probability to painting; but he laments that the decay of time, and the destruction of men, have made it impossible to say anything certain about Greek painting (53). One cannot base one's judgment about Greek painting from the remaining frescoes in Herculaneum, he insists, because their poor design and composition shows that they were not drawn by masters (54). Still, Winckelmann reassures us that we have good reason to think that some Greek paintings were of a high standard. Since Greek sculptors were also painters, it is plausible to assume that they would be able to reach the same high standards in their paintings as in their sculptures.

The objection that imitation of the ancients is impossible in the case of painting rests upon the standard misconception about what Winckelmann means by imitation. If imitation only meant copying ancient models, it would be indeed impossible in the case of painting. Since, however, imitation really means following the *aims* and *methods* of the ancients, it should be possible for us to imitate them in painting as much as sculpture. We do not need actually to see authentic examples of ancient painting; all we need to know is the aims and methods of the ancient painters. And, on this score, Winckelmann thinks that we can get all the evidence that we need from ancient writings, which tell us plenty about the aspirations of ancient painters.

What, then, were the aims and methods of the ancient painters? Winckelmann has a clear and straightforward answer in the *Gedancken*: "Painting extends to things that are not sensible; these are its highest goal; and the Greeks strived to achieve it, as the writings of the ancients attest" (55). The aim of ancient Greek painting, he further explains, was to portray the insensible through sensible means (58, 134). Here the insensible means the universal, conceptual, or archetypical, which has to be signified, alluded to, or suggested by some image from the senses.

Winckelmann's account of Greek painting reveals the same general principle that he applies to Greek sculpture. Like Greek sculpture, the method of Greek painting is not to copy a particular given in sense experience but to create a universal ideal according to the mind and then to embody it in some concrete sensual form. Hence the imitation of the ancients in painting means the same as it does in sculpture: to create universals in particulars rather than just to

reduplicate particulars. In the case of painting, however, Winckelmann takes this principle to a more specific conclusion. Since the aim of painting is to portray the insensible by sensible means, and since an allegory is essentially a sensible symbol for something insensible, the aim of painting should be allegory. Hence, in the case of painting, imitation of the ancients means devotion to one special kind of composition: allegory. Winckelmann thinks that ancient Greek painting was essentially allegorical. He explains that it had a religious purpose, and' that it served the ends of Greek mythology, which were entirely allegorical (138–9).

Granted that Greek painting was allegorical, the question still remains: Why should we imitate it? Why should painting become allegorical? Winckelmann's answer to this question, though never made explicit, is apparent everywhere in the *Gedancken* and *Erläuterung*. It is his central thesis that *all* painting reaches its perfection—or it fully satisfies us aesthetically—only when it becomes allegory. For this thesis Winckelmann offers a welter of interlacing arguments. First, he attacks the opposing view of painting, the theory that its purpose should be the imitation of particular things given to the senses in nature. If the aim of painting were simply to reproduce these objects, he argues, then it would be no more interesting than looking at the objects themselves; we would not really have something to think about (118). Second, drawing and coloring, perspective and composition, are entirely mechanical aspects of painting; they give a painting its body; but they do not provide it with a soul, a deeper message, which comes from allegory alone (118). Third, painting provides lasting aesthetic pleasure only if it appeals to the intellect. ''All pleasures . . . have their duration, and protect us from nausea and surfeit, according to the degree that they occupy our intellect'' (118). It is just the strength of allegory, however, that it exercises the intellect, which is naturally stimulated to decipher its underlying meaning. So if the painter is to ensure that his paintings give lasting satisfaction, he should, as Winckelmann puts it, ''dunk his brush in the intellect'', which means giving his images a deeper allegorical meaning.

It was a common theme of Winckelmann's reasoning throughout these arguments that painting and poetry are sister arts subject to the same kinds of constraints (118). He explicitly cites Simonides' famous dictum that painting is a silent form of poetry and poetry a speaking form of painting.[63] It is because painting has the same purpose and limits as poetry, Winckelmann contends, that it too should strive to portray universal truths like tragedy and the epic. The theme is noteworthy not least because Lessing attacks it in his *Laokoon*, contending that painting and poetry are very different arts subject to

[63] See *Versuch einer Allegorie*, p. 2.

very different kinds of rules and constraints. To some this has been sufficient to consign Winckelmann's allegorical doctrine to the dustbin of intellectual history.[64]

It is important to see, however, that even if we accept Lessing's arguments, they are not damaging to Winckelmann's case. When Winckelmann appeals to Simonides' dictum it is only to support his general claim that painting and poetry are alike in suggesting or implying universal truths. Lessing, however, does not contest this general claim; his interest is to show that, because of their very different media, painting and poetry have very different kinds of subject matter: the proper subject matter of painting is bodies, whereas that of poetry is actions. Although Winckelmann does suggest that the highest theme for a painter comes from history (118), this suggestion is not really essential to his main point that painting too embodies universal truths. All Lessing's careful reasoning about the different subject matters of painting and poetry has little import, then, for Winckelmann's general argument.

What most scholars find troubling, however, is not Winckelmann's arguments but his conclusion. To limit painting to allegory seems an intolerably narrow aesthetic, one that seems to exclude, or at least to depreciate, other kinds of painting, such as portraits, landscapes, or still lifes. Even worse, Winckelmann's aesthetic seems to restrict the painter to using classical motifs, as if his chief business should be the revival of Greek and Roman mythology.

The assessment of these objections is complicated because Winckelmann vacillates about central points of his doctrine. To some extent, it is indeed a narrow aesthetic. Winckelmann has a low opinion of portraits, landscapes, or still lifes if they are nothing more than simple imitations of nature; without an allegorical component, he claims, they do not give the spectator anything to think about (118). Regarding the use of ancient motifs, his classical bias is also unmistakable, since he stresses in the *Erläuterung* that the ancient symbols should be the modern artist's first object of study and main source of inspiration (123). Nevertheless, his allegorical project is not entirely or exclusively classical. He does not think that the modern artist should limit himself exclusively to ancient imagery; and he concedes that the modern artist has the right to make his own (129). His classicism regarding allegory is really about its form rather than substance: the modern artist could make his own symbols provided that they are in the classical spirit, having simplicity, clarity, and charm.[65] Winckelmann's broader vision is especially apparent in the *Gedancken* when he

[64] See Hermann Hettner, *Geschichte der deutschen Literatur im achtzehnen Jahrhundert* (Berlin: Aufbau Verlag, 1979), I, 629.

[65] See *Versuch einer Allegorie*, pp. 29–31.

recommends the creation of a general encyclopedia of imagery, one that is not limited to classical images but that comprises the images of all cultures (57). In his later years he took steps to realize this project in his *Versuch einer Allegorie*, which provides a catalog of allegories from the ancient and modern worlds. Winckelmann fully realized that the complete revival of classical allegory was an impossibility for his age, which no longer shared the same ethics and religion as antiquity.[66] He knew that the meaning of many classical symbols had been lost entirely, or that they were familiar only to a few scholars who took the trouble to decipher them (124–5).

8. Eros and Dionysus

In *Götzen-Dämmerung* Nietzsche cast a fateful judgment upon Winckelmann's understanding of Greek culture. He claimed that Winckelmann and Goethe had failed to appreciate that aspect of Greek culture whose importance he had discovered in his *Geburt der Tragödie*: the orgiastic.[67] In Nietzsche's terms, Winckelmann and Goethe had seen only one half of Greek culture: its Apollonian dimension; but they had ignored its other half: the Dionysian. They had stressed the principles of order, harmony, and serenity represented by Apollo, making them the chief values of Greek culture; but, in doing so, they had underestimated the dark instinctual forces underlying Apollo, to which the Greeks paid equal homage in the god Dionysus. Often accepted at face-value, especially among Nietzsche scholars, Nietzsche's judgment has been taken as the final word about Winckelmann's legacy.[68] It has seemed to many that Winckelmann's neo-classicism has been completely superseded by a broader, more accurate, and profound account of Greek culture.

Prima facie there does seem to be much truth to Nietzsche's assessment. Winckelmann did regard Greek art as the epitome of its culture, and he did see it essentially in Apollonian terms. There seems no other way to understand Winckelmann's famous claim that the central characteristics of

[66] Ibid., p. 22.

[67] See Nietzsche, *Sämtliche Werke: Kritische Studienausgabe*, ed. G. Colli and M. Montinari, 15 vols. (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1980), VI, 159.

[68] One notable exception here is Potts, who, in his *Flesh and the Ideal*, questions Nietzsche's judgment by contending that "No less insistently than Nietzsche's, Winckelmann's image of the Apollonian composure of the antique was one wrested from extremity" (p. 1). We are told that Winckelmann showed "an unusually acute awareness of the psychic and ideological tensions inherent in [the] image of an impossibly whole and fully embodied subjectivity". Unfortunately, Potts does not develop this point, leaving it to his reader to determine in what respect Winckelmann understood the Dionysian.

Greek masterpieces are their noble simplicity and serene greatness; these, after all, are paradigmatic Apollonian qualities. It also seems telling that Winckelmann's favorite sculpture was the Belvedere Apollo, which he called "the God and miracle of ancient art".[69] In the few lines where Winckelmann does attempt to describe the Greeks' response to the darker side of life, he writes as if they were blind to it. Consider this passage:

> The Greeks characterized their works with a certain open nature, with the character of joy: the muses loved no frightful spirits. The image of death appears only in a single old stone; but the skeleton dances according to the flute, appearing in the form that it had in the symposia where it was to encourage enjoyment of life.[70]

And to this one might add: there are virtually no references to Dionysus in Winckelmann's writings. He does write about Bacchus, but then it is only to condemn those statues that show anything grotesque in his features or movements. So one might well ask: Did Winckelmann ever paid homage to Dionysus?

It is not surprising to find that later German thinkers, influenced by Winckelmann, would describe Greek culture entirely in Apollonian terms. Schiller, Hölderlin, and Friedrich Schlegel read Greek culture as something like the childhood of the human race, a pagan version of paradise where people lived in complete innocence and harmony with themselves, others, and nature. On their interpretation, Greek culture becomes something like an early historical form of Rousseau's state of nature. It was a state of primal innocence and simplicity, where people were virtuous simply by following their own inner heart and nature.

It is important, however, to distinguish Winckelmann's understanding of the Greeks from what a later generation read into him. That there is something problematic with their interpretation becomes clear as soon as we understand more precisely what Winckelmann meant by Greek simplicity and serenity. He never understood these qualities as attributes of an innocent natural goodness. Rather, he reads simplicity and serenity into Greek statues because he sees them as the embodiment of the Greek ethic of *Sophrosyne*, the ethic of self-restraint, moderation, and self-possession. If Laocöon did not scream, that was because his virtue gave him composure and dignity in the face of fate. Winckelmann knew all too well that the Greeks' simplicity and serenity were not qualities given to them by nature, but that they had acquired them through culture and education. This alone involves some recognition of the deeper and darker side

[69] See the 'Erster Enwurf' to the *Beschreibung des Apollo im Belvedere*, p. 273.
[70] *Erläuterung*, p. 122.

of human life. For to acquire virtue means that one has struggled with and surmounted refractory impulses and desires. Winckelmann characterized Greek virtue in terms of moderation, the power to find a balance between extremes; and surely no one could achieve moderation without a deep awareness of what it means to live through extremes. It is for this reason that Winckelmann, in describing the beauty of Greek sculptures, always notes that their calmness and serenity is that which emerges from the turbulent depths beneath.[71] So Winckelmann would have entirely agreed with Nietzsche's claim that Greek superficiality came from depth.

This point is still not enough, however, to deflect the main point of Nietzsche's criticism. It shows at best that Winckelmann had some recognition, though very implicit, of the darker forces of life, specifically of those instincts, feelings, and desires that have to be controlled and directed by virtue. Nevertheless, he does not give a name or positive value to them; and still less does he grant the Dionysian equal and independent status to the Apollonian. Furthermore, there is nothing comparable in Winckelmann to the existential aspect of the Dionysian in Nietzsche. Winckelmann seems to be blissfully unaware of the terrifying message of Silenus: that life is intrinsically brutal and absurd, so that it is better not to be born or die young. So we are still left wondering: Was Nietzsche right after all?

That there is something very problematic about Nietzsche's criticism becomes apparent as soon as we consider one basic fact about Winckelmann's personality: his homosexuality. It is a well-recognized point that Winckelmann's interpretation of Greek sculpture, and indeed his understanding of Greek culture as a whole, was inspired by his homosexuality.[72] It is surely telling that Winckelmann saw the nude, young male as the very epitome of beauty. Winckelmann had an instinctive affinity and profound sympathy with the ancient Greeks because he knew all too well—even if he could never declare it openly—that his sexuality was theirs. In reading his sexuality into Greek sculpture he also realized that he was perfectly in keeping with the Greek ethos itself; for the Greeks were not only tacitly revealing but brazenly celebrating that sexuality in their sculptures. Any accurate account of Greek sculpture, he maintained, had to be especially sensitive to male rather than female beauty, given that most Greek statues were devoted to the male figure.[73] When we take all this into account, it seems that, if Winckelmann did not pay sufficient dues to Dionysus, he at least did pay homage to his near cousin, Eros.

[71] See *Gedancken*, p. 43, *Geschichte*, p. 152, and 'Von der Grazie in Werken der Kunst', p. 159.

[72] Goethe acknowledged this, even if in somewhat guarded terms. See his *Winckelmann und sein Jahrhundert*, in *Werke*, XIX, 182–3.

[73] See *Von der Fähigkeit der Empfindung des Schönen*, p. 216.

Once we consider Winckelmann's understanding of and sympathy for Greek sexuality, it becomes necessary to reconsider Nietzsche's assessment. The issue is somewhat complicated because of the various meanings ascribed to Dionysus. If we take the Dionysian in a very broad sense, so that it involves all forms of sexuality, then Winckelmann had a very accurate understanding of the Dionysian after all. Indeed, it seems that his understanding of it was superior to Nietzsche's, for he fully appreciated, as Nietzsche did not, the importance of the homosexually erotic in Greek culture. Nietzsche seems to have had little understanding of, and sympathy for, this fundamental value of Greek life; and his conception of the Dionysian as a symbol of the procreative and fertile slants it entirely in the direction of heterosexuality. Assuming, however, that we take the Dionysian in more narrow terms, so that it involves reference to procreativity and fertility, it must be conceded that Winckelmann did little justice to it. Once taken in this more narrow sense, however, the Dionysian becomes distinct from the Greek erotic ideal. We are then left with the question whether Nietzsche himself fully recognized the erotic dimension of Greek sexuality.

There is another basic problem with the Nietzschean assessment of Winckelmann: it treats what is a matter of interpretation as if it were simply a matter of fact. Rather than claiming that Winckelmann simply ignores the Dionysian, as if it were some kind of basic fact about Greek culture, it is important to note that he would have denied its very existence, at least in the precise sense Nietzsche gave to it. Under the influence of Kant and Schopenhauer, Nietzsche tends to read the distinction between the Apollonian and Dionysian in terms of their dualism between nature and reason. The sphere of the Dionysian is that of sensible desire and feeling, where these desires and feelings are purely given and natural, existing apart from and prior to the realm of rationality. It was part of Winckelmann's Platonic legacy, however, that he would never have read desire and feeling in such non-rational terms, as if they were nothing but blind natural forces. As a disciple of Diotima rather than Dionysus, Winckelmann would hold that all desire is a form of love, and that all love has for its object beauty, which is a sensible appearance of the forms. The account of desire and feeling in the *Phaedrus* and *Symposium* tends to intellectualize it, to make it a manifestation of the deeper spiritual urge to return to the realm of the forms. Even our most basic sexual impulses, Diotima teaches, derive from this striving for eternity, this desire to return to the eternal realm from which we all came. It is now easy to understand why Winckelmann would never have recognized the Dionysian: it simply does not exist, at least not in Nietzsche's sense. The Dionysian, even in its heterosexual forms, would have been a manifestation of the erotic.

In the end, then, it is necessary to conclude that Winckelmann and Nietzsche approached Greek culture from opposing philosophical perspectives. While Nietzsche read it in terms of Schopenhauer's voluntarism and dualism, Winckelmann saw it in terms of Plato's intellectualism and monism. The resolution of the dispute between them ultimately depends on the merits of these perspectives themselves. Whichever is correct, it should be clear that we should not naively claim that Winckelmann simply failed to take into account hard facts that Nietzsche discovered; for the very existence of these 'facts' is disputable. The value and validity of Winckelmann's interpretation of Greek culture remains an open question.

7

Mendelssohn's Defense of Reason

1. The Guardian of Enlightenment

One of the most illustrious representatives of the rationalist tradition in aesthetics is Moses Mendelssohn (1729–86). No one in that tradition had a profounder grasp of its metaphysics and epistemology, and no one had greater aesthetic sensitivity. In metaphysics Mendelssohn is on par with Wolff and Baumgarten; but he far surpasses them in aesthetic sensitivity. In aesthetic sensitivity he is the equal of Lessing and Winckelmann; but he far exceeds their powers as metaphysicians. In short, Mendelssohn's combination of philosophical depth and aesthetic sensitivity was unique and peerless.

In the history of aesthetic rationalism Mendelssohn plays a crucial role. His task was to defend aesthetic rationalism against the new irrationalist currents of the age. Coming of age in the 1750s and 1760s, Mendelssohn had to respond to some of the growing challenges to the Enlightenment and authority of reason. These challenges came from several quarters: from the new empiricist aesthetics of Dubos and Burke, which made aesthetic experience a matter of feeling alone; from the cult of genius of the rising *Sturm und Drang*, which claimed artistic inspiration stood above all rules; and from the cultural pessimism of Rousseau, who held that the arts and sciences had corrupted morals. It was Mendelssohn's mission to defend the rationalist legacy against all these currents, all of which would have greatly limited the powers of rational criticism. Against these challenges Mendelssohn continued to uphold the aesthetics of perfection of Leibniz, Wolff, and Baumgarten, according to which all aesthetic experience is a sensible perception of rational structure.

That Mendelssohn saw himself as a defender of rationalist values in an irrational age there cannot be any doubt. This was the literary persona he formed for himself in his early years. In some of his first articles for *Briefe, die neueste Litteratur betreffend* he portrayed himself as a defender of

Leibniz's and Wolff's philosophy against a new shallow generation.[1] The youth had grown weary of Wolff's scholastic demonstrations, and they scoffed at the very idea of monads. For them, Wolff was "*ein alter Schwätzer*" and Baumgarten "*ein dunkler Grillenfänger*". They were encouraged in such irreverence by the Berlin Academy of Sciences, whose president, Pierre Maupertuis, championed the new French and English empiricism against the Leibnizian–Wolffian philosophy. It is important to see that, in casting himself in this role, Mendelssohn makes it plain that his ultimate allegiance is not to Leibnizian–Wolffian doctrine *per se* but to the basic rational values underlying it. These values are thinking for oneself, accepting beliefs strictly according to the evidence for them, and always pushing inquiry further so that one reaches fundamentals. Mendelssohn insisted that Leibnizian–Wolffian doctrines too had to submit to the tests of reason, and he endorsed them only because they came closer to passing these tests than any other philosophy. He said he was glad to have grown up among opponents of the Leibnizian–Wolffian philosophy, because they had made him question its doctrines, which he accepted only after they withstood his initial objections. All his life Mendelssohn would regard himself as a "guardian of the enlightenment",[2] defending these rational values against the growing opposition to them. Hence in the 1780s he would make it his mission to vindicate them during the "pantheism controversy" with F. H. Jacobi.[3]

It is often said that Mendelssohn's aesthetic thought was a mere sideline for him, and that his chief interest lay in metaphysics. There is strong evidence for this claim, most of it coming from Mendelssohn himself. He joked to Lessing how he and Nicolai were seducing him away from his first love, "*Madame Metaphysik*", and turning him into a "*Belesprit*".[4] Rather than probing the depths of metaphysics, he was now writing literary reviews for Nicolai, and he was even thinking—perish the thought!—of writing poems himself. Mendelssohn would devote himself to aesthetics for seven years, from 1755 to 1763, after which he would finally return to his old mistress. It would be a serious mistake, however, to regard Mendelssohn's early interests in aesthetics

[1] See *Literaturbriefe* 20–2, March 1, 1759, in Moses Mendelssohn, *Gesammelte Schriften*, *Jubiläumsausgabe*, 23 vols., ed. Fritz Bamberger et al. (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Frommann, 1929), V/1, 11–17. All references to Mendelssohn's writings will be to this now standard edition.

[2] This is the felicitous phrase of Alexander Altmann in his magisterial *Moses Mendelssohn: A Biographical Study* (University Al: University of Alabama Press, 1973).

[3] On Mendelssohn's defense of reason during the pantheism controversy, see my *The Fate of Reason* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1987), pp. 92–108. For a somewhat different account, see Allan Arkush, *Moses Mendelssohn and the Enlightenment* (Albany: Suny, 1994), 69–98, 133–66.

[4] See Mendelssohn to Lessing, August 2, 1756, in *Lessing, Werke und Briefe*, ed. Wilfried Barner et al. (Frankfurt: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1987), XI/1, 100.

as a diversion, excursion, or fling. For he had weighty philosophical reasons for turning to the arts and devoting so much attention to them: he saw that some of the greatest challenges to the authority of reason now came from the arts rather than religion. Never could he conduct an effective campaign against the growing forces of unreason if he ignored aesthetics. That would be like defending a fortress from the front ramparts when its rear walls had already been breached.

Though Mendelssohn saw himself as a defender of reason in aesthetics, the common picture of him in the history of aesthetics is at odds with his self-characterization. The prevalent conception of Mendelssohn's place in the history of aesthetics sees him as an essentially transitional figure between the old rationalism of Wolff and the new subjectivism of Burke, Dubos, and Kant.[5] We are frequently told that in his later writings Mendelssohn began to abandon the aesthetics of perfection, and that he moved toward a more subjectivist aesthetic based on psychology rather than metaphysics. While his first aesthetic writings make perfection an attribute of the object, his later writings make it an attribute of the subject's perception of the object. This interpretation of Mendelssohn usually goes hand-in-hand with an account of him as a proto-Kantian thinker. Supposedly, Mendelssohn's great contribution to the history of aesthetics was his anticipation of Kant's three-faculty theory and concept of the autonomy of art.

We shall see in the subsequent sections, however, that this interpretation is utterly untenable. It would have us believe that Mendelssohn compromised with, or surrendered to, the irrational forces assaulting the enlightenment. Nothing, however, could be more opposed to his fundamental commitments. Rather than attempting to accommodate these forces, Mendelssohn attempted to resist them with all his wit and energy. Never does he flinch before the strongest irrationalist weapons, whether they are the claims of genius, the phenomenon of the sublime, or the problem of tragic pleasure. Apart from this difficulty, there is also a dire lack of evidence for this interpretation. Nowhere does Mendelssohn make a subjectivist turn that would make all aesthetic properties an attribute of the subject alone; and nowhere does he formulate a three-faculty theory that violates his original rationalist commitments.

[5] See, for example, Hermann Hettner, *Geschichte der deutschen Literatur im achtzehnten Jahrhundert* (Berlin: Aufbau, 1979), I, 489–90; Friedrich Braitmaier, *Geschichte der poetischen Theorie und Kritik*, vol. II (Frauenfeld: Huber, 1889), pp. 73, 148–9; L. W. Beck, *Early German Philosophy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1969), pp. 326, 328–9; and Kai Hammermeister, *The German Aesthetic Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 18–19. As if to give it official sanction, the same viewpoint surfaces in Fritz Bamberger's 'Einleitung' to volume I of the *Jubiläumsausgabe*, pp. xxxix–xlviii.

Furthermore, the terms in which this interpretation are cast—a dilemma between a metaphysical or psychological approach to aesthetics—are utterly anachronistic. They make no sense when Mendelssohn is placed in his historical context, for, as every student of Wolff knows, the basis of aesthetics lies as much in psychology as ontology. Finally, it has to be said: the Kantian interpretation of Mendelssohn is shamelessly biased, not to mention anachronistic. It simply begs the question to make Kant the standard of Mendelssohn's contributions to aesthetics.

The approach toward Mendelssohn in this chapter is completely opposed to this common interpretation. Rather than seeing a fundamental break in Mendelssohn's intellectual development, it sees continuity and evolution, where the abiding values are his allegiance to reason. And instead of regarding Mendelssohn as a transitional figure, it attempts to take him on his own terms, evaluating him from within or according to his own ideals. With this new approach Mendelssohn's stature is not diminished but augmented. Mendelssohn's defense of the enlightenment was, at the very least, intellectual heroism of the highest order.

2. The Analysis of Sensation

Mendelssohn's chief works on aesthetics are his *Briefe über die Empfindungen* (1755), and his later revision of and commentary upon it, his *Rhapsodie oder Zusätze zu den Briefen über die Empfindungen* (1761).[6] These works are, as the title indicates, primarily an analysis of feeling, sensation, or sentiment.[7] Mendelssohn chooses this topic partly because the nature of pleasure had become such a battleground in the controversies over taste. It is his hope that by focusing on this central concept he will be able to settle outstanding issues.

It would be unduly narrow, however, to see the *Briefe* and *Rhapsodie* as only works in aesthetics. Mendelssohn's chief concern is much deeper and broader: the nature of the good life. He wants to answer a classical question of ethics: What is the highest good? What values in life make it worth living? Although this question had lost some of its importance in the early

[6] There are important differences between the first and second editions of the *Briefe*. We will follow the exposition of the second edition here, noting any important changes from the first edition.

[7] The translation of *Empfindung* is difficult because there is no exact English equivalent. "Sentiment" is problematic because it suggests something non-cognitive, a mere state of feeling, when it was Mendelssohn's purpose to secure its cognitive status against the empiricists. It is noteworthy that Wolff and Baumgarten use *Empfindung* to translate the Latin *sensatio*. For these reasons I have stuck to the older term "sensation".

modern world—Locke and Hobbes dismissed it as a relic of scholasticism—it had always been central to the ethics of the Wolffian school. Mendelssohn makes no explicit mention of it in the *Briefe*; but he refers to it directly and unmistakably in later remarks and in the *Rhapsodie* itself.[8] Indeed, this question dominates both texts, and it is the unifying theme behind their many topics. Another reason Mendelssohn undertook his analysis of sensation was to resolve the classical dispute between the Stoics and Epicureans about the role of pleasure in the highest good.

That the *Briefe* and *Rhapsodie* are not works on aesthetics in any narrow sense becomes evident as soon as we ponder one otherwise indigestible fact: that five letters of the *Briefe*, nearly one third of the entire work, are devoted to reflections on suicide. Such a topic seems to have little connection with aesthetics, and for this reason scholars have questioned the unity of Mendelssohn's text. But the relevance of the topic becomes immediately apparent as soon as we consider Mendelssohn's broader concerns. Suicide poses the question whether life is worth living, and the highest good consists in those values that make life worth living; if we attain them, we have a reason to be rather than not to be. Mendelssohn focused on the problem of suicide in the *Briefe* because, in a very dramatic and personal form, it raised the general question of the value of life and existence itself.

It was Mendelssohn's intention in the *Briefe* and *Rhapsodie* to defend rationalist ethics and aesthetics against new and growing opposition, especially the empiricist ethics and aesthetics of La Mettrie, Holbach, Maupertuis, Burke, and Dubos. Mendelssohn saw a challenge to the authority of reason in their ethics and aesthetics, and his aim was to defend that authority against them. This opposing tradition held three propositions about pleasure, all of which limited the role of reason in the good life. First, pleasure is fundamentally simple and unanalyzable. Second, pleasure is primarily physical or sensual, a state or motion of the nerves. Third, the good life consists in sensual pleasure, not in the perfection of characteristic human activities, still less in religious or philosophical contemplation. The net result of these propositions is that aesthetic and moral experience is non-cognitive, consisting in mere feelings involving no acts of judgment; hence this experience escapes rational reflection and criticism.

Although Mendelssohn does not so precisely distinguish them, all these propositions appear prominently in the *Briefe* and *Rhapsodie*, and Mendelssohn

[8] See remark (g) of *Über die Empfindungen* where Mendelssohn points out that the dispute between Theocles and Euphranor about pleasure is the basic dividing line between Epicureans and Stoics (I, 312). See also *Rhapsodie* when he discusses the concepts of happiness of Epicureanism and Stoicism (I, 402).

devotes much space and energy to their refutation. We can understand the structure of both works in terms of Mendelssohn's response to them. To some extent, the epistolary exchange between Theocles and Euphranor, the main characters, reflects the clash between these views.[9]

The first proposition is put forward in the first two letters by Euphranor, who sometimes reflects the new French empiricist philosophy. Euphranor warns his friend Theocles, who is Mendelssohn's spokesman, that it is dangerous to push one's reason too far in pursuing the good life, because reason can be a source of unhappiness. Happiness, Euphranor explains, comes from pleasure, which consists in irreducible and indefinable sensations and feelings. Whenever reason analyzes these sensations or feelings, it destroys their characteristic qualities (238). As soon as we think, we cease to feel; we are left with "a bunch of dry truths" rather than "sweet delight" (241). Hence Euphranor defends the "je ne sais quoi". If we were to analyze beauty into distinct representations, he argues, it would just cease to be beauty. Although Euphranor endorses Meier's definition of beauty—a "confused representation of perfection"—he decidedly emphasizes the adjective, the element of confusion in aesthetic experience (240). Euphranor does allow reason some role in the good life—it imposes moderation and helps us to choose the best pleasure—but he insists that it should keep a respectful distance. As he puts it: reason can take the husband to his bride; but then it has to step aside discreetly and leave him to his pleasure. Summing up his position, Euphranor declares: "Reason alone cannot make any person happy—not unless he were entirely rational. We should feel, enjoy, and be happy" (241).

Although Theocles admits that pleasure is, if only to some degree, irreducible and unanalyzable, he insists that reason can heighten and intensify aesthetic experience. The feeling of beauty, he writes, excludes not only completely distinct concepts, but also completely obscure ones (242). If we were to analyze it entirely into distinct concepts, we would have to think of each part successively, so that we could not grasp it in a single moment as a whole. If, however, it were only an obscure concept, we would see no manifold, no distinct parts, when difference and variety are as important to beauty as unity and harmony. All beauty consists in unity-in-variety, Theocles explains, where complete obscurity clouds variety just as complete distinctness destroys

[9] It would be misleading to characterize the epistolary exchange between Theocles and Euphranor as a clash between empiricism and rationalism. Euphranor is not a pure spokesman for the empiricist view. Although he alludes to the French philosophers in the first letter (238), he makes it plain he does not entirely endorse their views; and although he later admits that he has been influenced by Du Bos (304), he quickly admits his mistake. From the very beginning Euphranor adopts Meier's definition of beauty (240), which makes his aesthetic views closer to rationalism than empiricism.

unity. Thus far Theocles hardly seems to take issue with Euphranor, and both seem to settle on the definition of beauty as the confused representation of perfection. But Theocles emphasizes the intellectual side of aesthetic experience underplayed and even shunned by Euphranor. He argues that the more we analyze the distinct elements of the manifold, the greater our appreciation of the whole. Analysis does not destroy but heightens aesthetic awareness, because it gives us a distinct view of the parts, which only increases and intensifies our experience of the whole. Intuition should not be opposed to analysis, Theocles implies, but it should emerge from it. Through the intuition of the whole the parts lose some of their sharpness, but they leave traces of themselves that illuminate the whole and give a greater liveliness to our pleasure (246). Hence Theocles' advice strikes a different note from Euphranor's. We are told not only to "feel and enjoy" but to "select, feel, reflect, and enjoy" (*wähle, empfinde, überdenke und geniesse*) (246).

Theocles' admission that there should be some element of confusion in aesthetic experience, that the perception of the whole shrouds the distinctness of the parts, amounts to Mendelssohn's endorsement of the "je ne sais quoi". It was Mendelssohn's one concession to the irrationalist case in the *Briefe.* Of course, it is not that much of a concession when we consider that it had already been made by Leibniz. But it is still a significant admission all the same, because it recognizes that the powers of reason are limited when it comes to aesthetic experience. In this regard Mendelssohn sides with Meier and Baumgarten against Wolff and Gottsched. While he agrees with Wolff and Gottsched that aesthetic experience is increased through intellectual knowledge, he refuses to draw the conclusion they sometimes draw from this point: that aesthetic experience is entirely intellectual. That we are finite sensible creatures, having our own distinctive qualities, which deserve cultivation for their own sake, is a point that Mendelssohn would often acknowledge and stress.[10]

Regarding the second empiricist proposition—that pleasure is entirely physical and sensual—Mendelssohn was less willing to make concessions. Throughout the *Briefe* and *Rhapsodie* he defends Wolff's definition of pleasure as an intuition of perfection. This means that pleasure is not only a feeling or sensation—its purely physical aspect—but that it is also a form of cognition involving an implicit act of judgment. Whenever we take pleasure in something, Mendelssohn argues, we are aware of it as, and judge it to be, perfect. This means that feelings of pleasure are either true or false, and as such are subject to rational assessment.

[10] See, for example, *Rhapsodie*, I, 393.

Fundamental to this analysis of pleasure, and Mendelssohn's faith in reason in general, is his theory of the will, according to which the will is the desire for perfection or the good (260, 402). Whenever we will something, Mendelssohn holds, we must will it for a reason; for the will, like everything else, is subject to the principle of sufficient reason. The sufficient reason for the will is its belief that whatever it chooses is the best option; a will without the belief that it is choosing the best would simply defeat and destroy itself. The opposition between this view and the empiricist tradition could not be more fundamental or jarring. While that tradition holds that something is good or pleasant because we desire it, Mendelssohn is saying that we desire and take pleasure in a thing because we think it is good. We are rational beings for Mendelssohn because we desire, and take pleasure in, things that we think are good, and we change these desires and feelings according to whether our beliefs in their value are falsified or confirmed.

One of the basic shortcomings of the empiricist view of pleasure, Mendelssohn thinks, is that it ignores the existence of intellectual pleasures. It is a mistake to assume that all pleasure is sensible, he argues, because it is just a fact that some pleasures come solely from the exercise of reason and the acquisition of knowledge (254, 277). If living well consists in tranquility or peace of mind (*Gemütsruhe*), then the contemplative life has a strong claim to be the best life for a human being (254). It is necessary to distinguish, Mendelssohn thinks, between intellectual and aesthetic pleasure. While intellectual pleasure can be entirely independent of the senses, aesthetic pleasure does depend on the senses, for it consists in a confused perception of perfection where such confusion arises from the senses. All pleasure consists in the perception of perfection, to be sure, but this perception can be either entirely intellectual or partly sensible. We must further distinguish, then, between beauty and perfection. Perfection, the heavenly Venus, consists in harmony, unity-in-variety. Beauty, the earthly Venus, consists in the *sensate* perception of perfection, in how perfection appears to the senses (251). If the earthly Venus rests on our incapacity, or limitations, as finite sensual beings, the heavenly Venus comes from our positive intellectual powers alone.

In the eighth letter Euphranor puts forward some potent counterexamples against Theocles' intellectualist analysis of pleasure. Although he now admits that reason is not the spoiler of all pleasure, Euphranor still finds it hard to believe that the source of all pleasure lies in the perception of a perfection. This theory seems to be clearly false, Euphranor says, for purely physical pleasures. When we desire sex or drink, for example, we do not perceive some perfection in the object. Where, in these cases, he asks, is there any perception

of proportion, harmony or fitness? (267). We take pleasure in these things not because we think them perfect, but we think them perfect because we find them pleasant (267).

Theocles replies to these counterexamples by engaging in some physiological speculations. He maintains that even the most physical pleasures—the taste of a fine wine or the warmth of fire—arise from the subconscious perception of the proper functioning and harmonious interaction of the nerves (277). This means that even sensual pleasure is "a confused but lively representation of the perfection of the body" (278). Since all the events in organic nature are both cause and effect, pleasure is both the cause and effect of the well-functioning of the body (284–5). Theocles thinks that, for each of the senses, there is a specific kind of harmony of the nerves (281). Even smell and taste have their specific form of beauty, although we do not distinctly perceive them. What we find in the case of music—the pleasant but subconscious perception of an underlying structure—probably holds for each of the senses, Theocles surmises.

Now that we have seen Mendelssohn's response to the first two empiricist propositions, his attitude toward the third—that the highest good consists in pleasure alone—should be evident. Mendelssohn himself makes it perfectly explicit in some passages from the *Rhapsodie* where he takes to task "the false concepts for measuring happiness" of the new "purified Epicureanism" (404). Although Mendelssohn does not cite names, he mentions the author of *Essai de philosophie morale*, who was none other than Pierre Louis Maupertuis, the leader of the Academy of Sciences in Berlin. In this work Maupertuis had devised a calculus to measure precisely degrees of happiness and the highest good itself. He measured pleasure and pain in units of intensity and duration, and understood happiness to be the sum of pleasant units over painful ones. So if someone wanted to determine whether his life was worth living, he simply had to subtract the painful units from the pleasant ones. If the result were less than 0, and if there were no prospects for future improvement, suicide became an option, indeed an imperative.

Mendelssohn thinks that this theory is so superficial it is scarcely worth the refutation (401).[11] But he does point out in passing two of its more basic errors. First, it assumes that sensations are pure cases of pleasure or displeasure. Mendelssohn thinks that most of our sensations are mixed, their pleasant and

[11] In fact, Mendelssohn went to some pains in the *Briefe* to refute the application of Maupertuis' theory to suicide. He first mentions the theory in the ninth letter (273), and then criticizes it explicitly in letter 14 (292–3) and in remark (p), the longest remark of all (318–24). On the importance of Maupertuis' tract for the suicide question, see Altmann, *Mendelssohn*, pp. 62, 63–4.

unpleasant aspects inextricably intertwined (394–5).[12] Second, it supposes that every displeasure diminishes the sum of happiness. This ignores the fact that people are sometimes willing not only to suffer but to nurture painful emotions like indignation or melancholy (397).

Mendelssohn's general response to the empiricist theory of the highest good appears a little later in the *Rhapsodie*. Here he expressly mentions the theory that the highest good, the final end of all human actions, consists in pleasant sensations (404). The empiricists are right to think, he concedes, that every good action is connected with pleasure, and that pleasure is an important incentive for moral actions. The chief problem with their theory, however, is that it regards pleasure as primitive, failing to take the analysis of pleasure far enough. If they were to examine the nature of pleasure, Mendelssohn argues, they would find that it is a confused perception of a perfection. Pleasure cannot be basic, because there must be some reason why we desire pleasure in general, or why we prefer one pleasure rather than another. The will must have some reason for its choice, and this reason must be that it thinks this option is better than the others. The analysis of pleasure in the *Briefe* has shown, Mendelssohn claims, that the Epicureans have reversed the true order of priority: we desire pleasure because we think it is good; it is not that we desire the good because we think that it is pleasant. But this is decisive for one's view of the highest good. Since perfection is the basis of pleasure, and not the converse, perfection rather than pleasure should be the highest good (405).

Although Mendelssohn rejects the empiricist theory of the highest good, it is important to note that he does not endorse the opposing Stoic theory. Some of Mendelssohn's remarks might lead one to make such an assumption, since he writes that a more reflective account of the highest good should lead to the Stoic view that it consists in conformity with nature (404). But Mendelssohn adopts nothing of the ancient Stoic posture toward pleasure, which advises us to spit on it, and which reassures us that we can be happy even under torture. His own view of the highest good is neither Stoic nor Epicurean, but attempts to do justice to both sides of this ancient dispute. Mendelssohn endorses the Wolffian formula of the highest good: "unhindered progress toward the greatest perfection".[13] Such a theory means that pleasure

[12] The importance of mixed sensations was one of the main shifts between the first edition of the *Briefe* and the *Rhapsodie*. In the first edition he claimed that sympathy was a unique sensation because it was a mixture of pleasure and displeasure (I, 110). From his reading of Burke he came to recognize their omnipresence of mixed sensations in aesthetic experience. See *Rhapsodie*, I, 400. The second edition of the *Briefe* therefore deletes the passage giving special status to sympathy.

[13] See Wolff, *Vernünftige Gedancken von der Menschen Thun und Lassen, zu Beförderung ihrer Glückseligkeit*, in Wolff, *Gesammelte Werke*, ed. Hans Werner Arndt, I/4, 32; §44. Cf. *Philosophia practica universalis*,

has a necessary place within the highest good, since, according to its general theory of pleasure, whenever we perceive a perfection we take pleasure in a thing.[14] Like Wolff, Mendelssohn thinks that pleasure, while it is not the ultimate reason for our actions, is still an important motivation or incentive for virtue and self-perfection.

3. The Grin of Silenus

Often in the 1750s Mendelssohn would ponder the nature of tragedy. He began to discuss the issue in the *Briefe*; and from August 1756 to March 1757 he engaged in a lively and intense correspondence with Nicolai and Lessing about it. After their correspondence he continued to think intermittently about tragedy for several years, offering a new theory in his *Rhapsodie* (1761). After and during his correspondence with Nicolai and Lessing, Mendelssohn's thinking about tragedy was turbulent, undergoing constant revisions and reversals.

Why was tragedy so important for Mendelssohn? First of all, he had to confront the classical problem of tragic pleasure: that we take pleasure in contemplating terrible events that, were they to happen to us, would terrify, depress, or anger us. This phenomenon is not only a mystery in itself, but it was also of special significance for Mendelssohn, because it seems to refute utterly the Wolffian theory of pleasure that he went to such pains to defend in the *Briefe*. According to that theory, aesthetic pleasure derives from the sensate perception of a perfection; but tragedy is the very opposite of perfection; it is indeed an evil, because tragedy happens whenever a virtuous person suffers undeserved misfortune. Why, then, do we take pleasure in it? The Wolffian theory has no ready answer to this question.

Behind the conundrum of tragic pleasure there lurked an even greater danger: irrationalism. Since perfection is the form or structure of reason, the pleasure that we take in the imperfection of tragedy seems to show that we are not entirely rational beings. Indeed, it suggests that we enjoy things just because they are disorderly, destructive, frenzied, and even mad. The aesthetics of perfection pays all its homage to Apollo; but does not Dionysus too demand his honors? Somehow, Mendelssohn would have to reinterpret tragic pleasure in a manner consistent with his Apollonian commitments.

§374; II/10, 293: "Beatitudo philosophica seu summum bonum hominis est non impeditus progressus ad majores continuo perfectiones."

[14] See Wolff, *Philosophia practica universalis*, §393; II/10, 305: "Summum hominis bonum cum vera voluptate constanter conjungitur."

Last but not least, tragedy poses the classical problem of evil. The mere fact of tragedy—that good people sometimes suffer misfortune—troubled Mendelssohn greatly all his life. This fact seemed to belie his religious faith in providence, to refute his Leibnizian–Wolffian doctrine that this is the best of all possible worlds. If God is omniscient and omnipotent, and if he chooses the best among all possible worlds, why is there tragedy? Assuming that tragedy is a brute fact gives rise to a completely opposed worldview to Leibnizian–Wolffian optimism: pessimism, or what Nietzsche would later call "the tragic worldview of the Greeks". The essence of that worldview is best epitomized by Silenus, a companion of Dionysius, who declared with a mad grin: "Best of all it is not to be born, not to be, to be nothing."[15] That Mendelssohn was disturbed about such a worldview, even if he never gave it a name, there cannot be any doubt. For this was the reason for his early preoccupation with suicide. Throughout his lengthy discussion of suicide in the *Briefe* we can see Mendelssohn struggling with the question of the value of existence itself. Silenus' dark saying, it is fair to say, posed a problem for Mendelssohn no less than Nietzsche.

How did Mendelssohn deal with such difficult issues? We cannot explain here his response to all these issues. We have no space to consider his treatment of the problem of suicide, still less to treat his defense of the optimistic worldview in *Morgenstunden* and *Die Sache Gottes*. Both these topics would demand a long excursion into the treacherous fields of metaphysics. Since our focus is primarily Mendelssohn's aesthetics, we must limit ourselves to his account of tragic pleasure. Suffice it to take note here how his discussion of tragic pleasure is embedded in these broader metaphysical issues.

Mendelssohn first tackled the problem of tragic pleasure in the 1755 edition of the *Briefe*. In the eighth letter Euphranor reminds Palemon of the pleasure he once found in the painting of a ship about to sink in a storm. Although all the people on board are about to perish—hardly a perfection—Palemon enjoyed the painting and even called it beautiful (74). The source of his pleasure was not only the skill of the painter in imitating nature, Euphranor argues, because he would have enjoyed the painting less if the skill were the same but the subject not so tragic. Something analogous happens when we see a tragedy on stage, Euphranor adds, because even though it makes us weep, we still take pleasure in such sadness.

To deal with these difficulties, Palemon stresses the fundamental role of pity (*Mitleid*) in tragic pleasure. Pity, he claims, is the only unpleasant sensation

[15] Nietzsche, *Die Geburt der Tragödie*, *Sämtliche Werke: Kritische Studienausgabe*, ed. Giorgo Colli and Mazzino Montinari, 15 vols. (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1980), I, 35.

that still pleases us (110). It essentially consists in love for someone who suffers misfortune. The love is the source of the pleasure in tragedy; and it is based on the person's perfections, which shine all the more brightly when the misfortune is undeserved. The fact that the misfortune threatens the life or well-being of the person we love makes him or her even more dear to us. Since we fear we might lose what we love, our pleasure becomes piquant. This explains, Palemon assures us, the bitter-sweet nature of tragic pleasure. Some of our pleasures are such, he says, that a drop of bitterness in them makes them taste all the sweeter. Whether we take pleasure in pity depends, Palemon admits, on whether the tragic events are real or fictional. If they are real, we might become so fearful or distressed that we cannot feel pleasure at all; if, however, they are fictional, we feel pleasure because we suffer no such fear or distress (111).

Since it seemed to preserve the link between pleasure and perfection, this theory had much strategic value for Mendelssohn. Tragic pleasure, it seemed, was a rational pleasure after all, based on the love for an unfortunate person's virtues. Nevertheless, Mendelssohn did not hold this theory for long. The first edition of the *Briefe* appeared in the summer of 1755; but by November 1756 Mendelssohn wrote Lessing with a completely new theory of tragedy. In stressing the importance of pity in tragic pleasure, Mendelssohn was content to follow Lessing, who had made pity the characteristic emotion of tragedy. But in his November 1756 letter Mendelssohn argues against Lessing that admiration rather than pity is the characteristic emotion of tragedy. The essence of this new theory is that pleasure in tragedy derives from admiration for the moral qualities of the hero. The hero's struggle against misfortune reveals his moral virtues, which raise him above all the forces of the physical world. Such a sight moves us, and it is the source of our pleasure in tragedy. It is a pleasant drama for the gods, Mendelssohn writes paraphrasing Seneca, to see the virtuous struggle with their fate, who are ready to sacrifice everything but their virtue.[16] The fundamental motto of tragedy now becomes "*vir fortis cum mala fortuna compositus*". Lessing bluntly rejected this new theory; but it was not without its admirers, not the least of them the young Friedrich Schiller.[17]

[16] See Mendelssohn, 'Ueber das Erhabene und Naive', *Jubiläumsausgabe*, I, 196. The citation is from Seneca *De providentia* II. 8. Mendelssohn had already formulated this view in his January 1757 letter to Lessing, *Lessing, Werke und Briefe*, 11/1, 161.

[17] See Schiller's 'Ueber den Grund des Vergnügens an tragischen Gegenständen', in *Schillers Werke, Nationalausgabe*, ed. Benno von Wiese et al., XX (Weimar: Böhlausnachfolger, 1962), pp.133–47. On Schiller's relation to Mendelssohn, see my *Schiller as Philosopher* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 253–7.

Why, though, did Mendelssohn reject Lessing's theory? Why did he now make admiration rather than pity the leading emotion of tragedy? There are few clues from Mendelssohn's writings or correspondence during this period. When Lessing asked him if magnanimity could arouse tears without pity Mendelssohn replied, in January 1756, that he doubted if this could be so.[18] He still seemed ready to acknowledge, then, the indispensable role of pity in tragedy. During the summer of 1756 Mendelssohn often met Nicolai, with whom he discussed all manner of philosophical issues, especially problems in aesthetics.[19] Not accidently, it was during this time that Nicolai worked on his own theory of tragedy, which he eventually published in 1757 as his *Abhandlung vom Trauerspiele*. It is noteworthy that in this work Nicolai gave a much greater role to admiration in tragedy than Lessing. He argued that the main purpose of tragedy is to arouse emotion, and that it could do so by provoking either admiration or fear and pity.[20] It is unclear, however, whether Nicolai's emphasis on admiration is the cause or effect of Mendelssohn's own thinking. It is very plausible that Mendelssohn influenced Nicolai, who happily acknowledged to Lessing that he owed many debts to Mendelssohn.[21] Apart from these few leads, the trail of evidence grows cold and we are left in the land of conjecture and hypothesis.

Whatever the external influences, Mendelssohn had sound philosophical reasons for preferring the new theory of admiration over the older theory of pity. The new theory offered a better strategy for defending the Wolffian account of pleasure. For there is a closer connection between admiration and perfection than between pity and perfection. In the *Briefe* Mendelssohn had argued that the pleasure in pity came from love, which is based on the perfections of the person who suffers misfortune. But this is not necessarily the case: it is possible to take pity on an imperfect or even evil character when they suffer greatly. While it is possible to take pity on such a character, it is not possible to admire him. Admiration requires perfection for its object whereas pity does not. Hence in his November 23 letter to Lessing, Mendelssohn begins the exposition of his theory by stressing the close connection between admiration and perfection.

When we perceive some good qualities in a person that surpass our opinion of him or of all human nature, we have a pleasant feeling that we call admiration. Since

[18] See Mendelssohn to Lessing, January 21, 1756, *Lessing, Werke und Briefe*, 11/1, 89.
[19] See Nicolai to Lessing, August 31, 1756, *Lessing, Werke und Briefe*, 11/1, 104.
[20] See Nicolai, *Abhandlung vom Trauerspiele*, in *Bibliothek der schönen Wissenschaften und der freyen Künste* 1 (1757), 38.
[21] See Nicolai to Lessing, August 31, 1756, *Lessing, Werke und Briefe*, 11/1, 104.

all admiration has good qualities for its basis, this feeling must in and for itself, and without respect to any pity . . . bring about a feeling of pleasure in the mind of the spectator.[22]

Now tragic pleasure, it seemed, has a firmer anchor in perfection.

Another attraction of the theory of admiration is that it gave tragedy a greater role in the promotion of morals. In the *Briefe* Mendelssohn did not see this as an attraction at all, and at one point even distinguished between the morality of the stage and that of real life. The poet had a right to portray evil characters on stage, because the purpose of theater is to arouse emotions, whatever they might be (94). In the last months of 1755, however, Mendelssohn had become preoccupied with Rousseau's critique of the arts and sciences, which had put him on the defensive regarding the moral value of all the arts. Although Mendelssohn still did not think that improving morals should be the chief intention of the poet,[23] Rousseau had convinced him that the arts are not ends in themselves; their worth now had to be assessed by whether they helped to promote human perfection.[24] Here again admiration seemed to suit this new role well, because it provides a moral example for the spectator. Mendelssohn at first held that such admiration has a positive moral effect on the spectator, because it leads to the desire to imitate the admired qualities of the hero.[25] Lessing soon convinced him, however, that it is not quite so simple: we might admire Addison's Cato but not attempt to imitate him.[26] Still, Mendelssohn did not flinch from his basic position that admiration gives a sufficient moral justification of tragedy.

Throughout all the changes in Mendelssohn's thinking about tragedy, there remains one constant theme: his allegiance to the Wolffian theory of pleasure. Mendelssohn always wanted to maintain the connection between pleasure and perfection, whether this was through a theory of pity or a theory of admiration. If the explanation above is correct, the shift from a theory of pity to a theory of admiration was basically motivated by Mendelssohn's desire to preserve the connection of pleasure with perfection, and so of beauty with morality. This demonstrates Mendelssohn's abiding Apollonian allegiance, his commitment to the presence of reason within tragic pleasure.

[22] See Mendelssohn to Lessing, November 23, 1756, *Lessing, Werke und Briefe*, 11/1, 125.

[23] See Mendelssohn to Lessing, January 1757, *Lessing, Werke und Briefe*, 11/1, 162.

[24] This is evident from two early unpublished manuscripts: *Briefe über Kunst*, *Jubilaumsausgabe*, II, 166, and 'Verwandschaft des Schönen und Guten', *Jub.* II, 179–85.

[25] Mendelssohn to Lessing, November 23, 1756, *Lessing, Werke und Briefe*, 11/1, 125.

[26] Lessing to Mendelssohn, November 28, 1756, *Lessing, Werke und Briefe*, 11/1, 130. Cf. Mendelssohn to Lessing, first half of December 1756, ibid. 11/1, 139.

4. Second Thoughts

After its first publication in 1755, Mendelssohn continued to think about the issues discussed in his *Briefe über die Empfindungen*. There were new challenges to the classical rationalist position that he defended in this work. One of the greatest came from Edmund Burke's *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, whose first edition appeared in 1757, and which Mendelssohn reviewed in 1758 for *Die Bibliothek der schönen Wissenschaften und der freyen Künste*.[27] Burke had convinced him that there are more mixed emotions than pity, that the nature of mixed sensations is much more complicated than he had first assumed, and that one of the main sources of aesthetic pleasure came from the sublime, from objects that are terrifying or tragic.[28] Another challenge came from a remark of Lessing, who had written him February 2, 1757: "Are we not agreed, my friend, that all passions are either strong desires or strong aversions? Also that with every strong desire or aversion we are conscious of a greater degree of our reality, and that this consciousness cannot be other than pleasant? Hence all passions, even the most unpleasant, can still be pleasant as passions."[29] Hence the net effect of Burke's theory and Lessing's remark is that pleasure cannot be so simple a matter as simply perceiving perfection, that we sometimes take pleasure in imperfections, whether that is from the sublime or just venting our own spleen. Of course, Mendelssohn had dealt with phenomena like these in the *Briefe*; but he now realized that they were much more complicated and prevalent than his original analysis allowed. It was now necessary to re-examine his entire theory to take them into account.

The task of revising his theory took place in his *Rhapsodie, oder Zusätze zu den Briefen über die Empfindungen*, which first appeared in 1761 in the first edition of his *Philosophische Schriften*. The *Rhapsodie* has been understood, however, not merely as a revision of Mendelssohn's original position in the *Briefe* but as its virtual recantation.[30] We are told that Mendelssohn no longer took the aesthetic of perfection as his starting point, and that he reinterpreted it to the

[27] 'Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful', *Jubiläumsausgabe*, IV, 216–36. Mendelssohn reviews the original English edition.

[28] Mendelssohn himself acknowledges the role of Burke in revising his theory in the *Rhapsodie* itself, *Jubiläumsausgabe*, I, 400–1.

[29] Lessing, *Werke und Briefe*, XI/1, 166. Mendelssohn acknowledges the importance of this remark in his 'Anmerkungen über das englische Buch: On the Sublime and Beautiful', *Jubiläumsausgabe*, III/1, 239.

[30] This is the account of Fritz Bamberger in his 'Einleitung' to the first volume of the *Jubiläümsausgabe*, I, xli–xliv.

point that it lost its original meaning. The traditional aesthetic of perfection is replaced by an emotivist theory—so we are told—so that Mendelssohn's revised aesthetics becomes an analogue to Burke's, and the prototype of Kant's, more subjectivist aesthetics. Whether this is true we can determine only by an examination of the text itself.

Without preface or introduction, the first sentence of the *Rhapsodie* goes to the heart of the problem. Mendelssohn says that in the *Briefe* he adopted as a nominal definition of pleasure a representation that we would rather have than not have, and as a nominal definition of displeasure a representation that we would rather not have than have (383). But he now thinks that there is "a small mistake" (*eine kleine Unrichtigkeit*) in this formulation, which has to be corrected to avoid erroneous inferences. According to the definition, we must prefer not to have every unpleasant representation; but when we examine ourselves, we find that we are averse not to having the representation but to the object of the representation. We disapprove of the evil that we see and we wish that it had never happened; yet once the evil has happened, we feel a strong temptation to see it. For example, we would like to see the Lisbon earthquake, although we deplore the catastrophe; and after the battle at "***",[31] we want to see the carnage, although we would have given up our own lives to prevent it. In these cases it is obvious that our disapproval, our aversion, is directed more toward the fact or thing than the representation itself. This makes it necessary to distinguish two aspects of the representation: its relation to the object or thing, of which it is an image or ectype; and its relation to the subject who is having it (384). We must be very careful, Mendelssohn insists, not to confuse the two.

Prima facie it might seem as if Mendelssohn has already abandoned his original theory, according to which pleasure consists in the perception of perfection. After all, he is now allowing that we take pleasure in things that are evil, things that the soul disapproves and would go to great pains to prevent or avoid. The discrepancy, it seems, could not be greater. Yet a closer look shows that Mendelssohn is really only revising his original theory, attempting to give it more explanatory power. Hence he explicitly reaffirms, at least twice, his general principle that the intuition of the perfections of a thing arouses pleasure, whereas the intuition of its imperfections arouses displeasure (385, 404–5). What he now sees, however, is that this very principle is applicable as much to the subject as to the object of the representation (385). We can

[31] Mendelssohn uses the triple asterisk, the common convention for the unmentionable in the eighteenth century. This is probably a reference to the battle of Kunersdorf in 1759, when Friedrich II was nearly defeated by Russia and Austria.

treat what happens in the subject as if it were an object too, so that it has its perfections or imperfections, and so that we take pleasure in the perfections within ourselves and displeasure in the imperfections within ourselves. This helps us to explain, Mendelssohn argues, the pleasures that we take in things of which we disapprove. In these cases, though we disapprove of the evil or imperfection in the object, we are really taking pleasure in the perfection within ourselves, such as the enlivening of our faculties. Although Mendelssohn now takes back his previous critique of Dubos, that is a concession he turns entirely to his advantage. He now admits that Dubos was right to say that the soul sometimes just wants to be aroused and stimulated, even if it is by some unpleasant representations (389); but this admission does not mean abandoning his original thesis; for he has now found a way to interpret Dubos' phenomenon according to the aesthetics of perfection. When we take pleasure in the arousal or stimulation of our faculties, Mendelssohn is saying, that involves a higher-order consciousness of their perfection, because the increase in their activity is an increase in their reality. This was the point of Lessing's original remark to Mendelssohn, which he has now incorporated into a broader theory of perfection, one that applied to the subject as well as the object.

On the basis of his distinction between the subject and object of representation Mendelssohn now thinks that his theory is able to explain all mixed representations. He says that he only half understood these representations in the *Briefe*, and that he is now in a much better position to give an account of them (400–1). When we see something imperfect, evil, or defective it arouses a mixed sensation, which is composed of displeasure in the object and pleasure in its representation (386). We disapprove of the object of the representation, and we would rather that it did not exist; yet the mere fact of seeing it stimulates our faculties, and we take pleasure in their operation. As a whole a representation is pleasant or unpleasant according to which aspect predominates, the relation to the subject or to the object. To have a mixed sensation it is crucial, Mendelssohn explains, that we can distinguish between the subject and object of the sensation. This is why there is no pleasure whatsoever in physical pain, because in these cases we do not distinguish between the object and the subject of the representation; we are, as it were, the very object and are completely averse to it (387).

Although this is a more complicated theory, it should be plain that it still retains the fundamental principle of the aesthetics of perfection: that all pleasure comes from the perception of perfection. The only difference between the original and revised theory is that, in the case of mixed sensations, the revised theory applies this principle to the subject as well as the object. Nowhere

does Mendelssohn want to claim, however, that the principle applies *only* to the subject, which would be the necessary condition of his developing a subjectivist theory like that of Burke or Kant. The problem with the subjectivist interpretation, then, is that it exaggerates the new side or aspect of Mendelssohn's theory, as if it were the whole theory; it is anachronistic and historicist, holding that Mendelssohn would be closer to the truth if he were to develop further the new subjectivist direction of his aesthetics. But this fails to take Mendelssohn's theory on his own terms. Mendelssohn was strongly committed to the aesthetics of perfection, not least because it gave reason a secure foothold in the sphere of aesthetics.

That Mendelssohn is far from endorsing—and indeed avidly resisting—a subjectivist theory becomes apparent from some of his unpublished comments on Burke's *Enquiry*.[32] Here he deplores Burke's ignorance of the principles of Wolffian psychology, which he thinks would have explained so many of the phenomena he observes; and he laments Burke's ignorance of Descartes' concept of perfection, the starting point for Wolff's theory. For these reasons, Burke's rollicking polemic against the theory of proportion and harmony in Part III of the *Enquiry* does not impress Mendelssohn at all.[33] All the examples from Section II, Part III, show only that proportion is not always the immediate cause of beauty; and all the examples from Section VII show only that either sensible perfection alone is beautiful or that the soul can make every perfection through reflection into something beautiful.

Apart from the issue of pleasure, there is another important respect in which Mendelssohn rethinks his views in the *Briefe*. This is with regard to the theory of the will, a theory of the first importance for his commitment to reason and the cause of enlightenment. Mendelssohn put forward his theory very briefly in the *Briefe* (260), but he did not elaborate or defend it. He realizes all too well, however, that the theory faces serious objections. He attempts to reply to these objections in the final section of the *Rhapsodie*.

As Mendelssohn explains his theory in the *Briefe*, if our whole lives were nothing more than willing and representing, then in every moment of our lives we would be preoccupied with the syllogism: (1) We all aspire toward what is good; (2) This object is good; and therefore (3) we ought to aspire to this object. People differ only regarding the minor premise, Mendelssohn assures us, because we all aspire toward the good but differ regarding only which

[32] See 'Anmerkungen über das englische Buch: On the Sublime and Beautiful', *Jubiläumsausgabe*, III/1, 235–53; 'Zu Lessings Anmerkungen über Burkes Enquiry', *Jubiläumsausgabe*, III/1, 254–8; and 'Über die Mischung der Schönheiten', *Jubiläumsausgabe*, III/1, 259–67.

[33] Cf. Mendelssohn's comment in his review that this part of the book is "am wenigstens gründlich", IV, 224, with those in 'Anmerkungen', III, 238, 244, 245.

objects we think to be good (260). In the *Rhapsodie* Mendelssohn realizes that this is much too simplistic, making it seem as if moral evil were only a problem of intellectual disagreement. He attempts to defend the first premise, which seems rather naive in the face of human evil. In other words, he is forced to ponder the classic conundrum of weakness of will, or why it seems that we know the good but still do evil.

Mendelssohn holds the major premise because he accepts the classical Platonic theory of the will, which had been recently reaffirmed by Wolff.[34] According to this theory, the will is essentially the desire to do good or the least evil. The will is therefore determined by the intellect or reason, or it is a function of our knowledge of good and evil, because we *must* will what we think to be good, or the least evil under the circumstances. It is then impossible for us to will the evil when we *know* that it is evil; if it is a fact that people sometimes will to do something evil, that is only because they have a mistaken view about the good. The attraction of this view for an *Aufklärer* like Wolff and Mendelssohn should be plain: it gives great power and authority to reason, which can direct and control the faculty of desire. We can therefore use reason to educate the people.

In the *Rhapsodie* Mendelssohn treats some of the fundamental problems facing this theory of the will. There are two closely connected problems. First, it seems that we often know the good but still desire to do evil. Second, it seems that even if we know the good and still desire to do it, we nevertheless do something evil. The theory has to close two gaps: one between knowing the good and desiring it, and another between desiring the good and acting on it. Mendelssohn illustrates both these problems by retelling the classical story from Xenophon about Araspes and Cyrus (409–12). Araspes is a devotee of the Platonic theory; but Cyrus puts his principles to the test by making him guard a beautiful enemy princess, Panthea. Sure enough, Araspes falls irresistibly in love with Panthea, and recants his original theory; he now advances the view that there are two warring principles in the soul, one willing good and the other evil. Mendelssohn wants to explain Araspes' experience—why he violated his principles in both will and deed—but to avoid his conclusions.

In his analysis of Araspes' experience Mendelssohn begins by making some significant concessions. While he thinks Araspes is wrong to think that there is a will for evil in the soul, he admits that "the reason within us does not always play the master", that "the practical will, decision, does not absolutely depend on the judgment of the understanding", and most significantly that "there must be something in the soul that is in certain cases stronger than

[34] Wolff, *Vernünfftige Gedancken von den Menschen Thun und Lassen*, §§6–7; I/4, 7–8.

reason" (412). To explain what this something is in the soul that sometimes prevents us from desiring or acting on the dictates of reason, Mendelssohn devises a theory to measure the force of the various incentives or motives (*Triebfedern*) acting on the soul (414–15).[35] According to his theory, there are three fundamental variables to measure the efficacy of an incentive. First, the degree of the perfection itself: the greater the perfection, the more pleasure it gives, and so the more force it exerts on the will. Second, the degree of our knowledge of the perfection: the more clear and certain our knowledge, the more force it has on the will. Third, the speed with which the incentive works upon the will: the more rapidly it works, the more it is likely to move the will. *Summa summarum*, the efficacy of an incentive is proportionate to the quantity of good, the quantity of our knowledge of it, and the speed with which the knowledge acts (415).

Having expounded his theory, Mendelssohn now is in a position to account for experiences like that of Araspes. This theory explains, he thinks, why the soul does not always act on its clear and distinct intellectual knowledge of the good (415). The second factor might be overwhelmed by the first and third. Although we might have a clear and distinct knowledge of some good (the second factor), it might be the case that we have an obscure or confused knowledge of a greater good (the first factor), or that the force of custom and habit works so swiftly that we do not take the time to think over all the options and their consequences (the third factor). In these cases we will not act on our clear and distinct knowledge of the good. Mendelssohn admits that the senses often work with much greater force and liveliness upon the soul than reason. Sense knowledge is more potent than intellectual because of the sheer quantity of its impressions, their constant presence before the mind, and the rapidity with which they represent the good to us (416). In a manner that would make Hume smile, he also concedes that the force of custom and habit is so great that it often makes us act contrary to reason. Through custom and practice we acquire skills where we are scarcely conscious anymore of what we are doing (417–18).

Although Mendelssohn has made some major concessions about the power of reason over the soul, it is important to see that he does not abandon his central principle: that the will is the desire for the good. He allows that reason is not always the most important power in determining the will into action; it can be overwhelmed by the forces of sense and custom. Still, the senses and custom do not give the will the power of desiring and acting on what is evil;

[35] Mendelssohn first sketched this theory in a short fragment he sent to Lessing and Nicolai in December 1756, 'Von der Herrschaft über die Neigungen', *Jubiläumsausgabe*, II, 147–56.

all that they do is make it possible for a person to continue to act on a *mistaken* or *confused* view about what is good. Though we are creatures of habit and the senses, we still follow them because, if only in a confused manner, we think them to be good. The possibility of radical evil in human nature, where the will chooses to do what is evil even when it knows it is evil, which would later be envisaged by Kant, Mendelssohn continues to resist stoutly.

Despite his concessions, it is important to understand that Mendelssohn never loses his faith in reason—his belief that it can direct the will and human actions—and that he never loses his optimism about human nature—his belief that people still desire to do good. The reason he keeps his faith in both is that he believes firmly in the power of education. Mendelssohn understands enlightenment essentially as a matter of education, which means that we have the power to create habits and to cultivate the senses so that they conform to the principles of reason.[36] So although it is a fact that people are now directed more by feeling and custom, education enables reason to take control of feeling and custom. Hence the rationality of human nature and conduct is ultimately for Mendelssohn not a naive theoretical or constitutive principle about how people actually behave, but a more sophisticated practical or regulative principle about how we should educate them.

It is precisely with regard to education, Mendelssohn writes at the close of the *Rhapsodie*, that the arts are so useful. They are powerful tools of education because they can stimulate and inspire people to act on the principles of reason when reasoning alone has too little influence over them. The great value of the arts (*schöne Wissenschaften*) is that through them we make the knowledge of reason practical. Rhetoric persuades people to act by appealing to their passions; and history supplies all kinds of examples of how the principles of reason are applied in everyday life (422). Poetry, painting, and sculpture illustrate moral principles by imaginary examples and give us a clearer and more lively demonstration of their truth (423). At the close of the *Rhapsodie* Mendelssohn clearly anticipates many of Schiller's later arguments for aesthetic education in his *Ästhetische Briefe*.

5. Taming the Sublime

It is just a fact of aesthetic experience that people take pleasure in objects that are immeasurable and unfathomable, that they find it pleasing to ponder

[36] See his 1784 essay 'Über die Frage: was heißt aufklären?', *Jubiläumsausgabe*, VI/1, 113–19.

the vast expanse of the desert, the immensity of the seas, the majesty of mountain ranges, the countless stars in the night sky. Contemplating such objects arouses feelings of awe, admiration, and wonder, which are described as "sublime".

The aesthetics of perfection has difficulty in explaining these facts, however. We take pleasure in the sublime because it is immeasurable and unfathomable; but perfection is by its very nature measurable and fathomable, the structure by which we grasp an object as a whole. The aesthetics of perfection, as Baumgarten first defined it and as Mendelssohn later endorsed it, claims that *all* aesthetic pleasure consists in the intuition of such a structure, in its confused sensible representation. Since it defines beauty in terms of such an intuition or sensible representation, its paradigm of aesthetic experience is limited to the beautiful. So much the worse, it seems, for the aesthetics of perfection. For no aesthetic theory can be valid that cannot explain such an indisputable and common experience as that of the sublime.

It is often said that Mendelssohn introduced the concept of the sublime into German aesthetics.[37] There is an important element of truth to this claim. Of course, the concept was anything but new when Mendelssohn first wrote about it. Its *locus classicus* was Longinus' *Peri Hypsous*, which was rediscovered in the Renaissance and widely read since then throughout Europe. That the sublime also challenges neo-classical principles was also well appreciated. In 1674 Boileau published an influential translation and commentary on Longinus, his *Réflexions sur Longin*, which attempts to explain the sublime on neo-classical principles.[38] The sublime started to become a topic in Germany, however, only with the poets' war in the 1740s. The concept was implicit in all the references to the mysterious, wonderful, and surprising during that dispute. Still, the concept was only in the background, never the subject of explicit attention; neither Gottsched nor the Swiss analyzed it in any detail. It was Mendelssohn who deliberately made an issue out of the sublime. In his August 4, 1757, letter to Lessing Mendelssohn complained about the lack of clarity surrounding the meaning of such a fundamental concept.[39] Longinus and Boileau were not helpful, he said, since their interest was chiefly in sublime style, and they simply assumed that the general concept of the sublime is well known. Like any good philosopher, Mendelssohn realized that what seems obvious and simple is really difficult and complicated.

[37] See, for example, Hettner, *Geschichte*, I, 488; and Hammermeister, *Aesthetic Tradition*, p. 17.

[38] On Boileau's treatment of Longinus, see Heinrich von Stein, *Die Entstehung der neueren Ästhetik* (Stuttgart: Cotta, 1886), pp. 3–9.

[39] Lessing, *Werke und Briefe*, XI, 224.

Mendelssohn began writing about the sublime during the summer of 1757, before the appearance of Burke's *Enquiry* in Germany, and long after the battles of the poet's war had subsided.[40] His reflections first appeared in the essay 'Betrachtungen über das Erhabene und das Naive in den schönen Wissenschaften', which was published in 1758 in the *Bibliothek der schönen Künste und Wissenschaften*. This article was drastically revised in its second edition, which appeared in 1761 in the *Philosophische Schriften*.

The stimulus for Mendelssohn's reflections on the sublime seem to have been his correspondence with Lessing and Nicolai on the nature of tragedy, which took place from August 1756 to March 1757, right around the time of the composition of the 'Betrachtungen'. In some of his letters to Lessing Mendelssohn had defended the importance of the feeling of admiration (*Bewunderung*) for tragedy, and he had refused to reduce tragic emotion down to pity alone, as Lessing wanted to do.[41] But his account of this feeling, and the need to examine it in more detail, inevitably raised more general questions about the nature of the sublime. Not surprisingly, the 'Betrachtungen' shows obvious traces of Mendelssohn's earlier discussion of tragedy. What Mendelssohn once held about tragedy—that its characteristic emotion is admiration—he now extends to the sublime in general; hence his central thesis in the 'Betrachtungen' is that the characteristic emotion of the sublime is admiration (I, 194).

The specific form the problem of the sublime had for Mendelssohn becomes clear when we focus on his earlier account of aesthetic pleasure. In the *Briefe* Mendelssohn had argued that the pleasure of beauty requires the awareness of both unity and multiplicity, which are the two basic components of perfection (I, 50–1). The awareness of unity means that we should be able to grasp the object as a whole. Even though we cannot perceive all its parts, even though we cannot explain why each of them is necessary, we still must have a clear, if confused, perception of its unity. Hence Mendelssohn cites approvingly Aristotle's dictum that all beauty has definite limits, and that it must reach its limits but never exceed them.[42] The problem with the sublime is that by its very nature it transcends the limits of beauty. The pleasure of the sublime seems to arise precisely from our *incapacity* to grasp the object as a whole; it stirs our admiration just because it is immeasurable, unfathomable, and infinite.

Why not split the difference? Why not admit two different forms of pleasure, one for the beautiful and another for the sublime? It would seem

[40] See Mendelssohn to Lessing, August 11, 1757, in *Lessing, Werke und Briefe*, XI, 234.
[41] See Mendelssohn to Lessing, first half of December, 1756, in *Lessing, Werke und Briefe*, XI, 137–40.
[42] *Metaphysics*, XIII, 3. 1087.

that if we make unity-in-multiplicity a necessary condition for the beautiful alone, the problem disappears entirely. Mendelssohn's deeper commitments, however, forbade him to take this easy solution. All sensible pleasure is for him the intuition of perfection, which consists in unity-in-multiplicity. He wants all sensible pleasures, of which the sublime is only a species, to be the confused perception of the forms of reason, the sensible analogues of the purely rational pleasures we would have if we were completely rational beings. This is partly a requirement of his psychology, which makes everything in the soul a manifestation of the power of representing or thinking; but, more significantly, it is also requirement of his rationalism, which expects all experience to conform, as far as possible, to the norms and forms of reason. If the sublime were a distinct *sui generis* pleasure, one deriving from transcending or violating these norms and forms, then a pervasive and profound form of human experience would be beyond the sphere of reason. What greater proof could there be of human irrationality and the limits of reason? And so Mendelssohn confronted anew in the late 1750s the issues Gottsched had encountered during his battle with the Swiss in the 1740s.

In face of this threat, Mendelssohn's response is to tame the sublime, to domesticate it as far as possible by defining it in terms of his aesthetics of perfection. Rather than being a distinctive kind of irrational pleasure, the sublime is made into an extraordinary rational pleasure, different from that of beauty only in degree. Hence Mendelssohn begins his 'Betrachtungen' with a definition of the sublime straight from the aesthetics of perfection: "Now every quality of a thing is called *sublime* when it is capable of arousing admiration (*Bewunderung*) through its extraordinary degree of perfection" (I, 193). The admiration aroused by the sublime, he further explains, is "a sudden intuitive knowledge of a perfection that we did not expect of the object under the circumstances and that surpasses everything that we could have thought to be perfect" (194). Mendelssohn then proceeds to distinguish two fundamental forms of the sublime: either the object itself possesses qualities that are admirable in itself, or the artistic presentation of the object possesses such qualities and not the object itself (194–5). It is necessary to make this distinction, he argues, because it is possible for the artist to write sublimely about something that is not intrinsically admirable, viz., Klopstock's sublime description of the death of an atheist (206–7).

There are three important points here. First, and most obviously, in defining the sublime in these terms Mendelssohn retains the concept of perfection. The sublime is not that which transcends perfection but an extraordinary degree of perfection, whether of the object itself or the description of it. Second,

Mendelssohn acknowledges that something within our experience goes beyond its limits; hence he writes that the sublime surpasses our normal expectations, or what we usually would have thought to be perfect. Nevertheless, he places theses limits entirely in our subjective apprehension of the object, while the object itself does conform to norms and forms of perfection—and indeed to an extraordinary degree—so that it is, at least in principle, comprehensible by reason. Third, in *both* forms of the sublime Mendelssohn thinks that the pleasure comes from the admiration of perfection, so that the cause and source of aesthetic pleasure remains perfection. In all these respects, then, Mendelssohn remains true to his earlier aesthetic formulated in the *Briefe*. The general upshot of the theory is that the distinction between the sublime and the beautiful is one not of kind but only of degree. Mendelssohn draws just this conclusion toward the end of the essay when he writes "all beauty in art presupposes the use of a certain power of the soul that, in a higher degree, arouses admiration, and so can be sublime" (210).

It is an ingenious theory, which does seem to save the aesthetics of perfection. But the question remains whether it really saves the phenomena. Mendelssohn still does not address the crucial fact that the pleasure of the sublime seems to come from *transcending* limits, from our *incapacity* to fathom the concept of the object. The earlier theory of pleasure requires that we have some clear, if confused, perception of the unity of the object, some intuition of its structure, from which all its properties flow of necessity.[43] But it seems there is no such perception or intuition of the sublime. Clearly, Mendelssohn had some more thinking to do.

6. Reckoning with Burke

But in just this regard Mendelssohn does not fail us. Always restless and ready to rethink issues, he returned to the topic of the sublime in 1758. The stimulus for his new reflections came from Burke, who had sharply challenged his rationalist principles. In his *Enquiry* Burke gives an empiricist account of the sublime that is completely at odds with Mendelssohn's in the 'Betrachtungen'. Burke sharply distinguishes the sublime from the beautiful; he completely dismisses the explanatory value of the concept of perfection; and he defines the sublime and the beautiful entirely by our emotional responses to them rather than by any property of the object itself. While Mendelssohn had carefully

[43] See *Briefe über den Empfindungen*, *Jubiläumsausgabe*, I, 50–1.

distinguished admiration (*Bewunderung*) from astonishment (*Verwunderung*), and insisted that only admiration is characteristic of the sublime,[44] Burke maintains that the distinctive emotion of the sublime is astonishment, which does not presuppose any perfection or virtue in the object. Astonishment he defines as "that state of the soul, in which all its emotions are suspended, with some degree of horror".[45] Burke is perfectly explicit that horror is entirely irrational, for horror is a form of fear, and "No passion so effectively robs the mind of its powers of acting and reasoning as fear."[46]

Such was the challenge of Burke to Mendelssohn that, in the late 1750s, he wrote not only an extensive review of the *Enquiry* but several commentaries and criticisms of it. While he greatly admired Burke's powers of observation, he thought less of his philosophical abilities, and least of all of his critique of perfection. Although Burke did not convince Mendelssohn to drop the theory of perfection, he did persuade him that the feeling of the sublime is much more complex than he first assumed. Under Burke's influence, he now came to believe that the sublime is a mixed emotion, containing elements of both pleasure and pain. In his review of Burke Mendelssohn was perplexed by Burke's comment that the sublime is a kind of "delightful horror". He then raised the question: "How can the terrible, the horrible, in the form of the sublime delight us?"[47] How indeed! Such was the question that would now preoccupy Mendelssohn.

Mendelssohn's first account of the sublime after his encounter with Burke appears in some passages from his *Rhapsodie* (I, 398–9). The immeasurable, which we contemplate as a whole but cannot fathom, he declares, arouses a mixed sensation of pleasure and displeasure (I, 398). When we first view the immeasurable, it arouses a kind of horror (*Schauern*); and if we continue to contemplate it, it gives rise to vertigo (*Schwindel*). The contemplation of the magnitude itself gives us pleasure, whereas the feeling of our limitation, of our inability to fathom it, gives rise to displeasure. The immeasurable might be an intensive or extensive magnitude, great either in force or in expanse; in either case the feelings of pleasure and displeasure are still the same. There is an important qualification to be made, Mendelssohn stresses, about what kind of immeasurable objects give rise to the pleasure of the sublime. Not anything immeasurable is sublime; there must be some kind of multiplicity or variety within the object itself, because the awareness of constant uniformity and homogeneity leads to disgust and makes us turn our attention away from the

[44] See Mendelssohn to Lessing, November 28, 1756, *Lessing, Werke und Briefe*, II/1, 129.
[45] Burke, *Enquiry*, Part Two, section I. [46] Ibid., Part Two, section II.
[47] 'E. Burke, Enquiry into the Origin of the Sublime and Beautiful', *Jubiläumsausgabe*, IV, 229.

object. This qualification is Mendelssohn's way of reinserting and reaffirming one essential constituent of the concept of perfection: variety or multiplicity.

The crucial question remains how Mendelssohn wants to explain the pleasure of the sublime. When he writes that we take pleasure in the sheer immeasurability of the object he seems to come close to abandoning his original theory of pleasure. This seems to clash sharply with his earlier statement that "the whole must not trespass definite limits of size. Our senses must not get lost in the great or the small. With too large objects the mind misses multiplicity, and with too great objects it does not have unity in multiplicity."[48] Now, finally, Mendelssohn seems to admit that the pleasure does come from going *beyond* these limits. This impression is strengthened from the second edition of the 'Betrachtungen'. Here Mendelssohn drops the language of perfection, which was so important for the first edition, and he stresses that the pleasure arises precisely from the *immeasurability* of the sublime. Hence he writes that the sublime has "something obnoxious to well-educated minds that are used to order and symmetry" because the senses "have difficulty in grasping their object and connecting it in one idea" (I, 456). When Mendelssohn describes the perception of the immeasurable in terms of an "agreeable horror" (*angenehmes Schauern*) we can hear the clear echoes of Burke's "delightful terror". So was Mendelssohn, under the influence of Burke, forsaking his aesthetics of perfection?[49]

Mendelssohn's concessions are entirely apparent. He remains loyal to the aesthetics of perfection to the very end; the sublime was no siren to tempt him away from it. When he writes in the *Rhapsodie* that we take pleasure in the immeasurable because of its infinite magnitude he still presupposes that the source of the pleasure is the extraordinary degree of perfection, not the absence of perfection whatsoever. We take pleasure in the immeasurable, he explains, because it appears to contain so much more reality, where reality is the same as perfection for him. Hence he reminds us, true to his original theory, that "the affirmative characteristics of a thing, whenever they are intuitively known, always arouse pleasure" (I, 399). Mendelssohn seems to think that we still have some confused concept of the whole, even though we cannot distinctly fathom everything contained under it (398). It is indeed noteworthy that in the second edition of the 'Hauptgrundsätze' Mendelssohn reaffirms his principle that the whole must be grasped in a single concept (I, 434), and

[48] 'Betrachtungen über die Quellen und die Verbindungen der schönen Künste und Wissenschaften', *Jubilaümsausgabe*, I, 172.

[49] This is the view of Bamberger, who thinks that Mendelssohn's later reflections on the sublime were one powerful factor in his abandonment of the aesthetics of perfection. See again his 'Einleitung' to Band I of the *Jubiläumsausgabe*, pp. xxxviii–xxxix.

that in the second edition of the 'Betrachtungen' he eventually reintroduces his concept of perfection, reaffirming his earlier view that the sublime is that which is immeasurable in the degree of its perfection (I, 458). Last but not least, Mendelssohn continued to insist that the sublime and beautiful differ only in degree and not in kind. As he wrote in a later review: "the borders between the sublime and beautiful get lost in one another, for the highest degree of beauty arouses admiration."[50] Firmly, then, Mendelssohn held the line against "encroaching enthusiasm".[51] The aesthetic version of enthusiasm was the belief in the distinctive irrational status of the sublime, which had to be resisted as much as the enthusiast's belief in a special intuition of the divine.

7. Encounter with Jean-Jacques

It was one of the chief articles of faith of the rationalist tradition from Leibniz to Baumgarten that the arts and sciences are indispensable to human progress. The more the arts and sciences advance, all the rationalists believed, the more we improve our lives and perfect ourselves. The cause of enlightenment assumed that the arts and sciences would educate the people, and that education would improve their taste, manners, and morals. The very interest in aesthetics in the rationalist tradition was inspired by this faith: the arts were so important because their cultivation seemed to increase morals, manners, and taste.

This faith was deeply shaken in the early 1750s by Jean Jacques Rousseau. In two infamous discourses—his *Discours sur les sciences et les arts* (1750) and his *Discours sur l'origine et les Fondemens de l'inégalité* (1755)—Rousseau defended the outrageous and seemingly paradoxical thesis that the arts and sciences had done more to corrupt than to improve morals. The challenge Rousseau threw down to the *philosophes* in France was quickly picked up by the *Aufklärer* in Germany. In the summer of 1755 Lessing and Mendelssohn often discussed Rousseau's provocative ideas. They were so fascinated by Rousseau that Lessing suggested, and Mendelssohn duly promised, a translation of the second discourse, along with some remarks about its central theses. Mendelssohn's translation and remarks appeared in 1756; the remarks took the form of a letter under the title *Sendschreiben an den Herrn Magister Lessing in Leipzig*.[52] The

[50] *Literaturbriefe* 147, February 26, 1761, *Jubilaumsausgabe*, V/1, 352.

[51] To use one of his vivid phrases. See his essay 'Soll man der einreißenden Schwärmerey durch Satyre oder durch äußerliche Verbindung entgegenarbeiten?', *Jubiläumsausgabe*, VI/1, 137–43.

[52] *Jubiläumsausgabe*, II, 81–109. Mendelssohn's translation of the second discourse is in *Jubiläumsausgabe*, VI/2, 61–202. Mendelssohn also wrote about Rousseau in *Der Chamäleon*,

Sendschreiben is a significant piece, one of the first and most subtle responses of the rationalist tradition to Rousseau's challenge.

Mendelssohn begins by confessing that he first read Rousseau with such profound indignation that it robbed him of the pleasure he took in his remarkable style. He simply could not accept Rousseau's thesis that mankind is better off in the state of nature than society, and that society and the state as such corrupt human beings. Such a thesis sabotaged almost everything Mendelssohn stood for: the value of enlightenment, education, and culture. He was puzzled about Rousseau's reasons for propounding such a thesis. What point could there be in telling us how miserable and perverse we are in society and the state if, as Rousseau insisted, there could be no going back to the state of nature? Rousseau seemed to have a perverse interest in shocking his readers and drawing attention to himself with his paradoxes, which he could not really or entirely mean. Mendelssohn knew all too well, however, that Rousseau could not always be taken at face-value, and that his tract works on many levels. Hence he admits that he lost his initial indignation when he cast his eyes on the dedication, where Rousseau expresses his admiration for the republic of Geneva. That dedication is a triumph of common sense over all misanthropic sophistry, Mendelssohn says. It shows clearly that Rousseau has not lost all feeling for the value of social and political life. For if Rousseau sees all his wishes fulfilled in the Genevan republic, he cannot mean to condemn society and the state as such. Mendelssohn also sees that one of Rousseau's intentions is to expose how *modern* societies and states are corrupting man. Behind Rousseau's gloomy pessimism about society and the state he could see a more positive doctrine about the need to reform society and state in contemporary Europe. With this tendency in Rousseau Mendelssohn was entirely sympathetic; hence he wrote Lessing, December 26, 1755:

> In very few places I cannot be at one with Rousseau; and nothing annoys me more than when I see our philosophical politics (*Staatskunst*) prove that everything as it is now for us must be according to reason. If only Rousseau had not denied all morality for civilized humanity (*gesitteten Menschen*)! To this I am very much committed.[53]

One of the chief reasons for Mendelssohn's adverse reaction to Rousseau's more pessimistic side is that it violated his faith in the value of life itself. Rousseau had admitted that there could be no returning to the state of nature,

Jubiläumsausgabe, II, 133–43. His treatment of Rousseau in this more popular work, however, is somewhat exaggerated, sensationalist, and stereotypical, portraying Rousseau as someone eager to abolish all the arts and sciences and all civil society. Mendelssohn was trying to provoke the reader's interest in Rousseau, not least in his own translation of the work.

[53] *Lessing, Werke und Briefe*, XI, 81.

and that social and political life is inevitable. But if mankind is better off in the state of nature, it would be better if we civilized human beings were not born at all. Unwittingly, Rousseau had vindicated Silenus! No wonder that Mendelssohn felt impelled to respond to him. He admits Rousseau's charge that civil society creates new evils and problems that never existed before in the state of nature. Civilized man shows physical infirmities and vicious inclinations that are never found in natural man (87). Although every development of our powers widens our existence, it also imposes limitations upon them, so that eventually new weaknesses and deficiencies arise. Does this mean, Mendelssohn asks, that we should not perfect and improve ourselves? His answer is blunt and firm: "*Keineswegs*!" Whenever we cultivate our powers, we improve and perfect ourselves, increasing the amount of good in the world, and so making our lives more worth living. Although our existence, and the creation of the world, gives rise to problems and evils that did not exist before, God must have created us for a reason, and that can only be because it is better that we exist than do not exist (87–8).

Of course, the most bitter of misanthropes would deny that human beings have the desire to perfect themselves, and he would maintain that they are more devoted to making their lives miserable for one another. Mendelssohn is aware of such extreme misanthropic positions—he refers to both Hobbes and Mandeville—but he recognizes that Rousseau does not share them. He seizes upon Rousseau's remark that one of the distinguishing characteristics of human beings is their faculty of self-perfection.[54] This admission is quickly turned against Rousseau (88). If human beings have the power of perfecting themselves, he argues, why limit that faculty to their powers in the state of nature? Why limit it to physical strength and endurance alone? Why deny it to our intellectual powers, which are after all more characteristic of our humanity?

Mendelssohn traces the source of all Rousseau's errors to his misreading of the natural law tradition. It was a fundamental principle of that tradition that natural law should be based upon the state of nature, the condition of human beings before they enter into their social and political obligations. Both Mendelssohn and Rousseau are within this tradition, and accept its fundamental principle. However, Mendelssohn thinks that Rousseau has misunderstood its purpose and meaning (92). In the second discourse Rousseau had famously argued that the chief fallacy of all previous natural law theories had been their attribution to natural man of what could only have been true of man within

[54] Rousseau, *Discours sur l'origine et les Fondemens de l'inégalité*, in *Œuvres complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1964), III, 143.

society.[55] Hence he had stripped away all moral characteristics, and even sociability itself—the inclination toward society—leaving nothing more in natural man than the desire for self-preservation and pity. Mendelssohn thinks that it is not necessary, and indeed profoundly misleading, to base the social contract upon what a person would be apart from all society whatsoever. The natural state of man is not necessarily the primitive or asocial state. Abstracting from the accidental and changeable features of human nature does not mean stripping human beings of all those distinctive qualities that they develop only in society, but bracketing or setting aside their specific obligations under existing customs and contracts. What is important for the social contract is not what a person would accept as a complete savage in the state of nature, but what a person would accept when all his distinctive human powers of insight and reasoning are developed.

The more interesting side of the *Sendschreiben* lies not in its polemics against Rousseau but in Mendelssohn's own account of human nature. In the course of complaining about Rousseau's views of human nature Mendelssohn tells Lessing that he has his own theory about why sociability is essential to humanity. He thinks that Rousseau's concept of human nature is much too asocial and individualistic, and that it fails to explain why human happiness is inseparable from social and political life. Rousseau does admit one natural passion that is at least partially social: pity. And Mendelssohn agrees with him against Hobbes that pity is a natural human inclination. Nevertheless, he also insists that pity is grounded in an even more fundamental aspect of the soul, its single most powerful drive. What is this fundamental drive? A true student of Diotima, Mendelssohn tells us that it is love. Like Diotima in the *Symposium*, Mendelssohn sees all desire as a form of love, and all love as a desire for something perfect or excellent.[56] Mendelssohn attempts to demonstrate Diotima's wisdom from some well-known Wolffian premises (86). All human desires have power over the soul, he explains, only if they represent the good or perfect; and since pleasure arises from attaining goodness or perfection, we are enticed toward the good by the prospect of pleasure. Hence all human beings, even if subconsciously, are driven toward the creation of perfection, whether in themselves or others. Pity is simply a manifestation of love, because it appears whenever we see someone of virtue (a perfection) suffer from misfortune (an imperfection). Now this capacity for love, Mendelssohn continues, is the main

[55] Ibid., III, 132.

[56] Plato, *Symposium* 205d. Mendelssohn does not explicitly refer to Diotima in the *Sendschreiben*. However, in remark [c] to the *Briefe* Mendelssohn refers to her parable about the origin of love and notes how it apt it is for his own theory of pleasure. See *Jubiläumsausgabe*, I, 311.

force behind social life. One person is drawn toward another because he sees perfection in that person, and because he sees the prospect for the growth of perfection in himself and the other. The basis of social life is therefore mutual love (87). And so Mendelssohn announces his general conclusion: "True love, considered in all its extent, is the motive, means and purpose of all virtue" (91).

If Mendelssohn's theory of human nature is speculative, it is also strategic, the strongest case anyone could make for the arts and the aesthetic aspect of human existence. Like Diotima, Mendelssohn thinks that the search for beauty is fundamental to all human aspiration. Since love is the desire for perfection, since perfection consists in harmony and order, and since harmony and order are the basis of beauty, love is naturally drawn toward beauty itself. Hence, to censure the arts, to forfeit beauty as a value in life, would be to frustrate the most fundamental of all human desires and passions: love itself. Following Wolff and Leibniz, Mendelssohn thinks that there is an aesthetic dimension to all pleasure, which consists in the intuition of a perfection. Whenever we take pleasure in a thing, then, we sense and affirm, if only subconsciously, its beauty. Thus we can no more banish the arts, and eradicate beauty from life, than we can forbid all pleasure itself.

But given that beauty is fundamental to human life, does it have a good effect on morals? Until Mendelssohn had an answer to that question his reply to Rousseau would remain incomplete. Sure enough, the question troubled him long after writing the *Sendschreiben*; he eventually turned to it in a short unpublished essay he probably wrote sometime in 1757, 'Verwandschaft des Schönen und Guten'.[57] Here Mendelssohn again poses Rousseau's question whether the arts and sciences are guilty of corrupting morals. Whether this is true as an historical fact, Mendelssohn does not think it is possible to give a definite answer. The causes for any change in morals are so complex, he argues, that it is impossible to determine any single cause; and cause and effect are so interconnected in social life that it is impossible to say whether the arts lead to luxury or luxury to the decline of the arts (181). The proper question to ask, Mendelssohn thinks, is what kind of effect the arts *could have* on morals; or, as he later formulates it: Does knowledge of beauty lead me away from the good? Is the cultivation of taste at the expense of morals? (182). Mendelssohn's general concern is to establish a connection between the beautiful and the good to show that the proper cultivation of taste at least *can* support morals. Since the essay seems to have been intended for a broad audience, he carefully explains the basics of the rationalist position. He begins with a definition of good taste: it is that sensation (*Empfindung*) by which we feel the beautiful,

[57] *Jubiläumsausgabe*, II, 179–85.

true, and good (182). This sensation reproduces on the level of feeling or common sense (*bon-sens*) what we could, at least in principle, demonstrate through reason, so that there is no distinction in kind between the knowledge of feeling and reason; feeling is simply a more confused and quick form of what we know distinctly and slowly through reason (183). Feelings are, therefore, ultimately analyzable into their elements, which are the distinct concepts we know through reason; they are the phenomena that relate to their rational grounds as colors to the angle of reflection of light rays (184). Mendelssohn briefly mentions Hutcheson's opposing view: that the knowledge of the senses, which is the basis of our knowledge of good and beauty, differs in kind from that of reason. This is significant since Hutcheson's views are closer to Rousseau's, which stressed the validity of feeling as an independent source of moral knowledge. Unfortunately, Mendelssohn does not discuss here his position regarding Hutcheson's theory, which would have taken him to the heart of his opposition to Rousseau. But we know that elsewhere he rejected the idea of moral sense because it postulates as primitive precisely what stands in need of further explanation.[58] His draft is still too crude to determine precisely how he wished to turn this general theory of sensation against Rousseau. But the general implications are plain enough. First, that taste, by giving us pleasure in the contemplation of perfection, draws us toward the good. That was the lesson of Diotima, which Mendelssohn heeds. Second, that the cultivation of reason, insofar as it reveals the basis of our moral feelings, does not undermine but supports moral life. On no account should one believe, as Rousseau did, that sentiment alone is a sufficient guide in life.

For all his animus against Rousseau, it would be a mistake to think that Mendelssohn learned nothing from him. There are some interesting remarks in Mendelssohn's *Briefe über Kunst*, another unpublished work most probably written in 1757,[59] which show how much he had taken to heart some of Rousseau's warnings about the dangers of the arts and sciences. Although Mendelssohn never concedes that the arts and sciences as such are damaging to morals and happiness, he admits that they are often misused, and that their misuse is the source of corruption and unhappiness. In the first of the *Briefe über Kunst* Mendelssohn reconsiders Rousseau's question whether the arts and sciences improve morals and promote happiness. He reaffirms his earlier position, arguing that the arts and sciences are crucial to human happiness and the perfection of our characteristic human powers. He warns, however,

[58] 'Über die Quellen und die Verbindungen der schönen Künste und Wissenschaften', *Jubiläumsausgabe*, I, 169.

[59] *Jubiläumsausgabe*, II, 163–74.

that the arts and sciences should be treated only as means to ends rather than ends in themselves. We must learn to integrate them into our lives and make them instruments of our pursuit of the highest good. If, however, we treat them as ends in themselves, devoting all of our time and energy to their cultivation, then we become stunted, one-sided, overspecialized, and repressed, mere fragments of the whole humanity we should become. Here Mendelssohn had appropriated one of Rousseau's main points without taking it to drastic paradoxical extremes.

8. The Claims of Genius

One of the most fashionable topics in literary circles in the late 1750s was genius. The concept fascinated Mendelssohn, who made it the subject of several *Literaturbriefe*.[60] When Mendelssohn first discussed the concept in *Literaturbrief* 92 (April 3, 1760), he noted that it was relatively new in Germany. The concept was a foreign import. Addison had written about the "great natural Genius's" in the *Spectator*; Shaftesbury had referred to genius on several occasions in *Advice to an Author*; and Dubos devoted several chapters to it in his 1719 *Reflexions critiques sur la poésie et la peinture*.[61] Since these authors were fashionable, it had become trendy to use the term. Although the word was now on everyone's lips, Mendelssohn regretted that philosophers had paid it scant attention. If Wolff had only known more about it, he would have investigated it in his *Psychologia*.[62] Though Baumgarten defines it in his *Metaphysica*, he treats it with his usual concision.[63] And Gottsched only scoffs at the whole concept, dismissing it as a nasty foreign import, beneath German dignity.[64] So Mendelssohn believed that in analyzing the concept he was treading relatively new ground. But he was not the first to do so; the occasion for his reflections was provided by two recent essays on genius, one by J. G. Sulzer and another by F. G. Resewitz.[65]

[60] *Literaturbriefe* 92–3, April 3 and 13, 1760, *Jubiläumsausgabe*, V/1, 166–73; and *Literaturbriefe* 208–10, January 7 and 14, 1762, *Jubiläumsausgabe*, V/1, 480–92.

[61] See Addison, *Spectator* no. 160, September 3, 1711; Shaftesbury, *Characteristicks*, I, 121–2, 162–3; and Du Bos, *Réflexions critiques sur la poësie et sur la peinture* (Paris: Pissot, 1770), II, 1–36.

[62] Wolff defined "Ingenium" as "Facilitatem observandi rerum similtudines", *Pyschologia empirica*, §476. This makes it almost identical with what he elsewhere calls wit (*Witz*), *Metaphysik*, §366.

[63] Baumgarten, *Metaphysica*, §649. Baumgarten uses Wolff's term "Ingenium" but uses it in a different sense and as the equivalent of "*höhere Geister oder Genies*".

[64] LB 210, January 14, 1762, V/1, 487.

[65] See J. G. Sulzer, 'Analyse du Génie', *Historie de l'Academie* 13 (1757), 392–404; and F. G. Resewitz, 'Versuch über das Genie', in *Sammlung vermischter Schriften zur Beförderung der schönen Wissenschaften und der freyen Künste*, II (1759), 131–79.

The concept of genius was important for Mendelssohn not least because it threatened anew the authority of reason. What troubled Mendelssohn so much was the claim that the inspiration of genius could give a kind of knowledge that transcended the powers of reason. The concept of genius, as it came down to Mendelssohn, was heavily laden with epistemological and metaphysical baggage. It was essentially the literary version of the old religious concept of inspiration and prophecy. The ancient poets were believed to speak with the voice of prophecy and to be inspired by spirits that spoke through them. They would gain their inspiration through wine and Bacchic rites, and in their frenzy and inebriation declaim their poems. Although their verses were dark and mysterious, people believed they held profound truths. Such a belief might seem obsolete in the age of Enlightenment; but it would soon be rehabilitated by the *Sturm und Drang* movement in the early 1760s. Once again in aesthetic matters, Mendelssohn demonstrated himself to be well ahead of the curve!

It is important to see that, for all his later opposition to the *Sturm und Drang*, Mendelssohn does not dispute the value or validity of the concept of genius. He thinks that it is perfectly legitimate and useful to aesthetics. On a general level and in a provisional way, he is happy to accept Dubos' definition: "One calls genius the aptitude a man has received from nature that makes him do well and easily certain things that others know how to do but poorly or only with a great deal of pain."[66] In this sense Mendelssohn has no doubts that there are geniuses in the sciences and the arts. It is just a fact, he thinks, that there are a few writers with special talents that most people lack. Whether this aptitude comes from nature or from education he does not speculate. Mendelssohn also does not dispute that a rare genius has the extraordinary power to intuit or feel the general truths of reason, and to utter profound moral and religious truths. This was indeed one of the gifts of the ancient prophets, whose insights Mendelssohn cherishes. Finally, Mendelssohn is even willing to allow genius to break the rules to express the deepest insights. Someone like Shakespeare so deeply moves us, he says, that we do not notice how much he violates every rule in Horace and Aristotle![67] If creating such effects requires breaking the rules, Mendelssohn is all for it. On this significant score, then, he is happy to side with the *Stürmer und Dränger* against Gottsched.

Where Mendelssohn draws the line, however, concerns claims for the irrational powers of genius. That the genius has insight into superrational truths, and that these insights stand above all criticism, he firmly denies. While the genius perhaps has insight into truths that many of us cannot see, these

[66] Du Bos, *Réflexions*, II, 7.

[67] LB 60, October 11, 1759, V/1, 89–90; and LB 236, June 3, 1762, V/1, 530.

truths are not superrational; they must be, at least in principle, formulable in discursive terms, i.e., into concepts, judgments and syllogisms. What the poetic genius sees in his fit of inspiration and passion are only *confused* intuitions of the truths of reason, which it is ultimately the task of the philosopher to criticize or demonstrate. This was, of course, standard Baumgartian doctrine. Now, however, Mendelssohn turns it into a weapon against the new claims for genius. It is interesting to see, for example, how Mendelssohn rejects Resewitz's thesis that there is a kind of intuitive knowledge independent of the senses that gives us distinct knowledge of things.[68] We humans, even if we are geniuses, are limited to a *sensate* intuition of things; intellectual intuition is the power and privilege of the divine alone. Significantly, Mendelssohn charges Resewitz with failing to appreciate how all human knowledge is fundamentally symbolic and discursive, which means we need language to make distinctions between things. What we see without the aid of language is only chaos and confusion. Although Mendelssohn is willing to concede that geniuses might have the power to feel the truths of reason, he is eager to insist that their knowledge does not stand above all criticism and argument. He makes his basic position firm and clear:

> We must see the worth of every form of knowledge, and we must attribute no more to the empyrean than it deserves. Without the help of general concepts it remains an unilluminating, limited insight, which might indeed show us something about the divine power and intellect from the effects of nature, but which cannot give us direct knowledge of the divine omnipotence and omniscience themselves.[69]

Mendelssohn's interest in containing the claims of genius, and his attempt to appropriate the concept for the cause of enlightenment, appears most clearly in his account of its psychology. Of all the powers of the soul necessary for genius, Mendelssohn gave the greatest importance to reason itself. He came to this conclusion thanks to the stimulus of Sulzer's essay. Sulzer had listed the faculties necessary for genius: wit, judgment, and reflection. By reflection or presence of mind (*Besonnenheit*, *présence d'esprit*) he meant that aptitude by which the genius, even in the height of passion and in the midst of inspiration, retains the power to focus on his goals and to deliberate about the best means to achieve them. Mendelssohn agreed entirely with Sulzer about the role of reflection; his only flaw is that he had not stressed it enough. Reflection does not mean simply the power of perfecting one's work, still less is it simply one aspect or effect of genius. Rather, Mendelssohn insisted, it is the very heart of genius itself. The genius must be master over his own inspiration, so that he is

[68] LB 209, January 7, 1762, V/1, 487–8. [69] Ibid., 491.

not overwhelmed by it but dominates and controls it, making it the instrument for his own ends. What is characteristic of genius is the power to form and order the chaos of impressions rushing in upon the soul, and to give them a definite unity and form. But that power, Mendelssohn believes, is the specific function of reason.

After writing passionately and spontaneously about genius, Mendelssohn cannot resist the irony of it all. Sulzer's idea of reflection had inspired him so much, he confesses, that he had forgotten to whom he was writing and what he was writing about! Apparently, the very idea of genius was inspiring, and even to those who made it into a species of reason.

9. First Clash with Hamann

Nowhere did the new concept of genius find a more stalwart champion than in J. G. Hamann, who had passionately defended it in his 1762 *Aesthetica in nuce*.[70] Hamann's aim was to revive the ancient belief in prophecy and inspiration, the belief that the poet is in possession of superrational insights into divine truths. He put forward the provocative thesis that no philosopher can discover or understand these insights, which stand above the criticism of reason. Hamann was a figure to reckon with, for he was giving voice to a new generation of writers, the emerging *Stürmer und Dränger*, who were appealing to genius to justify their rebellion against the rules. Given such a challenge to the claims of reason, Hamann was a threat that Mendelssohn could not afford to ignore. It is all the more interesting to see, therefore, that, around the same time he discussed genius, Mendelssohn went to great pains to review Hamann's latest writings. These reviews are of a piece with his examination of the concept of genius.[71]

As fate would have it, Mendelssohn undertook his first review of Hamann in June 1760, only months after his discussion of Sulzer and Resewitz. Glancing through the catalog from the Leipzig book fair, Mendelssohn's curiosity was struck by a book bearing the strange title *Sokratische Denkwürdigkeiten für die lange Weile des Publikums, zusammen getragen von einem Liebhaber der langen Weile. Mit einer doppelten Zuschrift an Niemand und an Zween*.[72] The little tract charmed and fascinated him. The style was something like Winckelmann's. There was

[70] J. G. Hamann, *Sämtliche Werke*, ed. J. Nadler, 6 vols. (Vienna: Herder, 1949–57), II, 195–217.

[71] See LB 113, January 7, 1762, V/1, 480–5; LB 254, September 9 and 16, 1762, Jub V/1, 558–66; and *Allgemeine deutsche Bibliothek*, 'Sammelrezension zu Hamann', Jub. V/2, 212–21.

[72] Hamann, *Sämtliche Werke*, II, 57–82.

the same density and obscurity, the same subtle wit, the same familiarity with the spirit of the ancients. In his review Mendelssohn praised the author's understanding of Socrates, especially his grasp of Socrates' ignorance, his analogical reasoning, and midwifery. Such praise was remarkable, for it was one of Hamann's aims to show the discrepancy between Socrates' reasoning and the methods of the Wolffian philosopher, who is so confident of the powers of demonstration. No one, however, had more emphatically affirmed Socrates' affinity with the methods of rationalism than Mendelssohn himself![73] Now, without a fight, Mendelssohn concedes Hamann's point. Socrates, it seemed, was now a lost cause for the *Aufklärung*. Still less had Mendelssohn appreciated the mysticism that Hamann read into Socrates' genius. Hamann saw the Socratic genius as a divine voice, a source of superrational truths. A very provocative claim, but, strangely, Mendelssohn does not grapple with that point in his first review. There is one striking passage, however, where he takes issue with Hamann. He thinks it is sophistry to say: "What one believes it is not necessary to prove, and a proposition can be irrefutably proven without for that reason being believed."[74] If it is not necessary to prove what we believe, Mendelssohn asks, how does the author pretend to convince us of his beliefs?

When he wrote his first review Mendelssohn had little idea of Hamann's broader programme and aims. He complained about Hamann's obscure style, but he had little idea that it was deliberately provocative, intentionally crafted to illustrate the higher mystical calling of genius. His ignorance was perfectly understandable, because, as fate would have it, he had met Hamann in Berlin in 1756, just before Hamann's remarkable journey to London and his mystical conversion.[75] When Mendelssohn met him, Hamann was still a footsoldier of the *Aufklärung*, writing articles on political economy for a moral weekly. Not for long, however, would Mendelssohn remain in the dark. In writing his next review of Hamann in 1762, he realized Hamann had become a newly born creature, and that something profound was at stake. He openly admitted that in his earlier review he had not fully fathomed Hamann's intentions in the *Sokratische Denkwürdigkeiten*. He thought that the obscurity and mystery of Hamann's style was more to amuse than to instruct. Now, however, after reading more of his writings, he could see that obscurity, mystery, and allusion were the very essence of Hamann's style and character, and that they were part of a general indictment of the Enlightenment. Now that Mendelssohn was disabused it was time to give his verdict; and it could not be more damning.

[73] See LB 11, January 25, 1759, I/1, 10.
[74] Hamann, *Sokratische Denkwürdigkeiten*, in *Sämtliche Werke*, II, 73.
[75] Altmann, *Mendelssohn*, pp. 197–8.

Hamann, he wrote, could be one of our very best writers; but he has been so seduced by the desire to be original—in other words, to be a genius—that he has become one of the worst. The two greatest virtues of a prose writer, Mendelssohn declared, are clarity and concision. Without directly saying so, he implied that Hamann's style is an illustration of the opposing vices: obscurity and prolixity. If one is obscure, one frustrates the reader; and if one is prolix, one bores him. Mendelssohn claimed that Hamann's style more than flirted with these dangers. With all its sibylline utterances and esoteric allusions it tried and frustrated the reader. True, there were a few insights here and there; but getting a glimpse of them was too much trouble. It was like an arduous journey over the Alps only to see a brief firework display.

It is tempting to dismiss Mendelssohn's demand for clarity and concision as question-begging, as a complete misunderstanding of the purpose of Hamann's style. It seems as if Mendelssohn thinks Hamann should explain things in clear and distinct terms, when it is precisely Hamann's aim to allude to those things that are inexplicable and indemonstrable. The purpose of his obscure style is to make us aware of what is obscure, to point to or suggest what ultimately can be revealed only through intuition or feeling. Here, it seems, in Mendelssohn's reviews of Hamann, *Aufklärung* and *Sturm und Drang* clash head-on, and there cannot be any easy resolution of the debate between them. Perhaps! But let us leave Mendelssohn with the last word. In his last review, Mendelssohn provides the advocates of genius, who so love metaphors, with one telling metaphor of his own. He asks them: Is not a book that is deliberately obscure, that costs so much trouble to penetrate, and that leaves us with so little in the end, not like a sedan chair without a bottom? Rather than carrying us somewhere new and interesting, the author leaves us pretty much where we were in the first place. In that case, is it not better just to walk on our own?[76]

10. Abelard and Fulbert's Brief Spat

After his first intense encounter with Rousseau in 1755, Mendelssohn could not resist the opportunity to discuss him again. When *Julie, ou la nouvelle Héloïse* appeared in 1761, he made an exception to the longstanding policy of the *Literaturbriefe* not to discuss foreign literature and wrote his longest review of any work.[77] Though he had often disagreed with Rousseau, he always found

[76] Jub V/2, 220. [77] LB 166–71, *Jubiläumsausgabe*, I, 366–89.

his work provocative. So Mendelssohn expected another exciting encounter with France's premiere philosopher.

This time, however, he was bitterly disappointed. Mendelssohn found it almost impossible to force himself to read all six books of Rousseau's huge novel. It turned out that Jean-Jacques was a much better philosopher than a novelist. The only good chapters of the book were those that discussed general philosophical issues; but the rest was, to put it bluntly, a bore. Rousseau had no gift for fiction, little power of invention or imagination. His plot was contrived and artificial. Rather than writing the material around the story, he wrote the story around the material, most of which seemed to have been written independently and earlier (383). Rousseau's characters were also anemic stereotypes, colorless posts upon which to hang philosophical reflections. Because they were so philosophical and prone to analyzing their passions, they were scarcely credible. While the heroine is supposed to be dying of fever, she still engages in such long and sane philosophical reflections that it is hard to believe that she is sick at all.

The worst aspect of the novel for Mendelssohn was Rousseau's language of passion (*Affektensprache*). Like many modern readers, he found Rousseau's language self-indulgent, contrived, and pretentious. Rousseau writes about the passions, he claimed, like someone who has never felt them himself. Julie and St. Preux, the main characters of the novel, describe their feelings in very general and almost clinical terms, as if they were philosophers rather than lovers. As if to make up for the lack of immediacy and naturalness, Rousseau uses constant hyperboles and exclamations, which makes everything seem even more forced and unbelievable. Their professions of passion were so long-winded that one tired of reading them. "I believe", Mendelssohn confessed, "that there is nothing more unbearable than when the pathetic becomes the loquacious" (380). In his apologetic second preface to the novel, Rousseau attempted to justify his characters' long disquisitions by claiming that the passions speak in abundance and reveal themselves in a chaotic and repetitious torrent.[78] Mendelssohn begged to differ. Real tenderness, he claimed, is "too shy to boast about itself with words". Rather than manifesting themselves chaotically, the passions still have a kind of order all their own, not the scholastic order of concepts, to be sure, but still an intelligible structure that they subconsciously discern. "The disorder must be only apparent", Mendelssohn insisted, so that "in this apparent disorder there should be a higher order, the order that sentiments themselves perceive." Rousseau's language of the

[78] See *La Nouvelle Heloïse*: "und lettre d'un Amant vraiment passioné, sera lâche, diffuse, toute en longuers, en désordre, en répétitions" (*Œuvres complètes*, II, 15).

passions was so affected, long-winded, and abstract that Mendelssohn doubted whether it could achieve its ultimate end: moving the reader. For his own part, he confessed that it left his heart "*eiskalt*" (373).

Shortly after Mendelssohn's review appeared, Hamann, another admirer of Rousseau, also read *Julie.* In spite of Mendelssohn's review, and indeed probably because of it, his reaction was just the opposite. After reading the novel in August 1761, Hamann wrote to his friend J. G. Lindner that he read this "philosopher in a hoopskirt" (*Philosophen im Reifrock*) "with patience and satisfaction".[79] Acquaintance with this author was essential, he believed, for anyone who wanted to see the life of the senses and passions. Nothing pleased him more than the "enthusiasm of the senses", the "subtlety of the passions", that he found in Rousseau's novel. Of course, Rousseau's masterpiece had its mistakes; but the real question is how he made them and whether they were appropriate. Every good author should know his strengths and weaknesses and how to put them in their right place; and Rousseau was one of those fortunate few who could declare: since I am weak I am also strong. Still smarting from Mendelssohn's review of the *Sokratische Denkwürdigkeiten*, Hamann could not resist the opportunity to take issue with Mendelssohn's review of Rousseau's novel. In early September there duly appeared in the *Literaturbriefe* a remarkable counterreview: *Abälardus Virbius an den Verfasser der fünf Briefe die neue Heloise betreffend*.[80]

Though allusive and obscure, Hamann's little tract succeeds in raising fundamental questions about the powers of reason and literary criticism. There could not be a more provocative challenge to Mendelssohn's basic presuppositions. Hamann now assails Mendelssohn as a protagonist of the *Aufklärung* just as he had once flayed Kant in the *Sokratische Denkwürdigkeiten*. The basic theme is the same: the fundamental facts of life have to be lived, and they cannot be described, demonstrated, or explained; they are accessible to the senses and feeling but are utterly incomprehensible to reason alone. In the *Sokratische Denkwürdigkeiten* Hamann made this point with regard to death, an experience so profound that it reduced philosophers like Voltaire to silence. Now he extends his theme to love itself. Love, like death, also turns a philosopher into an idiot. Philosophers cannot understand love, and they should not presume to judge it, unless they feel it in their hearts. St. Preux, Rousseau's

[79] Hamann to J. G. Lindner, August 21, 1761, in Johann Georg Hamann, *Briefwechsel*, ed. Walther Ziesemer and Arthur Henkel, 6 vols. (Wiesbaden: Insel, 1956), II, 104–6.

[80] See *Jübiläumsausgabe*, V/1, 441–8. The full original title was *Abaelardi Virbii Chimärische Einfälle über den zehnten Theil der Briefe die Neueste Litteratur betreffend* (Köngisberg: Kanter, 1761). It was republished as part six of *Kreuzzüge des Philologen* (Königsberg: Kanter, 1762). See Hamann, *Sämtliche Werke*, II, 157–65.

hero, should not be ashamed of making declamations and hyperboles about what philosophers cannot begin to describe. Rousseau's language appears affected and artificial, Hamann implies, only because Mendelssohn imposes abstract and artificial standards upon it. He wants order, concision, and restraint where there can be only disorder, abundance, and spontaneity. Mendelssohn judges the novel (*der Roman*) as if it should be a drama. But is there not a big difference between the dramatic and the romantic? The standards of probability or verisimilitude that we use for drama should not be applied to the novel, which describes the experience of love, an experience that is anything but everyday and normal. Sometimes, Hamann declares, we should judge a novel according to that dictum the ancients applied to certain legends: *incredible sed verum!* If Mendelssohn wants to understand Rousseau, he first has to thaw his "ice-cold heart", and he has to look into some mysterious dark eyes and fall in love himself. Hamann puts his main point in one of his most famous lines: "All the aesthetic thaumaturgy in the world does not suffice to replace an immediate feeling, and only through *the journey to hell of self-consciousness* do we pave the way for our divinization."

So provocative was Hamann in *Abälardus Viribius* that he lapses into *ad hominem* attacks. He could not resist alluding to Mendelssohn's Jewish faith and turning it against him. Casting aside Mendelssohn's pretense of anonymity, he asks pointedly: "Who is this aesthetic Moses who may prescribe weak and paltry laws to free citizens?" His laws were like those of the orthodox Jews, who declare "you should not handle this, you should not taste that, and you should not touch this". It was especially appropriate for Hamann that Mendelssohn was a Jew, for in his view all philosophers were Jews, who, according to the standard anti-Semitic trope, are creatures of the letter rather than the spirit, of the law instead of faith. The philosophers are to love what the Jews are to the Christian revelation: what they do not understood they scorn. In passing judgment upon Rousseau Mendelssohn was imposing "the yoke of circumcision" upon the deepest passions of the soul. It was as unfair to impose such a yoke on Rousseau as it was to ask an Israelite to crave Pomeranian ham!

Such provocation Mendelssohn could hardly ignore. He duly wrote a riposte, 'Fulberti Kulmii Antwort an Abälardum Virbium', which appeared in the same issue of the *Literaturbriefe*, October 22, 1761.[81] Mendelssohn's riposte was a burlesque of Hamann's own style, written in the same ironic, needling, and cryptic spirit. It was now time for Hamann to get a taste of his own medicine. Mendelssohn dodges none of Hamann's questions. It was not a mistake to measure Rousseau's novel by the standards of drama and verisimilitude, he

[81] LB 192, *Jubiläumsausgabe*, V/1, 449–53.

contends, because Rousseau himself claimed to write something dramatic and true to nature itself. Hamann attempted to defend Rousseau by claiming that he was writing about the "true nature of the romantic", as if this were a world of its own, completely independent of our normal standards of truth. But Mendelssohn dismisses Hamann's phrase as gibberish and replaces it with his own: "the romantic nature of truth". He insists that the criteria by which we judge Rousseau's novel are the same as those for truth in general; we have a right, indeed a duty, to demand cogency, coherence, and order. Hamann is asking us to take a leap of faith and to believe in some higher or special kind of truth, which involves no intelligible order at all. This higher romantic truth is perhaps accessible to a genius like himself, but it is incomprehensible to any normal human being. "I demanded connection, order, and coherence. And behold! I was transported instead into a magical world where I could not conceive anything, and still less believe anything, but where I was told I ought to believe in it all the more" (450). Mendelssohn insists that his rights as a critic are inviolable and irrevocable, though Hamann wants him to suspend them in the face of some deep mystery. He writes:

> As a critic I have a right to play the part of strong spirit and to mistrust the [writer's] mysterious arts. The aesthetic magician must enchant my sentiments or I remain in disbelief. He might foam at the mouth and declare: *I see spirits rising from the earth!*. But I must see for myself or I will believe that he has lost his head.

Turning one of Hamann's nasty barbs against him, Mendelssohn claims that it is Hamann who is attempting to legislate about what people should see and believe. For he asks us to suspend our critical faculties and to accept something as a masterpiece even when it is impossible to explain why or how it is one. The real dogmatists, Mendelssohn was suggesting, were those who demanded that we take a leap of faith and believe.

The conflict between Abälardus Virbius and Fulberti Kulmii was a brilliant but brief explosion. Though it raised the most important issues, it bore no fruit. Neither party explored the issues further or attempted to resolve them. Fulbert had asked Abelard to step down from the clouds—a reference to *Wolken*—and to speak in a more human form. But that, of course, was not Hamann's style. There could be no dispute in civilized scholastic form. Incredibly Mendelssohn wrote Hamann on March 2, 1762, inviting him to join the *Literaturbriefe* and advising an end to their dispute.[82] But he must have already known this was a futile gesture,[83] which he probably made only out of

[82] Hamann, *Briefwechsel*, II, 134–5.
[83] See Mendelssohn to Abbt, February 22, 1762, *Jubiläumsausgabe*, XI, 294.

respect for Nicolai, the chief editor of the *Literaturbriefe*, who wanted to recruit Hamann for their journal. Nicolai was deeply mistaken about Hamann: he wanted a collaborator in their common search for truth, someone who could provoke discussion and inquiry among equals; but Hamann wanted to be a genius, not a colleague. Sure enough, Hamann wrote Mendelssohn on March 21 to decline the invitation.[84] He also took Mendelssohn's advice about calling off the dispute between Abelard and Kulmii. Thus another skirmish between Hamann and Mendelssohn came to an end, though they would return to fight another day.[85]

11. The Three-Faculty Theory

One aspect of Mendelssohn's legacy that has been especially stressed in histories of philosophy and aesthetics is his development of the three-faculty view, according to which the mind divides into a faculty of desire, knowledge, and taste. This is said to be a decisive turn away from the Wolff's single-faculty theory and toward Kant's tripartite theory in the *Kritik der Urteilskraft*. One consequence of this interpretation is that Mendelssohn is also seen as one of the first champions of the autonomy of art.[86] For if taste is independent of desire and knowledge, it seems it should have its own *sui generis* rules.

It is important to note that Mendelssohn develops this tripartite theory only very late in his intellectual development. It appears chiefly in his 1785 *Morgenstunden* where he distinguishes between the faculties of knowledge, desire, and approval; but there are also some crude anticipations of it in the *Kollektaneenbücher*, especially one note from June 1776 entitled 'Über das Erkenntnis-, das Empfindungs- und das Begehrungsvermögen'.[87] Assuming, for a moment, that the interpretation of these later passages is correct and that Mendelssohn really is adopting a three-faculty theory in them, we must be careful to keep its late origins firmly in perspective. We must not take some remarks from Mendelssohn's later years as characteristic of his thinking as a whole; we must not assume that his later views were somehow implicit in his earlier philosophy, as if its proper development led to them. The

[84] Hamann, *Briefwechsel*, II, 142–3.

[85] Most spectacularly in Hamann's hostile review of Mendelssohn's *Jerusalem*, his *Golgotha und Scheblimni! Von einem Prediger in der Wüsten* (1784).

[86] See Hettner, *Geschichte*, I, 489–90; Beck, *Early German Philosophy*, pp. 326, 328–9; and Hammermeister, *Aesthetic Tradition*, pp. 18–19.

[87] See *Morgenstunden*, 'Vorlesung VII', *Jubiläumsausgabe*, III/2, 59–66; and 'Ueber das Erkenntnis-, das Empfindungs- und das Begehrungsvermögen', *Jubiläumsausgabe*, III/1, 276–7.

truth of the matter is that, in all his major writings before *Morgenstunden*, Mendelssohn was a firm adherent of the single-faculty theory. It was a salient feature of his earlier aesthetics that it unites all these faculties into one. Aesthetic experience necessarily involves the faculty of knowledge because it is a *perception* of perfection; and it necessarily involves the faculty of desire because, as Mendelssohn explicitly argues, we *desire* to have rather than not have pleasure; indeed, in the *Briefe* the faculty of desire or will is distinguished from pleasure only in degree rather than in kind (I, 258). The union of beauty with truth and goodness—the connection of aesthetic experience with desire and knowledge—is most explicit and emphatic in Mendelssohn's affirmation in the *Sendschreiben an Lessing* of the Platonic doctrine of love. It is in Mendelssohn's allegiance to this Platonic tradition—and not in any late experimentation with a three-faculty view—that we should seek what is most characteristic and constant in his thinking.

The question remains whether Mendelssohn broke with his earlier rationalism and was really advancing a three-faculty theory in his later writings. A close examination of the passages from the *Kollektaneenbücher* and *Morgenstunden* writings shows that this is not the case. The problem is that these passages have been read anachronistically in the light of Kant's later distinction, as if Mendelssohn were wise enough to see the dawning light from Königsberg in his later years.

The passage from the *Kollektaneenbücher* shows that Mendelssohn is still very far from advocating a complete separation of the three faculties. At best the evidence supports a two-faculty theory, but even that is put forward in a way that is consistent with his earlier views. In his opening paragraph Mendelssohn states that between the faculty of knowledge and desire there is a middle faculty of feeling (*Empfindung*), by which we take pleasure in something and approve of it (III/1, 276). There are thoughts or representations that do not arouse our desires, and that are not connected with any feelings. There are also feelings that do not pass over into desires, viz., we find a painting or a piece of music beautiful, although we do not desire to possess it. He then distinguishes between the faculty of knowledge and the faculty of feeling on the grounds that the former attempts to make representations conform with their objects, whereas the faculty of feeling attempts to make objects conform to our representations. However, Mendelssohn does not go beyond these distinctions. Rather than distinguishing between the faculties of feeling and desire, he seems intent on connecting them. Hence he stresses that the goal of the faculty of feeling (*Empfindunsvermögen*) consists in the good; i.e., insofar as we have a faculty of feeling we strive to make things agree with

our concepts of good, order, and beauty (276, 277). When we examine the context more closely, we also see that the distinction between the faculty of knowledge and that of feeling does not amount to much, least of all does it commit Mendelssohn to dropping his original theory of feeling. The point of the distinction is to distinguish between the theoretical standpoint, where our aim is to know the truth, and the practical standpoint, where our aim is to make something. This involves only a change in focus from his earlier theory of pleasure, not a change in doctrine. For Mendelssohn is writing now from the standpoint of aesthetic production, and not aesthetic contemplation, which was the focus of his original theory. On no account does he deny, or even question, his original theory that aesthetic contemplation involves the perception of perfection. In one passage he does write about the need not to confuse aesthetic illusion with the truth, but that too does not undermine his original theory that all aesthetic pleasure involves some *perceived* or *purported* perfection.

When we read *Morgenstunden* we also find that the distinction between the faculties, though sharper, is still far from the Kantian tripartite theory. Mendelssohn first states, as he did in the passage from the *Kollekteenbücher*, that there is between the faculties of knowledge and desire a faculty of feeling or approval, which is still very far from desire. We consider the beauty of nature and art with pleasure and approval, he writes, but not with desire. It seems to be a characteristic quality of beauty, he adds, that we contemplate it in tranquility without attempting to possess it (61). Hence the sensation of beauty is not always connected with desire, and so cannot be regarded as a manifestation of the faculty of desire (62). It becomes clear from the context that Mendelssohn wants to distinguish between the faculty of knowledge and desire to explain the problem that troubled him long ago in *Rhapsodie*: that we want to perceive things even if we do not want them to happen (66).

No sooner has Mendelssohn made these distinctions, however, than he begins to blur them. The pleasure or displeasure we take in something is concerned with the form rather than the matter of knowledge (62); and all knowledge involves a kind of assent or approval because some things activate our powers of soul in a more pleasant manner than others (63). We then prefer or desire those things that do this in the most pleasant manner, so the faculty of desire is brought into operation and joined with that of feeling. More significantly, Mendelssohn then reaffirms that the faculties of knowledge and approval are "expressions of one and the same power of the soul" (*Aeußerungen einer und ebenderselben Kraft der Seele*) and that they differ only "with respect to the goal of their striving" (*in Absicht auf das Ziel ihres Bestrebens*) (63–4). While

the faculty of knowledge begins with things and ends in us, the faculty of desire begins in us and ends with things. Mendelssohn explains that every power of the soul involves the striving to bring something into actuality, either within the soul itself or in something outside it (64). The power of knowledge concerns the former: we strive to realize within ourselves true representations. The power of approval concerns the latter: we strive to realize our representations in things outside us, or to make things according to what we would approve in them. The faculty of knowledge wants to form representations around things; the faculty of desire wants to form things around our representations. What we have here is a recurrence of the earlier distinction between the theoretical and practical standpoints, which amounts to no more a reversal of the original theory in this case as in the latter.

Mendelssohn's explicit statement that this is only a difference in direction or perspective for ''one and the same faculty of soul'' demonstrates his abiding allegiance to a single-faculty theory. He also continues to support the traditional Wolffian account of this faculty as a *vis representativa*. Hence he writes that the different direction of this single faculty of the soul involves the striving to realize representations: either to make them a reality or to make them conform to reality (64). In either case, the basic striving of the soul concerns its representations, whether making them true in practice or seeing if they are true in theory.

Ultimately, then, there is little evidence for the view that Mendelssohn abandoned the rationalist tradition in his later writings. All the textual evidence points for the most remarkable consistency and continuity in Mendelssohn's aesthetic thinking. This is indeed just what we would expect from the analogy with Mendelssohn's metaphysical thought, where he defended in his last days the rationalist heritage against an increasingly popular Kantianism. From his earliest years in the *Literaturbriefe* Mendelssohn's preferred persona was to be an unpopular spokesman for basic rationalist values, a defender of the Leibnizian–Wolffian legacy against all the superficial fashions of his age. All his life he kept that persona, both in his aesthetics and in his metaphysics. It was really this persona that made him the last great guardian of the Enlightenment.

8

Lessing and the Reformation of Aesthetic Rationalism

1. Lessing and the Rationalist Tradition

The last great thinker in the rationalist tradition of aesthetics was Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1729–81). The year of his death is fateful for this tradition. For in the same year Kant published his *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, which marks the beginning of his fatal assault on aesthetic rationalism. Unlike Mendelssohn, Lessing was spared the trying task of defending rationalism against its last and most powerful adversary. We can only speculate what Lessing—a formidable critic—would have said about Kant's *Kritik der Urteilskraft*; but had he written one of his usual penetrating reviews, we can be sure that Kant would not have won such an easy victory. At the very least the rationalist tradition would not have collapsed so quickly.

Lessing occupies a unique place in the rationalist tradition. He was its single thinker to be not only a great aesthetician but also a great writer. No one else in this tradition combined so well critical reflection on the arts with the practice of them. Gottsched's bumbling efforts in *Der sterbende Cato* pale in comparison with Lessing's dazzling performances in *Emilia Galotti* or *Minna von Barnhelm*. Famously, Lessing was very self-deprecating about his talents as a dramatist. Refusing to regard himself as a genius, he confessed that he never wrote from inspiration but had to squeeze his few creative juices through a system of rickety pipes. He compared himself to a cripple who could walk only on the crutches of criticism.[1] Yet this self-confessed plodder transformed the German theatre. Lessing became the foremost dramatist of "bourgeois tragedy", which made ordinary people, rather than royalty or aristocracy, the stuff of drama.

[1] See Lessing's *Hamburgische Dramaturgie*, Stücke 100–4, April 19, 1768, in Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Werke und Briefe*, ed. Wilfried Barner et al., 14 vols. (Frankfurt: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1985–90), VI, 680–1. Henceforth this edition will be designated DKA.

Whatever the ultimate merits of Lessing's plays, many of which now seem dated, they are still a potent counterexample to the claim that the rationalist tradition was entirely theoretical, a parasitic band of intellectuals who followed the arts rather than helping to create them.

To no small degree, Lessing's work as a dramatist shaped his aesthetic thought, which in turn altered the course of the rationalist tradition. Since he saw that writers need inspiration, Lessing became more skeptical of rules, and more appreciative of genius, than most of his predecessors and contemporaries. Having to work with the medium of poetry made him sensitive to its unique qualities, a sensitivity that ultimately led to his *Laokoon* and a greater emphasis on the difference between the arts. Finally, Lessing's devotion to bourgeois tragedy gave rise to a new theory of tragedy that broke decisively with French models, which had been authoritative for Gottsched, Baumgarten, and even Mendelssohn. Lessing's attempt to formulate such a theory in his early correspondence with Nicolai and Mendelssohn brought reflection on tragedy to a new height, one never attained before or since in the German tradition.

Lessing's place in the rationalist tradition appears in its clearest light when we compare him with his closest friend, Moses Mendelssohn. From the mid-1750s to the 1760s Lessing forged his aesthetic doctrines through frequent conversation, correspondence, and collaboration with Mendelssohn. Though they often differed in their views, they shared basic rationalist principles and neo-classical values, and presented a common front against the rising *Sturm und Drang*. Despite their solidarity, they played very different roles within the rationalist tradition. If Mendelssohn was the guardian of the rationalist tradition, Lessing was its reformer. While Mendelssohn defended this tradition against the many outside forces marshalling against it, Lessing liberalized it from within by freeing it from a dogmatic reliance on rules and servitude to French models. He broadened the rationalist tradition by giving a much greater role to genius, by helping to establish the genre of bourgeois tragedy, and by extending critical inquiry into the differences between the arts.

If Lessing's chief ally in the rationalist tradition was Mendelssohn, his great rival was Gottsched. He fought with all his cunning and energy against Gottsched's schoolmasterly insistence on the rules and his advocacy of French models for the German theatre. All Lessing's vehemence against Gottsched exploded in the famous opening passage of *Literaturbriefe* 17:

> "Nobody", write the authors of the *Bibliothek*, "will deny that the German theater owes a great part of its improvement to Herr Professor Gottsched". I am this nobody; and I deny it outright. It is to be wished that Herr Gottsched never interfered with

the theatre. His presumed improvements are either dispensable trivialities or true corruptions.[2]

Yet for all his contempt for Gottsched, Lessing had his debts to him. In his early days in Leipzig he came under Gottsched's influence, and treated him with all the deference the old dictator demanded.[3] Lessing's quarrel with Gottsched is best seen as an internal quarrel within the rationalist tradition rather than as an attack upon it. At stake was the *direction* of this tradition (whether it should look toward France or England) or its *administration* (how often and when it should administer its rules) but not its fundamental values or principles.

Lessing had another rival in the rationalist tradition, though he is cast in the shadows from the fireworks surrounding Lessing's polemic against Gottsched. This less public and more formidable foe was none other than Winckelmann.[4] Lessing had the greatest respect for Winckelmann, and shared with him common neo-classical and rationalist values. Upon news of his murder he declared to Nicolai that he would have happily given him a few years of his own life.[5] Yet Lessing felt challenged by Winckelmann. The final sections of his *Laokoon* would be a detailed polemic against Winckelmann's classical scholarship. But more was at stake than scholarship. For Winckelmann had questioned his faith in poetry and drama as the highest of the arts. The result of his attempt to defend this faith is no less than the *Laokoon* itself. Without Winckelmann's provocation it is doubtful the *Laokoon* would have been written.

For generations now, there has been much debate about Lessing's place in the rationalist tradition.[6] The main question is not *how* Lessing fits into this tradition but *whether* he does so. Some scholars point out that Lessing was such a sharp critic of rationalism, not only in religion but also in the arts, that it is misleading to treat him as a rationalist *simpliciter*. In their view, Lessing was not simply a critic *within* the *Aufklärung* but a *self*-critic of the *Aufklärung*, whose self-criticism forced him beyond its confines. There are indeed good reasons

[2] DKA IV, 499.

[3] That Lessing agreed with the fundamentals of Gottsched's program in his early years had been argued long ago by Hermann Hettner. See his *Geschichte der deutschen Literatur im achtzehnten Jahrhundert* (Berlin: Aufbau, 1979; 1st edn. Braunschweig: Vieweg, 1862–70), I, 688–91. Hettner rightly questioned Danzel's anachronistic reading of the early writings, which saw them as anticipations of his mature views.

[4] For an instructive general account of the Lessing's relationship to Winckelmann, see Walter Rehm, 'Winckelmann und Lessing', in his *Götterstille und Göttersprache* (Salzburg: Bergland, 1951), pp. 183–201.

[5] Lessing to Nicolai, July 5, 1768, DKA 11/1, 526–7.

[6] For a helpful survey of one phase of the debate, see Karl Guthke, *Der Stand der Lessing-Forschung: Ein Bericht über die Literatur von 1932–1962* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1965), pp. 10–35.

for questioning Lessing's place in the rationalist tradition of aesthetics. He is skeptical of its faith in rules; he gives genius the power to make and break rules; and he thinks that the arousal of feeling rather than intellectual insight is the purpose of drama. Sometimes the distance between Lessing and Wolff or Gottsched seems so great that one wonders how they could both belong to the same tradition at all.

Although Lessing was indeed a critic of rationalism, it would be a mistake to place him outside the rationalist tradition entirely. After all, if Lessing is a self-critical *Aufklärer*, that hardly makes him an enthusiastic *Stürmer und Dränger*. If criticism of rationalism were a sufficient reason to place him outside the tradition of the *Aufklärung*, then by the same token Kant too would be no *Aufklärer*. The apparent evidence for placing Lessing outside this tradition is better understood—so I shall argue—as evidence for regarding him as a reformer of it. This is because Lessing's ultimate sympathies and deeper loyalties were with the fundamental principles and values of the rationalist tradition. Although Lessing was critical of an excessive reliance on rules in creating works of art, he never doubted, and indeed defended, the value of rules and the necessity of criticism. The purpose of his *Laokoon* was to place rationalist criticism on a sounder footing, so that its rules would be more nuanced and differentiated, sensitive to the differences between the arts. Although Lessing stressed that the end of drama is to arouse feeling, he continued to explain feeling in rationalist terms; here indeed is the chief stumbling block of irrationalist interpretations of Lessing: his abiding loyalty to Wolffian psychology. Finally, Lessing never hesitated or wavered in his faith in the holy trinity of the rationalist tradition, its cardinal principle of the unity of beauty, truth, and goodness. He stressed that aesthetic experience had to contain some insight into truth, even if it did not consist in the clear and distinct ideas of intellectual discourse; and he never tired of insisting that drama should serve moral ends. Often Lessing is regarded as an early champion of the autonomy of the arts; but this interpretation is anachronistic. While Lessing lamented the interference of religion in the arts, he never wavered in his conviction that art should have a moral purpose.

2. Genius and Rules

Unlike Mendelssohn, who encountered the concept of genius only in the mid-1750s, Lessing was familiar with the concept by the late 1740s. Indeed, he

had given it a central role in his early aesthetics. In his early poem 'Gedicht über die Regeln in den Wissenschaften', which first appeared July 1749 in *Der critische Musicus an der Spree*, Lessing introduced the concept of a "master" (*Meister*) or "model spirit" (*Mustergeist*) whose creative force sets the standards for good poetry.[7] This early poem is essentially a protest against the oppressive rule-aesthetic of Gottsched and the Swiss. This aesthetic is charged with choking poetic inspiration, with smothering "spirit and fire" (*Feur und Geist*), by a schoolmasterly insistence on following rules.[8] Rather than basing poetry on precepts, Lessing wants to found it on genius. All faith and hope for the future of poetry lies in the model spirit, a power of nature, who does not need rules, and who provides a model for others:

> Ein Geist, den die Natur zum Mustergeist beschloß,
> Ist, was er ist, durch sich, wird ohne Regeln groß.
> Er geht, so kühn er geht, auch ohne Weiser, sicher.
> Er schöpfet aus sich selbst. Er ist sich Schul und Bücher.[9]

In this early poem Lessing seems to go so far as to reject all rules. The master spirit finds no use for rules at all, and to support his work with rules would be like "holding up the world with elephants" (I, 34, *2*). Even those who do not have a natural gift for poetry are advised not to learn rules, which will only make them produce something mechanical; they are warned that Apollo has a word for someone who writes poetry by the recipe book: "a bungler" (*einen Stümper*) (35, *6*). Such is Lessing's animus against the rules that he regards them as an obstacle to enjoying poems as well as creating them. To analyze a poem, to apply rules to it, is only to water down or cramp our pleasures, which are more enjoyable in their pristine natural state.

> Ist das, was uns gefällt, denn lauter starker Wein,
> Den man erst wässern muß, wenn er soll heilsam sein?
> O nein! Denn gleich entfernt vom Geiz und vom Verschwenden,
> Floß, was du gabst, Natur, aus sparsam klugen Händen.

[7] Although Lessing does not use the term "Genie" in this poem, he attributes to his "Meistergeist" all the characteristics he will later attribute to "Genie" in the *Hamburgische Dramaturgie*. In *Literaturbrief* 19 he uses the term "Meister der Kunst" as a virtual synonym for "Genie". See DKA IV, 508, *22* and 512, *31*.

[8] The importance of this early poem was stressed by Karl Guthke, *Literarisches Leben im achtzehnten Jahrhundert* (Bern: Francke, 1975), p. 36. Guthke argues, rightly, that it is a protest against Bodmer and Breitinger as much as Gottsched.

[9] I, 34, *7–10*. Literally translated: "A spirit whom nature has made a model spirit | Is what he is through himself, becomes great without rules. He goes, as boldly as he does, securely without the wise. He creates from himself. He is his own school and book."

Was einen Bauer reizt, macht keine Regel schlecht,
Denn in ihm würkt dein Trieb noch unverfälscht echt.[10]

In protesting against the tyranny of rules, the young Lessing was rebelling against the authority of reason itself. The realm of reason is that governed by law or rule; and reason goes too far when it attempts to regulate everything. Hence Lessing writes about how "*die grübelnde Vernunft*" intrudes into every sphere, climbing too high here and delving too deep there, untrue to the sphere where God intended to keep it (29, *18*, *26*, *27*). Its proper sphere is morality, the depths of the heart, where evil impulses lurk; there reason has the task of restraining impulses and guiding conduct according to principles. But not satisfied with this limited realm, reason flies to the stars and attempts to rule the entire world, not least the realm of the senses where poetry has its home. The epitome of an imperious and excessive rationality is the critic, who attempts to regulate even the charms of our senses (30, *10–14*).

Given Lessing's appeal to genius, his attack upon rules, and his protest against reason, it is not surprising that his early poem has been seen as a break with the rationalist tradition. It has been interpreted as a manifesto for a new sentimentalist aesthetic, one which replaces rules with masterpieces, and one which makes feeling rather than the intellect the judge of art.[11]

It would be a mistake, however, to draw such general conclusions from Lessing's early poem. Granted, we should not dismiss the poem as adolescent rebellion. We have to take it seriously, not least because it presages future Lessingian themes. Belief in genius, contempt for a pedantic insistence upon rules, and a deep sense of the limits of reason, are all basic characteristics of Lessing's mature aesthetics. Nevertheless, it would be going too far to think that in this early poem Lessing has already broken with the rationalist tradition and that he has embarked upon a new sentimentalist aesthetic. The problem with such a reading is that, in the late 1740s and early 1750s, Lessing's views about the role of genius, and the place of rules in art, were still very much in flux. Although he questions the overzealous application of rules, he also fully recognizes, and explicitly affirms, the need for rules themselves. This recognition surfaces in the poem itself when Lessing expresses his reverence for neo-classical basics: "measure, identity, order" (*Maß*, *Gleichheit*, *Ordnung*) (I, 29, *10*). It is even more apparent in the preface to his *Beyträge zur Historie und*

[10] I, 32, *27–8*, *32–3*. Literally translated: "Is that which pleases only pure strong wine | which one must dilute for it to be beneficial? Oh no! For equally removed from stinginess and extravagance | Flows what you have given nature, from thrifty wise hands. What excites a peasant, makes no rule bad | for in him your drive still works true with no distortion."

[11] See Guthke, *Literarisches Leben*, pp. 37–8.

Aufnahme des Theaters, which he wrote in October 1749, only a few months after the appearance of the poem.[12] Here Lessing affirms the importance of rules to develop good taste among the public. He sketches a program to educate the public about theater, and to assist new authors in writing better drama. The heart of this program will consist in teaching them "the precepts" and "the rules" about theatrical composition and performance. Far from distancing himself from Gottsched's program, Lessing fully endorses it. Hence he welcomes Gottsched's forthcoming *Deutsche Schaubühne*. Flatly contrary to his famous damning lines in *Literaturbrief* 17, Lessing claims that nobody would deny Professor Gottsched's contribution to the theater.[13] It would be another ten years before Lessing had the confidence to declare himself that nobody.

In the early 1750s Lessing would continue to reflect upon the powers of genius and the authority of rules in aesthetics. He came to no solution, however, of their proper roles relative to one another. He would vacillate on the issue, uncertain of the precise place of either genius or rules. Some of his vacillation about the rules is apparent from his *Abhandlung über Plautus,* which he wrote for his *Beyträge* in 1750. This is essentially a translation and defense of Plautus' comedy *Captivi*, a work Lessing claimed to be the greatest masterpiece of drama. He was compelled to defend such a bold claim against an anonymous critic, who faulted Plautus' work for failing to conform to the essential rules of drama.[14] It is striking that in his defense of Plautus Lessing never questions the legitimacy of the three unities. No less than Gottsched, he regards them as fundamental rules for every good drama; and he attempts to show that Plautus conforms to them more than his critic allows. When he is forced to admit the critic's point that Plautus violates the rule of unity of place, he regards this as a definite fault (I, 872). Nevertheless, despite his acceptance of the classical three unities, Lessing also insists that in evaluating any play we have to consider more than its conformity to rules. The most beautiful comedy is not the most probable and regular (*regelmäßig*), and still less the one that also contains many striking lines and interesting ideas; rather, it is one that not only has these virtues but also achieves the essential end of its genre (I, 877). The aim of comedy is to improve the morals of the spectator, to make vice hateful and virtue lovable; and it is precisely in this respect that Plautus deserves our respect. Lessing's skepticism about, and aversion toward, the rules surfaces in

[12] 'Vorrede', *Beyträge zur Historie und Aufnahme des Theaters*, DKA I, 723–33.

[13] Cf. DKA I, 729 and DKA IV, 499. In these famous lines Lessing was chiding himself.

[14] Lessing published the critique in his *Beyträge zur Historie und Aufnahme des Theaters*. Its authorship has been disputed; the traditional assumption was that it was by Lessing himself, but a case has been made for an anonymous author. See J. G. Robertson, 'Notes on Lessing's Beyträge zur Historie und Aufnahme des Theaters', *Modern Language Review* 8 (1913), 511–32 and 9 (1914), 213–22.

an interesting aside when he remarks that it is fortunate that critics have not devised rules for everything in drama, viz., the order in which actors have to leave the stage. Sarcastically, he wishes luck to those critics who attempt to put everything in poetry on a "metaphysical footing" (I, 876).

Lessing's reviews in the early 1750s also reflect his uncertainty about the place of rules in aesthetics. When he reviewed Batteux's *Les Beaux Arts réduits à un même principe* for *Das Neueste aus dem Reiche des Witzes* in June 1751, Lessing praised Batteux's attempt to find a single fundamental principle for all the arts (II, 125). Such a principle would not only simplify the bewildering variety of specific rules, but it would also guide the genius, who often felt chained but not enlightened by so many restrictions. Through Batteux's principle of imitation the genius could understand the reason for all the specific rules, and he would no longer have to be guided by mere feeling alone. But Lessing quickly lost his faith in such a universal panacea. In a review in the *Berlinische Privligierte Zeitung,* which appeared in 1753, he remarked that the principle of imitation, though true, is too abstract to be of much use to the poet (II, 485–6). When a critic stresses this principle he is a like a cobbler who demands that a shoe should fit the size of the person who wears it. Even the dullest apprentice would find such a principle too obvious to be helpful.

Other reviews reveal Lessing's vacillating views about the nature of genius. In one review for the *Berlinische Priviligierte Zeitung* Lessing raised the much-disputed question about the value of rhyme in poetry (II, 175–6). He was happy to let genius settle the issue. If the poet's fire is so strong that he is not exhausted by the difficulty of rhyme, let him practice this art; but if his inspiration flags under the effort, let him avoid it. Following Horace, Lessing remarked that there are two kinds of poets. There are those whose inspiration is so strong that they do not submit to the effort of revision; and there are those whose inspiration is not so strong but who know how to sustain it through revision. It is hard to tell, Lessing says, which is better; they are both great and distinguish themselves from the mediocre, who do not know how to use rhyme to perfect their technique or free verse to voice their inspiration. Regarding the first kind of poet, the untamed genius, Lessing has not entirely made up his mind. He states that he is great; but he also seemed to prefer the poet who submits to self-criticism and discipline, because his "exactitude and his constantly measured vibrancy" does not create "the confusing beauties of a hot-tempered fire" (176).

Lessing came to a temporary resolution of these issues only in 1756, after his correspondence with Nicolai and Mendelssohn about tragedy. Reflection on the purpose of tragedy had given him new clarity about the roles of genius

and rules in art. Hence, in his preface to *Des Herrn Jacob Thomson Sämtliche Trauerspiele*, which he published in 1756, Lessing felt confident enough finally "to declare my true opinion about the rules" (III, 757). Suppose, he asks us, a play that conforms perfectly to all the rules. It has unity of time, place, and action; each person has a definite character; the language is flawless; and it has a good moral effect on the audience. Would someone who achieved such a masterpiece still be able to call his work a tragedy? Yes, Lessing says, but no more than someone who sculpted a statue would be able to boast that he had created a human being. Just as in the statue, there would still be one thing missing in this masterpiece: a soul. Lessing then announces that he would rather be the author of *The London Merchant* (i.e., George Lillo) than *Der sterbende Cato* (i.e., Gottsched), even if *per impossibile* the latter composition entirely conformed to the rules. Why? Because, he claims, the former work makes us shed more tears than the latter. In doing so it is more in accord with the vocation of true tragedy, which is to arouse pity and feelings of humanity in the audience. Lessing still insists, however, that the rules play a crucial role in drama: they are necessary for the correct relation of the parts, for the whole having order and symmetry (757). He therefore seems to assign the rules an essentially *formal* function in tragedy, i.e., their specific task is to ensure that a piece has unity and harmony. Having the proper form, however, is only a necessary but not a sufficient condition of good tragedy. In addition to conformity with the rules, i.e., having a perfect structure or form, it is also necessary that a composition have spirit, soul, or energy. What gives a piece these qualities? Genius, of course. The genius fathoms the depths of the human heart. He possesses the magical art of revealing human passions, of showing how they originate and grow inside us, and of affecting the passions of the spectator. Lessing had now assigned genius and rules their proper domains: genius creates energy, fire, and soul, and the rules establish structure, unity, or harmony. Which of these is most important? Lessing leaves us in no doubt about his preferences. He would rather write a piece with inner energy and little proportion than a piece with no energy and perfect proportion (757–8). Here, it seemed, in the classical conflict between genius and rules, Lessing had come down on the side of genius.

And so it seemed, at least for a little while. It is doubtful, however, that Lessing remained satisfied with this solution for long. The position that he had reached in 1756 was only a temporary one, which he would abandon, by implication if not intention, later in the 1760s. When reflecting on Aristotle in the *Hamburgische Dramaturgie* Lessing gained new insight into the purpose of rules in tragedy, which extended their jurisdiction beyond his original estimate

of their limits. He could now see that the rules concern not only the formal dimension of a composition, but also how it achieves its essential ends.[15] When Aristotle wrote, for example, that the poet should choose a character of average virtue, he did so because this would help him to achieve the end of tragedy: arousing fear and pity among the audience. If this were the purpose of the rules of tragedy, then the rules have not only a *formal* function in creating structure and unity in a drama, but also have an *instrumental* function in ensuring that tragedy realizes its ends. This is significant because, in 1756, in both his defense of Plautus and his preface to Thompson, Lessing assigned the instrumental function to genius alone. Only his intuition and imagination, he argued, could fathom the depths of the human heart and know how to affect the feelings of the audience. Now Lessing seemed to realize that the "magical art" of genius was not so magical or mysterious after all. There were definite rules about how to achieve the ends of drama, about how to create pity and move people to tears.

Lessing reached final clarity about these issues only in Stück 96 of the *Hamburgische Dramaturgie*, which he wrote in April 1768. Here Lessing was forced to define his position *vis-à-vis* the emerging *Sturm und Drang*. Now he faced the opposite problem of the 1750s, when Gottsched's lingering shadow still darkened the literary horizon. In the 1750s Lessing had to defend genius against a rigid rule-aesthetic, which threatened to squelch all inspiration in the name of order and discipline; in the 1760s he had to defend the rules against a cult of genius, which attempted to overthrow all order and discipline in the name of inspiration. The rebellious adolescence of the *Stürmer und Dränger* made him appreciate all the more the value and significance of the rules. The *Stürmer und Dränger* would cry "Genius! Genius!", and they would exclaim that: "The genius puts himself above all the rules!" "Rules oppress genius!", they would insist. To these shrill declamations Lessing responded: the rules could not oppress genius because they make his insight possible. It is by means of rules that the genius expresses his feelings in words. If the genius were to renounce all rules, he would have to remain on the level of vague intuition and feeling, unable to refine his first crude drafts or to clarify his insights. Of course, as a younger man Lessing himself had once rebelled against the oppression of the rules; but he could defend himself against charges of hypocrisy on the grounds that there is a big difference between protesting against *narrow* rules and wanting to overthrow *all* the rules. In the heat of his polemic against the *Stürmer und Dränger* Lessing now realized that genius

[15] See, for example, *Hamburgische Dramaturgie*, Stück 77, January 26, 1768, DKA VI, 566–7; and Stück 80, February 5, 1768, DKA VI, 590–1.

and rules, inspiration and reason, are complements rather than opposites. The inspiration of genius is simply an intuitive form of reason, whereas the rules of critique are only a self-conscious, self-critical form of genius. As he concluded his diatribe: ''Whoever reasons correctly also discovers; and who wants to discover something must also be able to reason'' (VI, 659). In this belated affirmation of the necessity of the rules we see clearly Lessing's abiding loyalty to the rationalist tradition.

3. The Irrationality of Genius?

Not surprisingly, Lessing's concept of genius has often been regarded as a chief source of his irrationalism.[16] Since genius stands above the rules, which comprise the domain of reason, and since it works by feeling and intuition, it seems to be an essentially irrational force. For this reason, some scholars have stressed Lessing's affinity with the *Sturm und Drang*, which opposed the force of genius to the rules.[17]

Apart from its intuitive plausibility, there is considerable textual evidence for such an interpretation. Some of it comes from Lessing's psychology, which makes genius more an emotional than a rational faculty. The riches of a genius, he writes in the *Hamburgische Dramaturgie*, consist not in the storehouse of memory, still less in mastery of rules, but in the power to create from the depths of feeling.[18] In one draft for *Laokoon* Lessing doubted whether his rules would be useful for the genius, because ''his mere feeling has to lead him unconsciously in his work''.[19] It is also significant that Lessing contrasts genius with wit, which rationalist psychology made the chief ingredient of genius.[20] While wit consists simply in the power to observe superficial similarities between things, genius has the power to create necessary connections between them.[21] In demoting the role of wit in genius, Lessing seems to be taking issue with rationalist psychology.

[16] See Robert Heitner, 'Rationalism and Irrationalism in Lessing', *Lessing Yearbook* 5 (1973), 82–106. ''Genius is irrational; it works through the heart with feeling to produce good works, not really knowing how this is done'' (94). ''Irrational, mysteriously innate properties are central to Lessing's concept of genius'' (92).

[17] See, for example, Armand Nivelle, *Kunst- und Dichtungstheorien zwischen Aufklarung und Klassik* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1960), pp. 133–4.

[18] Stück 34, August 25, 1767, DKA VI, 347.

[19] *Paralipomena* 3, DKA V/2, 218–19.

[20] See Wolff, *Psychologia empirica*, §476: ''Facilitatem observandi rerum similitudines Ingenium appellamus'' (*Werke* II/5, 367).

[21] Stück 30, August 11, 1767, DKA VI, 329.

Further evidence for this interpretation comes from Lessing's *Hamburgische Dramaturgie* (1767–8), which often seems to attribute irrational powers to genius. In one revealing passage from Stück 48, for example, Lessing seems to place genius above the rules, for he gives it the power not only to make the rules but also the right to break them. Hence he warns the imperious critic: "Oh, you fashioners of general rules, how little you understand of art, and how little you possess of genius, which produces the models on which you base your rules, and which can step beyond them as often as it wants!"[22] In another passage from Stück 17 Lessing reminds critics that the genius nullifies all their subtle attempts to distinguish genres: "The genius laughs at all the distinctions of criticism."[23] The evidence for irrationalism appears to be at its strongest in Stück 11 when Lessing claims that the genius has the power to make us believe what we know to be false. "Does not poetry have examples where genius spites all our philosophy, and where it knows how to make things frightening for our imagination that appear ridiculous to cold reason?"[24] One such example is Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Reason scorns belief in ghosts; but Shakespeare still knows how to make a rationalist's hair stand on end.

While all this evidence is suggestive, it is not sufficient to establish the irrationalist case. Lessing's psychology tends to refute rather than prove it, because its fundamental principles are straight from the rationalist tradition. Although Lessing regards genius as more an emotional than an intellectual power, he still explains feeling by the general principles of rational psychology, not the empiricist psychology favored by the *Sturm und Drang*. According to rationalist principles, feeling is not a faculty of the soul distinct from reason, for both feeling and reason are powers of representation, which differ in degree rather than in kind. While reason is a power of distinct representation, feeling is a faculty of confused representation. In his 1755–6 correspondence with Nicolai and Mendelssohn about tragedy, Lessing will reaffirm these principles time and again, explicitly endorsing the rationalist concept of sentiment as a perception of perfection.[25] Again true to rationalist psychology, he thinks that feeling, like association and memory, is an *analogon rationis*, which operates instinctively and unconsciously according to the general laws of representation.

What about Lessing's refusal to reduce genius to wit? Here, it would seem, Lessing really cannot be forced into the categories of rational psychology, for he is implicitly taking issue with its theory of genius. True enough, here there is a break with Wolff's and Gottsched's psychology; yet, ironically, it is precisely in this respect that Lessing reveals his abiding loyalty to rationalism. For when

[22] Stück 48, October 13, 1767, DKA VI, 420.
[23] Stück 17, May 22, 1767, DKA VI, 217.
[24] Stück 11, June 5, 1767, DKA VI, 237.
[25] See below, section 4.

Lessing demotes the role of wit in genius he elevates the role of reason. Hence he stresses that the genius, however intuitively and subconsciously, works according to a plan, and that such a plan brings inner connection and unity to his creation.[26] But such a power of creating unity-amid-diversity, of fashioning necessary connections among a plurality of things, is nothing less than reason itself in Wolffian psychology. According to Wolff, reason is not simply the analytical power of dividing things, of breaking them down into their parts, but also the power of establishing necessary connections between them.[27] What Lessing is doing is applying this Wolffian concept of reason to genius itself. Far from regarding genius as an irrational power, Lessing seems to think of it as a *hyperrational* power, the intuitive form of the intelligence operative in inferences and reasoning. Here one detects the influence of Mendelssohn, who sketches a similar account of genius in the *Literaturbriefe*.[28]

The rationalism behind Lessing's concept of genius emerges most plainly from his attitude toward religious enthusiasm. No less than Mendelssohn, Lessing decidedly rejected the view, later espoused by Hamann, that the genius has insights that stand above reason. Since feelings and intuitions are only a confused form of representation, he insists they do not provide us with a superior form of knowledge that is somehow exempt from criticism. Hence in the *Literaturbriefe* Lessing denies that we can know truth through "the rush of feeling" (*dem Taumel unsrer Empfindungen*).[29] To assume that we can know new truths through feeling alone, he writes, is the very essence of enthusiasm (*Schwärmerei*). The only way to determine the validity of our feelings is to submit them to the cold discipline of reason.

All the evidence from the *Hamburgische Dramaturgie* is also inconclusive. It does not demonstrate that Lessing regards genius as an *irrational* power. For Lessing never states that the creativity of genius is ruleless, as if it were somehow utterly arbitrary and might not conform to rules at all. Sure, the genius does have the power to make and break rules; but this does not mean his creativity entirely transcends the rules. To see the problem with such an inference, it is first necessary to ask: *Which* rules can the genius make or break? It is important to distinguish two kinds of rules, or two standpoints about them. There are the rules that the genius follows subconsciously, naturally, and instinctively; and there are the rules that the critic formulates consciously, artificially, and deliberately. Clearly, there is no necessary correspondence between these levels: it is possible that the critic inaccurately formulates the rules the genius

[26] *Hamburgische Dramaturgie*, Stück 30, August 11, VI, 329. Cf. Stück 34, August 25, 1767, VI, 350–1.
[27] Wolff, *Deutsche Metaphysik*, §§368–70; I/2, 224–8. [28] See Chapter 7.8.
[29] *Brief* 49, August 2, 1759, DKA IV, 609.

actually follows; or that he accurately formulates them but misapplies them. When there is such a discrepancy, either in formulation or application, the genius has the right to break the critic's rules. Note, however, that the rules the genius makes or breaks are those that have been misformulated or misapplied by the critic, not those that the genius has naturally followed.

That Lessing thinks the genius naturally and inevitably works according to rules there cannot be any doubt. In Stück 96 of the *Hamburgische Dramaturgie* he argues that the genius has no choice but to follow rules. Here, as we have seen, Lessing takes to task the budding *Sturm und Drang* movement for its cult of genius, for its belief that genius has the power to dispense entirely with rules. His response is that such a belief is delusory: the genius, even if he is not aware of them, creates only by virtue of rules. Given that rules formulate means to ends, and that there are only a few effective means to attain them, the artist has no choice but to follow them. As Lessing puts it, every genius is necessarily a critic, though every critic is not necessarily a genius.[30] His point is that the genius works inevitably according to rules, and that it behooves him to be self-conscious of them if he is to more surely attain his ends.

Of course, Lessing himself would often insist, like any *Stürmer und Dränger*, that the genius should create according to his spontaneous feelings and impulses rather than according to artificial rules and precepts. Yet, ironically, his insistence on creating according to feelings and impulses is not meant to obviate the rules but to ensure compliance with them. For Lessing, like everyone in the rationalist tradition, and unlike everyone in the *Sturm und Drang*, believes that acting on feelings and impulses is sometimes a more reliable means of conforming to rules than self-consciously applying them. Since impulses and feelings are *analoga rationis*, inevitably and naturally working according to rules even when we are not aware of them, and since it is notorious that the critic can formulate false rules, or misapply true ones, it turns out that impulses and feelings sometimes are a better guide for following the rules than the most carefully formulated rules of the critic. If he follows false or misapplied rules, the artist's energies will be misdirected or wasted. Of course, self-awareness of the rules also has its advantages, because it will help the artist to achieve his ends more surely and effectively; but this still assumes that the artist, in his role as self-critic, knows the true rules and applies them correctly.

One of the most difficult tasks the critic faces, Lessing realizes, is bringing to self-consciousness the rules and procedures behind the artist's subconscious creative activity. If he formulates these rules wrongly, or if he is too zealous

[30] Stück 96, April 1, 1768, DKA VI, 657.

in applying them, they inhibit the artist's inspiration from taking shape. This is indeed just the problem Lessing addressed in his *Laokoon*. Because critics have not correctly distinguished the rules governing poetry and painting, they force the poet to comply with the painter's rules, and the painter to comply with the poet's rules, so that neither realizes the true potential of his medium.[31]

How, then, does the critic know the rules? What guarantee is there that his rules will help rather than hinder genius? Lessing's answer is simple: he must carefully observe the methods of genius. Rather than abolishing or replacing the rules, the activities of genius are the most reliable means to study them. Since the genius, unlike the beginner or bungler, has the sure instinct to act according to rules, and since he does not allow himself to be misdirected by false conceptions of his rules, his working methods provide the most reliable basis to make generalizations and inferences about the rules. Hence Lessing wrote in *Literaturbrief* 19: "Changes and improvements that a poet, like Klopstock, makes to his work deserve not only to be noticed but to be studied with diligence. One studies in them the finest rules of art; for what the master of art finds it good to observe are the rules."[32]

Such was Lessing's confidence in genius that he made it the test of entire art forms. Whether there could be Christian tragedies, and whether there could be bourgeois tragedies among the French, was not something that could be decided a priori or on general principles.[33] Rather, it was a matter of seeing what the genius could create, and whether his works created the right effect upon the audience.

If genius serves as the basis of the rules, the proper method in aesthetics is to formulate rules a posteriori rather than a priori, after rather than before the voice of artistic inspiration has spoken. This not only ensures that the artist's impulses and feelings have a chance to express themselves, but also that the critic accurately formulates the rules the artist actually follows. Lessing expresses his belief in such an empirical inductive method in the *Hamburgische Dramaturgie*: "What assures me that I do not mistake the essence of dramatic poetry is this: that I know it as perfectly as Aristotle, who abstracted it from innumerable masterpieces of the Greek stage."[34]

Such confidence in induction does not mean that Lessing completely rejects deduction from higher principles. Although in the preface to *Laokoon* he would laugh at Baumgarten's attempt to derive results from definitions alone, he still believed in, and practiced, the deductive method of beginning from

[31] See especially the 'Vorrede', DKA VI, 14–15. [32] DKA IV, 508.
[33] Cf. Stück 2, May 5, 1767, DKA VI, 193 and Stück 14, June 16, 1767, VI, 252.
[34] Stücke 101–4, April 19, 1768, DKA VI, 685–6.

first principles. Still, Lessing holds that an inductive survey should *precede* deductions from general principles. Inferences are only as reliable as their general principles, which ultimately have to be based upon induction.

Granted that the critic should proceed empirically in the first instance, how is he to determine what is really a rule? If there are both true and false rules, how does he distinguish between them? Lessing's views about this important issue seem to have evolved over the years. At first he seems to have held that true rules are those that help the poet attain the main aim of his genre. He argues that there are ends proper to and characteristic of a genre, and that the poet should comply with them. If he is a tragic poet, for example, his aim is to arouse pity in his audience, and the true rules will be those that allow the poet to achieve this end effectively. Hence, in his early correspondence with Nicolai and Mendelssohn, Lessing goes to great lengths to determine the proper end of the genre of tragedy. Lessing argues against Mendelssohn that this end is to arouse pity in the spectator, and not to evoke admiration. The success or failure of the tragic poet is determined by how many tears he wrings out of his audience. But, in his later years, Lessing seems to have grown more liberal. For in the *Hamburgische Dramaturgie* it is not a matter of the ends of the genre but simply the ends of the poet. Critics might separate genres ever so carefully, Lessing writes, but when the genius has higher ends, he has the right to mix them; and in that case one simply has to lay aside the rule book and see if it works. And so Lessing writes: "Call it a bastard (*Zwitter*) if you want; it's enough that this bastard pleases me, instructs me, more than all the legitimate births of a correct Racine . . . Because the mule is neither a donkey nor a horse, does that make it any less one of the most useful beasts of burden?"[35] Lessing was not, however, granting the genius *carte blanche*, as if he had the right to make anything he wanted the purpose of his work. For he still held that the ultimate ends of art were to please and to instruct, and that there were only so many means to achieve such ends. Hence in the *Laokoon* he makes it clear that the end of poet and painter alike is to arouse pleasure in the spectator.[36]

4. Rationalism and Sentimentalism in Lessing's Ethics

Perhaps the strongest case for placing Lessing outside the rationalist tradition is based on his theory of tragedy. During his famous correspondence with

[35] Stück 49, October 13, 1767, DKA VI, 423.

[36] See *Laokoon* DKA V/2, 25, 99–100.

Nicolai and Mendelssohn about the nature of tragedy, which took place from July 1756 until May 1757, Lessing defended the traditional Aristotelian view that the chief purpose of tragedy is moral improvement. While Nicolai had argued that the main goal of tragedy is the arousal of feeling alone, regardless of its moral effect,[37] Lessing stressed that such arousal should be only a means to a moral end. He further insisted that tragedy could best attain its moral end through arousing one specific passion, namely pity (*Mitleid*). All the other emotions aroused by tragedy, such as admiration or terror, were, in Lessing's view, only interludes from or aspects of pity. Lessing laid such great emphasis upon pity because he saw it as the basis of "all social virtues and benevolence". The person most disposed to feel pity is the most moral because he or she is the most sensitive to the well-being of others. Hence Lessing made it the chief maxim of his ethics: "The most pitying person is the best person" (*Der mitleidigste Mensch ist der beste Mensch*).[38]

The great value Lessing placed upon pity has been taken as evidence against his adherence to the rationalist ethic of Leibniz and Wolff, and as evidence for his allegiance to the competing sentimentalist ethic of Hutcheson and Rousseau.[39] For advocates of this interpretation, it is no accident that, around the time of his correspondence with Nicolai and Mendelssohn, Lessing had reviewed Rousseau's first discourse and translated Hutcheson's *System of Moral Philosophy*. Supposedly, Lessing came under the influence of Rousseau and Hutcheson, who inspired him to stress the role of feeling in moral conduct.[40]

What are we to make of this interpretation? Is it true that Lessing was essentially a sentimentalist in his moral and aesthetic views? If so, we have one very strong reason to place Lessing outside the rationalist tradition. When we examine the sources more carefully, however, we find that, though Lessing has indeed some affinities with sentimentalism, his main allegiance is still to the rationalist tradition. The crucial task is to determine in *what respects* Lessing

[37] See Friedrich Nicolai, 'Abhandlung vom Trauerspiele', *Bibliothek der schönen Wissenschaften und der freyen Künste* 1 (1757), 17–68.

[38] Lessing to Nicolai, November 1756, DKA XI/1, 120.

[39] See Jochen Schulte-Sasse who, in his edition of Lessing's *Briefwechsel über das Trauerspiel* (Munich: Winckler, 1972), p. 203, claims that Lessing's psychology amounts to "eine Zerstörung der rationalistischen Metaphysik". See especially Hans-Jürgen Schings, *Der mitleidigste Mensch ist der beste Mensch: Poetik des Mitleids von Lessing bis Büchner* (Munich: Beck, 1980), pp. 22–45. Schings is critical of Peter Michelsen, who places Lessing more squarely in the rationalist tradition. See Michelsen's 'Zu Lessings Ansichten über das Trauerspiel im Briefwechsel mit Mendelssohn und Nicolai', *Deutsche Vierteljahrschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte* 40 (1966), 548–66. Michelsen replied to Schings in the 'Post-Scriptum' to the 1990 edition of this essay. See 'Die Erregung des Mitleids durch die Tragödie', in *Der unruhige Bürger: Studien zu Lessing und zur Literatur des achtzehnten Jahrhunderts* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 1990), pp. 107–25.

[40] See Schings, *Der mitleidigste Mensch*, pp. 25–33.

is a rationalist, in *what respects* he is a sentimentalist. We must be careful here not to place Lessing in all-or-nothing categories, to paint him in simplistic black-and-white terms.[41]

To evaluate this interpretation, we must first have a clearer idea of Hutcheson's sentimentalism, which was the most important version of this theory for Lessing. It was the fundamental principle of Hutcheson's sentimentalist ethics that sentiment rather than reason is the basis of moral and aesthetic value. Such a principle is, however, ambiguous. Sentiments might be basic *reasons* for moral and aesthetic judgments, or they might be the chief *causes* of moral and aesthetic action. In other words, they can be necessary for the *justification* or the *execution* of moral actions. These roles are distinct: having a sentiment might be necessary for someone *to act* morally and to develop a moral character, but not necessary *to justify* their action or character. If, for example, I am to become a benevolent person and do philanthropic actions, it is necessary that I develop feelings of sympathy for people in distress; nevertheless, simply having these feelings is not sufficient to justify my acts of kindness to others. Failure to make this basic distinction has led to much confusion in studies of Lessing's ethics and tragic theory.[42]

Hutcheson's sentimentalism is best understood as a specific form of voluntarism, i.e., the doctrine that the will is the ultimate source of moral value. According to voluntarism, something is good because we will it; we do not will it because it is good. If there were no volition, there would be no value at all, neither moral nor aesthetic. Reason, therefore, determines only the means, never the ends, of moral action.[43] What is distinctive about Hutcheson's sentimentalism is that it attempts to limit the will to the constant and universal

[41] Other scholars have attempted to take a middle position on Lessing's stance toward rationalism and sentimentalism. See Heitner, 'Rationalism and Irrationalism in Lessing'. Heitner thinks that Lessing weaves together the rationalist and irrationalist strands of his thought into a coherent whole. Cf. H. B. Nisbet, 'Lessing's Ethics', *Lessing Yearbook* 25 (1993), 1–40. Nisbet maintains that Lessing's ethics is an inconsistent mixture of rationalism and sentimentalism. Like Heitner, and unlike Nisbet, I see no incoherence in Lessing's general position.

[42] Nisbet confuses this distinction when he reasons that Lessing's theory of tragedy "cannot easily be reconciled with Wolff's ethical theory, in which the passions are described and criticised as a source of error and confusion". See 'Lessing's Ethics', p. 4. Lessing's claim that tragedy should provoke passions to *execute* moral obligations is perfectly consistent with reason being the *ratio cognoscendi* of these obligations. Nisbet's general indictment of Lessing's coherence rests upon a confusion of this distinction.

[43] See Hutcheson, *A System of Moral Philosophy*, Book I, chap. iv, sec. iv, in *Collected Works* (Hildesheim: Olms, 1969), V, 58: "And 'tis pretty plain that *reason* is only a subservient power to our ultimate determinations either of perception or will. The ultimate end is settled by some sense, and some determinations of will . . . Reason can only direct to the means; or compare two ends previously constituted by some other immediate powers." See also Hutcheson, *Illustrations of the Moral Sense*, ed. Bernard Peach (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1971), pp. 121–3, 210–11.

sentiments of human nature, viz., self-preservation and love. Such sentiments or feelings are the basic expressions or manifestations of our desires, and as such they serve as criteria of moral value.

If we understand sentimentalism in these terms, and if we keep in mind this basic distinction, then we have reason to think that Lessing adopts a middle position in the dispute between rationalism and sentimentalism. He is a rationalist insofar as he is loyal to the fundamental principle of rationalism that reason, rather than sentiment, *justifies* moral and aesthetic judgments. Nevertheless, he is also a sentimentalist insofar as he holds that sentiment should be a necessary *cause* of moral action, a necessary element of moral character. Lessing adopts this middle position because, like many *Aufklärer* in mid-eighteenth century, he holds that, although reason provides the principles that justify our actions, people more often act according to their sentiments or inclinations. People are primarily affective beings, who act more from feeling than reason. The crucial task of enlightenment is to educate people, so that they develop *moral* feelings and inclinations, and so that they are sympathetic to moral conduct. So if Lessing is a rationalist regarding the *justification* of moral and aesthetic values, he is a sentimentalist regarding their *realization* and *execution* in human conduct and character. Such a position is entirely consistent, even if it is eclectic.

That Lessing was a rationalist regarding the *justification* of moral and aesthetic judgments there cannot be any doubt. His allegiance to rationalism is apparent from this telling passage of the *Hamburgische Dramaturgie*: "The true critic draws no rules from his taste, but forms his taste from the rules, which the nature of things requires."[44] The same basic rationalism appears in *Die Erziehung des Menschengeschlechts*, when Lessing writes that revelation does not reveal anything that we could not have determined through reason itself (§4; X, 75). Although revelation educates us more quickly and firmly than reason alone, it is not a distinct source of knowledge in its own right; indeed, the sole justification for it is that its precepts conform to reason. It is also significant that Lessing makes the fundamental standard for measuring progress in history that of the Wolffian ethic: perfectibility.

That Lessing held at least similar views to sentimentalism regarding the role of feeling in the *execution* of moral judgments is also plain. In his plays he often presents moral decisions and actions as stemming from spontaneous feeling rather than rational deliberation.[45] In the *Hamburgische Dramaturgie* Lessing

[44] *Hamburgische Dramaturgie*, Stück 19, DKA VI, 275.

[45] This point is stressed by Nisbet, 'Lessing's Ethics', p. 8, and Heitner, 'Rationalism and Irrationalism in Lessing', pp. 100–2.

declares that: "All morals must come from fullness of the heart . . . "[46] The reason that people need the revelation of religion for their moral education, he argues in *Die Erziehung des Menschengeschlechts*, is because they act more from feeling and inclination than from reason (§§79–80; X, 95). Since their feelings are often directed by self-interest, there is the need for the religious doctrine of divine rewards and punishments to ensure that people act morally. Only in the final ideal stage of world history, when the education of humanity is nearing its completion, will people have the power to act on reason alone, to do the good because it is good rather than because it is in their self-interest (§85; X, 96).

Some scholars see no departure from the rationalist tradition at all in Lessing's insistence on the role of passion in the execution of moral judgments.[47] This is not evidence for his allegiance to sentimentalism, in their view, because in this regard there is little difference between Lessing and Gottsched, the chief representative of rationalist aesthetics. They note how Gottsched, long before Lessing, had developed a program of aesthetic education, whose purpose is to educate people's feelings and desires through art so that they act on the principles of reason. Such a program presupposes that feelings and desires are fundamental forces behind human action. One can take this point a step further, because in this respect there is no difference between Lessing and many other rationalists. By the 1750s the ideal of an aesthetic education had become a staple of the rationalist tradition; the same program is found in Baumgarten, Meier, and Mendelssohn, no less than in Gottsched.

The whole issue is more complicated, however, because the program of aesthetic education itself does mark a significant development beyond Wolff's ethics, which marks the purest version of ethical rationalism. If we take Wolff rather than Gottsched as the benchmark of rationalism, then Lessing is indeed departing from rationalism after all. How does aesthetic education go beyond Wolff's strict rationalism? In his *Vernunfftige Gedancken von dem menschlichen Thun und Lassen*, the so-called *Deutsche Ethik*, Wolff had stressed how the senses, emotions, and imagination deceive us in making moral judgments, and that their confusions can cause us to deviate from the law of nature (§§180–4; I/4, 109–13). The dominance of the senses, emotions, and imagination, Wolff claimed, is the slavery of man, and only he who has power over them is the master of himself. Rather than seeing the passions as something we can educate and cultivate, so that they can become supports for moral action and character, Wolff regards them more as hindrances, obstacles, or dangers. It is fair to say,

[46] *Hamburgische Dramaturgie*, 'Drittes Stück', DKA VI, 197.

[47] See Michelsen, *Der unruhige Bürger*, pp. 126–7.

then, that Wolff had no conception of aesthetic education. Throughout his ethics there is a deep strand of Stoicism, which emphasizes the importance of developing reason to dominate and control the emotions.

It is in Lessing's insistence on the role of feeling in the execution, if not in the justification, of moral principles that we can find some *affinity* of his position with sentimentalism. Whether this amounts to a case for the actual *influence* of sentimentalism is, however, entirely another matter. It is doubtful that Lessing was inspired by either Hutcheson or Rousseau to stress the moral value of pity in his dramatic theory. Hutcheson does not give an important role to pity in his moral philosophy,[48] and he certainly does not give it the significance that Rousseau would later assign it. Although Lessing had reviewed Rousseau's first discourse in 1751, years before his November 1756 letter to Nicolai, he had confessed to Mendelssohn in 1756 that he had not read but "only leafed through" (*durchgeblättert*) the second discourse.[49] It is only in the second discourse, however, that Rousseau puts forward his theory about pity. In any case, Lessing's views about moral education are scarcely those of Rousseau. In his early review he is critical of Rousseau's thesis that culture of itself corrupts morals.[50] Whether the arts and sciences promote or corrupt morals, Lessing maintains, depends on what use we make of them. When Lessing later maintains that tragedy is a potent force in shaping our sensibility, he assumes that the arts can indeed support morals.

While there is some affinity, rather than influence, between Lessing and the sentimentalist tradition, the affinity really goes no further than Lessing's belief that sentiment is, at least in our present stage of moral development, necessary for the execution of moral duties. In all other respects, Lessing remains firmly within the rationalist tradition. What more than anything else fixes him within this tradition is his allegiance to the rationalist theory of emotions. While the sentimentalist tradition regards emotions as solely affective states arising from volition alone, the rationalist tradition holds that they are also cognitive states, more specifically, confused perceptions of perfections. According to Wolff's *Metaphysik*, an affect (*Affekt*) consists in a perceptible degree of sensate desire or aversion (§439; I/2, 212). Wolff acknowledges, therefore, the role of volition in emotion; however, contrary to the sentimentalist, he makes volition dependent in turn upon cognition. Desire arises from pleasure, which consists

[48] Indeed, in his *System of Moral Philosophy*, Book I, chapter 3, sec. v, Hutcheson argues that all kind affections are *not* derived from sympathy or pity. The fundamental moral passion for Hutcheson is love or benevolence, which seems to play no role in Lessing's ethics.

[49] See Lessing to Mendelssohn, January 21, 1756, DKA XI/1, 88. This point has been made by Michelsen, *Der unruhige Bürger*, p. 131.

[50] 'Das Neueste aus dem Reiche des Witzes', Monat April 1751, DKA II, 64–80.

in the perception of a perfection; and aversion derives from displeasure, which comes from the perception of an imperfection (§404; I/2, 247). Wolff's account of pity conforms to these general principles. Pity is based upon love, which consists in the pleasure we take in the happiness or perfection of others (§449; I/2, 276–7). If someone we love suffers misfortune, we feel pity (*Mitleid*). When we feel pity we make the sorrow or suffering of someone else our own sorrow; true to the German etymology, we literally suffer with them, and it is as good as if their misfortune were happening to us (§461; I/2, 282–3). But to feel this pity for them, we must first have some reason to love them; and we find such reason only from the perception of perfection and excellence in their lives or character. If someone were a complete scoundrel, having no perfection to his character, he would be unworthy of our love, and therefore of our pity.

It is clear from Lessing's correspondence with Nicolai and Mendelssohn that he endorses the Wolffian theory. On several occasions he states expressly that pity involves the perception of a perfection in the person suffering misfortune. He writes, for example, that "Great pity cannot be without great perfection in the object of pity . . . "[51] Indeed, Lessing argues explicitly at least twice that we cannot feel pity for someone lacking all good qualities. When the old cousin is murdered in George Lillo's *The London Merchant*, for example, we feel no pity because he does not have a good character.[52] Finally, Lessing develops a taxonomy of the forms of pity that conforms to strict rationalist principles. There are three degrees of pity: the touching (*Rührung*), the tearful (*Thränen*), and convulsion (*Beklemmung*). The touching arises from only an obscure perception of someone's misfortune and their virtues; the tearful from a clear but confused perception; and convulsion from a clear and distinct perception.[53]

There is one striking passage from his correspondence where Lessing does seem to reject the rationalist theory. In his December 18, 1756 letter to Mendelssohn he writes that it does not matter if the poet deceives my understanding and makes me feel pity for someone who does not really deserve it; as long as the poet has seduced my heart, he has achieved his main end (XI/1, 149). This passage has been taken as evidence for the view that Lessing, like a true sentimentalist, values feelings over intellectual awareness.[54]

[51] See Lessing to Mendelssohn, December 18, 1756, DKA XI/1, 145. Cf. Lessing to Mendelssohn, November 13, 1756, XI/1, 123: "all sorrow accompanied by tears is sorrow from a lost good"; and Lessing to Mendelssohn, November 28, 1756, XI/1, 129: "pity appears at the side of amazement, that is, it arises from a finally and suddenly discovered good quality".

[52] See Lessing to Mendelssohn, December 18, 1756, XI/1, 152. Cf. Lessing to Mendelssohn, November 28, 1756, XI/1, 131.

[53] Lessing to Nicolai, November 29, 1756, XI/1, 134–6.

[54] Shings, *Der mitleidigste Mensch*, p. 40.

But this passage needs to be placed in its context. What Lessing says here is that tragedy should teach us how to practice pity and not only to feel pity in this or that specific case, for this or that particular person. It does not matter, therefore, if in *a specific case* the poet deceives me and makes me feel pity for a particular person who really has no perfections of character; as long as this develops one's *general capacity* to feel pity some good has been achieved. This does not imply, however, that, on the whole or usually, this disposition can be directed toward imperfect objects. In other words, Lessing is allowing for exceptions to the rule, which demands that we feel pity for people of good character; he is not advocating the rule that we should cultivate pity for good and bad characters alike.

5. *Laokoon*: Thesis and Inductive Argument

One of the classic texts in the rationalist tradition—one whose fame and interest has transcended this tradition—is Lessing's *Laokoon, oder über die Grenzen der Malerei und Poesie*, which was first published in 1766. Like so many tracts in this tradition, *Laokoon* attempts to establish a solid foundation for criticism; it too seeks the basic rules by which the critic should judge works of art. In this respect Lessing's work does not differ from those of his rationalist predecessors, from the efforts of Gottsched, Bodmer, Breitinger, Baumgarten, and Mendelssohn. There is, however, something new to Lessing's text, something that carries the discussion forward and into new territory. Its central problem is less to determine the common principles of the arts than the specific differences between them. Whereas his predecessors attempted to discover the single fundamental principle behind all the arts, Lessing wants to determine how this principle takes shape in the individual arts. Lessing takes it for granted that imitation is the sole purpose of all arts, but he wants to know its specific forms in different arts.

Lessing's general thesis in *Laokoon* is that each art has a characteristic purpose and medium, and that it should be judged by them alone. We should not expect one art to do the work of another, but judge each by what it aims to do and the instruments it has at its disposal to achieve them. In an earlier draft he summarized his thesis very succinctly:

> I maintain only that can be the end of an art to which it is singularly and alone fitted, and not that which another art can do just as well or better than it. I find in Plutarch a simile that illustrates this very well. "Who", he says, "wants to chop wood with a key

and open a door with an axe not only destroys both tools but also deprives himself of their use." (V/2, 318)[55]

For Lessing, unlike Gottsched, Bodmer, Breitinger and Baumgarten, criticism has a very different task from philosophy. He agrees with his predecessors that it is the business of the philosopher to determine the general principles of the arts while it is the task of the critic to apply them to specific cases. However, for Lessing, applying general principles imposes another task on the critic that he does not share with the philosopher. Namely, it is the job of the critic to see how general principles take on a different meaning when applied to different arts. So where the philosopher requires *wit*, the power of finding the similarities between things, the critic needs *acumen*, which determines the differences between them. Acumen, Lessing stresses, is the rarer capacity. For every fifty critics who show wit only one has acumen.[56]

Laokoon was not meant to be a general aesthetic about all the different arts but only a case study in how to distinguish between them. Hence, as the subtitle suggests, Lessing's aim in *Laokoon* is to determine the differences between only two of the fine arts: poetry and painting, where painting (*Malerei*) is understood in a broad sense to refer to all the visual arts, to sculpture and ceramics as well as painting. Even in this modest task, however, Lessing had his work cut out for him. For his central thesis was quite controversial. It was opposed to an old classical tradition that treated poetry and painting as if they were one and the same. According to an old saying of Simonides, painting is "a silent poem" and poetry "a speaking picture". Horace's famous dictum "*Ut pictura poesis*" was constantly cited and understood in this sense. This classical theory had not disappeared in the eighteenth century, but had been reaffirmed recently by Joseph Spence in his *Polymetis* (1747) and by Count Craylus in his *Tableu tirés de l'Iliade* (1757). Both duly became Lessing's chief targets in *Laokoon*. But Lessing was taking on an even more entrenched view, one much closer to home. For no one had gone to greater lengths to re-establish the classical theory than the rationalists themselves. This was indeed the essence of the poetics of Bodmer, Breitinger, and Baumgarten; and Winckelmann too would appeal to it to justify the claims of the visual arts *vis-à-vis* poetry. Although it is never explicit in *Laokoon*, Lessing was, by intention or implication, also criticizing the rationalist tradition itself.

[55] See *Paralipomena* 20: "The proper end of a fine art can be only that which it is in a position to produce without the aid of another" (DKA V/2, 295).

[56] Lessing contrasts a "witzige" to a "scharfsinnige" critic (*Kunstrichter*) (165). Here he employs the Wolffian technical distinction between wit (*Witz*) and acumen (*Scharfsinnigkeit*), according to which wit determines the similarities and acumen the differences between things. This distinction is blurred in both the Steel and McCormick translations.

Laokoon was first and foremost directed against some abuses of contemporary criticism, what Lessing contemptuously called "*Afterkritik*". The problem with so much current criticism, he complains, is that critics do not judge each art in its own terms, according to its specific ends and the unique qualities of its medium. They expect one art to conform to the rules and ends of another; and the results are ruinous: an art's potential is unnecessarily restricted, its limits imprudently exceeded. Lessing makes it clear, however, that the problem is not only one of criticism but also of creation; not only critics but also artists themselves were misled by misconceptions of the arts. Hence *Laokoon* also targets some major trends in contemporary poetry and painting. One of these was the rage for descriptive poetry, "*poetische Gemälde*", which was practiced by Haller, Brockes, Kleist, and Geßner. The other was allegorical painting, which had been the fashion among rococo painters. Lessing referred to these trends as if they were degenerative diseases, calling them (respectively) *Schilderungssucht* and *Allegoristerei*.

From Lessing's account of his intentions in the preface to *Laokoon*, it seems as if he is arguing for the autonomy and integrity of each of the arts. His main critical point seems to be his general thesis that each art should be judged according to its own ends and media, and not by those of another art. Such a thesis seems to support what we might call "the principle of the natural equality of the arts",[57] the doctrine that each art is valid in its own terms and that none is better than another. This principle seems to be the very spirit of Lessing's tract, and it has been held to be his chief contribution to aesthetics.[58] It is important to see, however, that though this principle is indeed the implication of Lessing's thesis, at least when broadly construed, it is completely at odds with his practice and deeper intentions. Far from respecting each art in its own terms, Lessing damns whole genres, viz., landscapes, historical painting, and portraits; and instead of carefully distinguishing between sculpture and painting, he lumps them together as if there were no difference between them. This discrepancy between Lessing's general thesis and his actual performance seems downright puzzling until we recognize that it is only in keeping with his deeper designs.[59] Rather than championing a principle of natural equality, Lessing's real goal is to vindicate a rationalist hierarchy of the fine arts, which would grade them according to their intellectual content and imitative power. Such a hierarchy places poetry at its top, and dramatic poetry at its very apex,

[57] To adapt Hume's phrase, "the principle of the natural equality of tastes", from 'Of the Standard of Taste', in *Essays, Moral, Political and Literary* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1985), p. 231.

[58] See, for example, Hettner, *Geschichte* I, 736.

[59] In the next sections, 6–7, we will explain in more detail this discrepancy between Lessing's principle and program.

while the visual arts, occupied with mere visual appearances and encumbered with manual practices, compose its base. Nothing could better betray Lessing's deep rationalist bias.

True to his general aim, Lessing makes arguments throughout *Laokoon* about the distinctive limits and powers of poetry and painting. It is important to note, however, the precise purport and structure of these arguments, which are often misunderstood. Fundamental to Lessing's thesis that there are artistic genres is his claim that each art should have a specific subject matter, viz., that painting should represent static bodies and poetry actions. Prima facie Lessing's argument for this thesis is based entirely on the technical qualities of their signs or media, viz., because its signs are in space, painting represents static bodies; and because its signs are in time poetry represents actions. Yet closer inspection reveals that Lessing's argument is never based *entirely* on the nature of their signs of media. He recognizes that painters have it in their technical power to portray actions, and that poets have it in their technical power to describe bodies. So it is never simply a matter of the physical properties of a medium or the technical powers of the artist. The crucial question for Lessing is whether, given the technical powers and the nature of the medium, the artist can effectively achieve the ends of his art. Hence in the beginning of chapter XXIV Lessing makes an important distinction between what an artist can do by virtue of his technical powers, and what he must do to achieve the ends of his fine art (V/2, 169). Or, as he puts the point in an earlier draft: "The critic must keep in mind not only the power but also the end of the art" (V/2, 268). So Lessing's arguments are based not only upon the nature of the media, but also upon how each art best achieves its ends. Without argument or explanation, Lessing makes it a fundamental principle that the chief end of the fine arts is to create pleasure in the spectator (25, 225). The issue is then about how best to use a medium to create such pleasure. The arguments about genres are therefore hypothetical in form: *if* the artist wants to achieve the ends of his art, *if* he wishes to maximize its effect on the spectator, then he must use his medium in a certain way and choose a certain subject matter.

In his preface Lessing gives only a few hints about his methodology. He explains that his method will be empirical and casual, not systematic and rigorous. Rather than beginning with definitions and making rigorous deductions from them, he intends to expound his thoughts in the accidental order he has discovered them. They comprise more the *Collectanea* for a book than a book proper, as he puts it. Lessing laughs at the systematic ambitions of someone like Baumgarten, who out of a few definitions spins whatever he wants (15). We must be careful, however, not to take Lessing's disclaimers too

seriously, as if they meant rejection in principle of the rationalist method. The first drafts of the *Laokoon* proceed according to a deductive method; and in chapter XVI of the published version Lessing continues to follow just such a method. Rather than being purely inductive or deductive, Lessing's method is a combination of both. It begins from observations about works that are generally regarded as masterpieces; and it then ascends to higher principles, which attempt to explain these observations. There is an obvious analogy here with the method of the natural sciences, though it is unclear whether Lessing deliberately intended to follow such a model.[60]

Following his inductive method, Lessing begins his tract with Winckelmann's famous description of the Laocoön sculpture. According to Winckelmann, Laocoön exhibits the "noble simplicity and serene greatness" (*edle Einfalt und stille Größe*) characteristic of all Greek sculpture.[61] Sharing Winckelmann's neo-classical taste, Lessing acknowledges that his description is indeed correct: Laocoön's face shows no violence, despite the pain, but only composure and restraint (17–18). Like Winckelmann, Lessing finds it striking that Laocoön is groaning rather than screaming. This is odd because one would expect someone to shriek when being crushed to death by serpents. So the crucial question for Lessing is: Why is Laocoön not screaming?

Before considering Lessing's explanation for this fact, one might well ask whether it is a fact at all. Is it not the *interpretation* of a fact? Lessing's and Winckelmann's common starting point seems to betray their neo-classical taste, their refusal to allow representation of extreme and excessive emotions in a work of art. Wisely, Lessing wrote: "What we find beautiful in a work of art we find not by our eye but by our imagination through the eye" (V/2, 61). This raises the question whether the imagination of someone else might see something different in the sculpture. Sure enough, others have seen Laocoön's expression as a scream more than a groan.[62] Lessing's argument then seems circular: rather than basing taste upon a work of art, he reads his taste into it.

Whatever the merits of Winckelmann's description, Lessing accepts it as the starting point of his investigation. While he agrees that Laocoön groans rather than screams, he questions Winckelmann's explanation for this apparent fact. Winckelmann found the reason in the Greek *ethos*. The Greek sculptor,

[60] Dilthey claimed that Lessing's *Laokoon* was "das erste große Beispiel analytischer Untersuchungsweise auf dem Gebiet geistiger Phänomene in Deutschland", and that the analogy with the natural sciences was not accidental. See his 'Gotthold Ephraim Lessing', in *Das Erlebnis und die Dichtung*, Zweite Auflage (Leipzig: Teubner, 1907), pp. 37–8. Dilthey offers little textual support for his interpretation.

[61] See Chapter 6.4.

[62] Some critics found excessive pathos in Laocoön. For their reactions, see Margaret Bieber, *Laocoon* (New York: Columbia, 1942), pp. 15–17.

he wrote in his *Gedancken über die Nachahmung der griechischen Wercke in der Mahlerei und Bildhauer-Kunst*, had the same greatness of soul as the philosopher; and it was this greatness of soul that he imparted to the marble. "Greatness of soul" derives from the ethic of self-restraint, moderation, and self-possession prized by Aristotle and the Stoics. Lessing contends, however, that it could not have been the Greek *ethos*. For if we read the Greek poets—specifically, Homer and Sophocles—we find that they were happy to describe pain and suffering. Sophocles' heroes shout when they are in pain; and Homer's warriors scream when they are wounded. In any case, Lessing questions Winckelmann's account of the Greek *ethos*. He claims that, unlike moderns or the ancient barbarians, the Greeks were not afraid to express their feelings, which they saw as a crucial element of their humanity (20–1).

The real reason why Laocoön does not scream has nothing to do with Greek ethics, Lessing claims, and everything to do with their aesthetics. The Greek aesthetic set narrow limits to the visual arts, prohibiting them from depicting ugly or ordinary objects. The supreme law of their aesthetic was beauty, which meant that the visual arts had to represent something having a pleasing visual form (22). It was this law, Lessing contends, that prohibited the Greek sculptor from depicting a screaming Laocoön. For if Laocoön were to scream, it would have distorted his face, which would have been ugly. Cries of pain, Lessing says, "disfigure the face in a nauseating manner" (29).

It is tempting to object to Lessing's argument on the grounds that beauty is really an attribute of a painting rather than its subject matter. Prima facie the argument confuses a beautiful painting with the painting of a beautiful object. Once we admit such a distinction Lessing's explanation appears to crumble, because it is then possible to say *both* that the Greeks made beauty the end of the visual arts and that they allowed the depiction of ugly objects. Lessing, however, is perfectly aware of this distinction,[63] which would have been familiar to him from Baumgarten and Mendelssohn. Nevertheless, he explicitly refuses to apply it to the ancient Greeks. He carefully explains that the Greeks wanted more than a beautiful painting of an ordinary or ugly object; they also demanded a beautiful painting of a beautiful object (22, 31). It is a distinguishing characteristic of modern painting, Lessing thinks, that it does not insist on this additional requirement and attempts to create beautiful paintings of ordinary or even ugly objects.

For Lessing, the ancient demand for a beautiful subject matter is more than an historical fact about ancient Greek taste. It also reflects a fundamental

[63] This is especially clear from *Paralipomena* 3, V/2, 227–8, where Lessing directly addresses this point.

principle of all visual arts. The ancient Greeks were entirely correct, he argues, to insist that not only the imitation but also its subject matter should be beautiful. Lessing's argument for this controversial point, which is only vaguely sketched in chapter II, takes the following form: (1) The purpose of art is to please the spectator as much as possible. (2) The spectator is pleased more by the sight of beautiful than ugly objects. (3) Therefore, the purpose of art is to imitate beautiful objects. It follows that the artist should refrain from imitating ugly objects. Lessing does not deny that there can be perfect paintings of ugly objects, and that these paintings, by virtue of their perfection, give the spectator *some* pleasure. His only point is that such paintings do not *fully realize* the purpose of art since they do not create as much pleasure as paintings of beautiful objects.[64]

Some of the premises for this argument are clarified only in chapters XXIV and XXV of *Laokoon*, where Lessing explains why ugliness should not be an object of art. Perception of ugliness of form never pleases, he contends, whether in reality or in imitation. We do not want to see Thersites—the ugly anti-hero of Homer's *Iliad*—in nature or in a picture (169–70). We cannot make ugliness of form into a pleasant sensation simply through the power of its imitation. However much we might be pleased by the quality of the imitation, however much it might resemble its object, we still do not take pleasure in the ugly form itself. Lessing does not deny that many unpleasant feelings can be made pleasant, or at least rendered harmless, through imitation. The fear and pity aroused by tragedy, for example, give us pleasure solely because they are imitations. Still, he denies that this is the case with ugliness of form. He is so keen to banish ugliness of form from the visual arts that he likens it to the feeling of disgust (*Ekel*). Mendelssohn had written that disgust is one of those feelings that can never be rendered pleasant through art; but he had limited disgust to the senses of smell, taste, and touch.[65] Lessing agrees with Mendelssohn that disgust in itself can never be made pleasant through art; but he claims that the sensation is not limited to smell, taste, and touch but can

[64] Lessing's argument is not committed to the equation of the beauty of a picture with the beauty of its subject matter, nor does it require the belief that they are interconnected. My own account of Lessing's argument avoids the obvious problems attributed to it by Anthony Savile in his *Aesthetic Reconstructions*, Aristotelian Society Series 8 (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987), pp. 4–18. Savile claims that Lessing is committed to such an equation because of his adherence to the principle of imitation (10). It is questionable, however, whether Lessing held this doctrine in such an unqualified form as to infer all that *all* properties of the imitation must resemble those of the object imitated. In Stück 70 of the *Hamburgische Dramaturgie*, DKA VI, 532, 534, Lessing argues that imitation pleases only in virtue of an act of abstraction, only in virtue of creating an artificial order that does not resemble anything in the order of nature.

[65] See *Briefe, die neueste Literatur betreffend*, no. 82, February 14, 1760, *Jubiläumsausgabe*, V/1, 131–2.

be extended to sight too. He gives some striking examples, viz., a complete absence of eyebrows, a cleft lip, a scar in the face (173–4).

However plausible the premises, there is a problem with Lessing's argument as it stands. His aim is to establish something true about the *visual* arts; but the argument shoots too wide, because it seems that *any* art should avoid having the ugly for its object. If poetry were to have something ugly for its object, that should limit its perfection too. Fully aware of this problem, Lessing responds to it in chapters IV and XXIII. Here he admits that poetry, unlike painting and sculpture, can have ugliness of form for its object. Although a painter or sculptor cannot portray Laocoön screaming, the poet can make his Laocoön shriek to the heavens. Why? Lessing explains in chapter IV that because poetry, unlike sculpture and painting, does not deal with one moment but an entire action throughout many moments, it can include something ugly *provided that* it is one moment of the whole action (35). When it is part of a larger whole, the effects of ugliness are mitigated and balanced; indeed, through contrast it gives extra power and piquancy to the pleasure of perceiving the whole. In chapter XXIII Lessing argues that there are even occasions when the poet will find it necessary to include ugliness as a necessary component of his work (165). These occasions are when the poet wants to arouse the mixed emotions of the ridiculous or the terrible.

Whatever the ultimate merits of his argument in chapter II, Lessing advances a completely new argument in chapter III about why painters and sculptors should not represent Laocoön screaming. Whereas the first argument depends on the concept of beauty, the second avoids any reference to it at all. Lessing now reasons as follows. Since the visual arts represent something only in a single moment, and since they represent only one aspect of that moment, the painter or sculptor must choose a moment that is extremely "fruitful" or "pregnant". A fruitful or pregnant moment is one that allows the imagination "free play" (*freies Spiel*). (181). Such free play takes place when seeing and thinking reinforce one another, so that the more we think about the object the more we see in it, and the more we see in it the more we think about it. Now the problem with the representation of extreme or excessive states of mind, such as Laocoön screaming, is that it sets limits to our imagination; it fixes the imagination on one point, beyond which it cannot go.

Lessing's principle of "the free play of the imagination" was itself pregnant and fruitful. The concept would later be made famous by Kant, who cast it in more obscure transcendental terms in the *Kritik der Urteilskraft*. The question remains, however, whether it gives Lessing the neo-classical conclusion he wants: excluding the representation of extreme states of mind from the visual

arts. As first formulated, there is something wrong with this argument. For, arguably, whenever the artist portrays anything determinate or anything in detail—whenever his work is not sketchy or impressionistic—he limits the imagination. Our attention is focused on that determinate shape or color, so that it cannot shift to any other. So whether Laocoön is screaming or sighing there is no room for the play of imagination.

Although the argument as formulated is problematic, there is a better point behind it, though it has little to do with imagination and much to do with sensibility. Lessing is saying, if only implicitly, that the spectator cannot dwell very long on something extreme or excessive. Something extreme or excessive does not tire the imagination—it is indeed not hard to imagine it—but it does stress our sensibility. We cannot repeatedly, constantly, or even for a long time, look at something that overstimulates our senses and disturbs our composure. Whether in the visual or the poetic arts, the principle of imitation has to be restricted for the sake of our sensibility. No one, for example, could bear to hear someone on stage screaming in agony for ten minutes, even when in real life this would be the likely response to what happens to them.[66]

6. *Laokoon*: The Deductive Argument

After proceeding inductively in his early chapters, Lessing begins to argue deductively in chapter XVI. The deductive argument, which is almost in syllogistic form, consists in the following premises (116–17): (1) Painting and poetry use different signs. Painting uses figures and colors that are contiguous in space, whereas poetry uses sounds that succeed one another in time. (2) Since signs should have ''a fitting relation'' (*ein bequemes Verhältnis*) to the things signified, signs that are contiguous should signify only the contiguous; and signs that are successive should signify only the successive. (3) Since contiguous things are bodies, and since successive things are actions, the subject matter of painting should consist in bodies, whereas the subject matter of poetry should consist in actions. As Lessing later puts it, the sphere of the poet is succession in time, whereas the sphere of the painter and sculptor is juxtaposition in space (130).

This argument has two important implications, which Lessing spells out in chapter XVIII. First, that the painter cannot bring distant points in time into the same picture; to do so would be for the painter to invade the space of

[66] Compare Hume's comment at the close of his essay 'Of Tragedy', *Essays*, p. 224.

the poet. Second, the poet cannot make what is simultaneous in space into a successive series of moments; this would be for the painter to invade the realm of the poet (258). While Lessing's main concern is to place each art into its proper boundaries, he also acknowledges that he cannot completely separate these spheres. To a limited degree, he allows each art to intrude into the sphere of the other. Since all bodies exist in time as well as space, painting can also imitate actions, though only by way of suggestion (*andeutungsweise*) through bodies (245). Since actions are connected to certain bodies, poetry too depicts bodies, though only by way of suggestion through actions (245).

The crucial premise of the argument, though terribly vague, is the second. What Lessing seems to have in mind by "a fitting relation to the signified" (*ein bequemes Verhältnis zu dem Bezeichneten*) is an analogy between the structure of the signs and the structure of their objects. There must be an isomorphism between them, so that what is contiguous in the signs must be contiguous in the object, and so that what is successive in the signs must be successive in the object. The demand for such an isomorphism seems to derive from the principle of imitation, which Lessing endorses, although he does not spell it out as a premise of his argument.

As it stands, there seems to be a type fallacy lurking behind the analogy: Why should a property of a sign also be a property of the signified? The problem here is that Lessing treats the signs of both arts as natural rather than arbitrary, as if their meaning came from the observable similarity between sign and signified rather than from convention. While this seems correct for painting and sculpture, which represent things through colors and shapes, it seems false for poetry, which represents things through words. This difficulty was pointed out to Lessing by Mendelssohn when he commented on one of the first drafts of *Laokoon*. To Lessing's claim that poetry had to portray actions because its signs appeared in succession, Mendelssohn declared, flatly and firmly, "*Nein*!".[67] He argued that because poetry uses words having a conventional meaning for its medium, it can signify bodies as well as actions.

Alerted by Mendelssohn to the difficulty, Lessing attempts to respond to it in chapter XVII of the final version. He admits that the signs of speech are arbitrary, so that what is successive in speech might represent a static object. But, he replies, this is not a property of speech that best suits poetry. The poet is not concerned to be merely intelligible; he does not simply want his representations to be clear and distinct. Rather, he wants the ideas within us to be living things, so that it is as if we experience the very objects themselves, and so that it is as if we are having the sense impressions the objects would make on

[67] Mendelssohn, 'Zu einem Laokoon-Entwurf Lessings', *Jubiläumsausgabe*, II, 234.

us (123–4). Although the poet can indeed describe visible bodies, his words, because they appear successively, cannot make the same vivid impression on us as the painter. Whereas the painter's signs present all the qualities of the object as a whole and at once, just as they appear to our senses, the poet's words follow one another in time, so that they reproduce the impression only one part at a time and never instantly as a whole (124, 125–6).

Although Lessing has a point when he claims that the poet cannot be as vivid as the painter, it is at least arguable that he gives the correct diagnosis of this fact. He thinks that it is because the poet's medium of exposition is temporal rather than spatial, or because, as he puts it, "the coexistence of the body comes into collision with the consecutiveness of speech" (127). But a simpler diagnosis suggests itself: that words having a conventional meaning are more abstract than signs having a natural meaning. The picture cannot be reproduced in words not because words have to be expounded in time, but because they are abstract while a picture is concrete. That succession is not a decisive factor becomes clear from the fact that, after hearing all the words successively the first time, we can later consider them all at once and as a whole; even then, however, they still do not create a vivid impression. In that case the only explanation has to be the abstractness of the words rather than the time necessary to apprehend them.

Whatever the difficulties with these arguments, they scarcely exhaust Lessing's attempt to answer Mendelssohn's objection. Lessing was so greatly troubled by it that he made several attempts to respond to it in his drafts and correspondence. Perhaps the most interesting and effective reply appears in his March 26, 1759 letter to Nicolai (11/1. 609–10). Here Lessing admits that painting is not confined to natural signs, because it contains symbols as well as shapes and colors, and that poetry heavily uses arbitrary signs, because it relies on the conventional meanings of words. Nevertheless, Lessing insists that the *ideal* of painting should be to use *entirely* natural signs while that of poetry should be to *approach* natural signs. The more painting reduces its use of natural signs the more it departs from its perfection; and the more poetry uses arbitrary signs the more it departs from its perfection. In other words, the highest form of painting uses only natural signs in space, while the highest form of poetry uses only natural signs in time. This point reveals that Lessing's argument about genres is more normative than descriptive. What determines the norm of each should be whether they create a pleasing effect on the reader or spectator. The question remains: How should poetry aspire to its ideal of having purely natural signs? Lessing explains that the chief means of achieving this are through sound, measure, figures, tropes, and metaphors. In

an earlier draft of *Laokoon* he advised the poet to use onomatopoeic words and interjections, to order his words so that they succeed one another as the object itself, and to use similes and metaphors (V/2, 309–310). Lessing saw metaphor as involving a natural sign for an object, for, although the word itself was not a natural sign for the object, it designated something that was naturally similar to the object.

All this advice seems to consist in so many desperate measures, futile attempts to diminish the basically irreducible and fundamental fact that poetry consists in arbitrary rather than natural signs. But all the objections against Lessing's theory lose their force when one realizes the specific form of poetry for which it was originally designed: dramatic poetry. In his March 26 letter to Nicolai, Lessing insists that his theory works only for poetry in its ideal state; and he goes on to explain that the perfect form of poetry is dramatic poetry. Aristotle had already said as much in his *Poetics*, and for Lessing this was by itself sufficient reason for accepting such a doctrine. But once we realize that Lessing is chiefly writing with dramatic poetry in mind, it is easy to see why he thinks the most perfect form of poetry consists in natural signs. This is because dramatic poetry involves in its very conception speaking and acting on stage, which can be treated as natural signs. Speaking and action consist in movements, expressions, and sounds, which naturally designate real actions, thoughts, and speech. Hence, sure enough, there is a ''fitting'' relationship between sign and signified because the order in which the signs succeed one another on stage is the same as the order in which an action or speech would or should take place. Lessing himself makes this very point in *Laokoon* when he notes in chapter IV that drama can follow the laws of material painting better than poetry itself because its signs are natural (V/2, 36). Whereas poetry gives us a description of a cry, drama can give us the cry itself.

7. *Laokoon*: Its Hidden Agenda

Now that we have examined Lessing's argument in the *Laokoon*, we might well ask what motivated it in the first place. Why was Lessing so concerned to separate the spheres of poetry and painting? What was at stake? Many scholars have stressed the provocative role of Winckelmann's *Gedancken* in the genesis of Lessing's work.[68] In their view, it is no accident that *Laokoon*

[68] The significance of Winckelmann for the genesis of the *Laokoon* was pointed out long ago by Theodor Danzel and G. E. Guhrauer, *Gotthold Ephraim Lessing: Seine Leben und seine Werke* (Berlin: Hofmann, 1881), II, 1–53.

begins and ends with a polemic against Winckelmann. It was not simply that Lessing had another explanation for why Laocoön groans, or that he suggested a different date for the composition of the statue. Despite their shared neo-classical taste, and despite their common rationalist heritage, the differences between Lessing and Winckelmann run rather deep. We begin to appreciate these differences when we note that, in the *Gedancken*, Winckelmann had reaffirmed the old doctrine of the identity of poetry and visual art, the very doctrine Lessing wanted to put in its place in *Laokoon*. The crucial question is why Winckelmann's version of this doctrine was so troubling for Lessing. After all, the same doctrine had been reaffirmed by Bodmer and Breitinger, who never bothered Lessing.

There are different accounts about why Lessing disliked Winckelmann's version of this doctrine. One interpretation is that Lessing was greatly disturbed by the growing popularity of Winckelmann's neo-classicism, which threatened to bring back into the theatrical world the French taste he had so passionately opposed in the 1750s.[69] Winckelmann's description of Greek sculpture—"noble simplicity and serene greatness"—seemed to be especially apt for neo-classical French tragedies, whose stilted and mannered heroes seemed to be like nothing more than moving statues. Such a description also seemed to apply perfectly to the Stoic virtues displayed on the French stage, whose purpose was to excite the admiration of the audience. If, then, such neo-classical taste were to be applied to the dramatic world, it would amount to re-establishing and rationalizing the old French dramas. If the heroes of tragedy were to show noble simplicity and calm grandeur, then the purpose of tragedy would be to arouse admiration rather than pity. The bourgeois tragedy, which Lessing had championed since the 1750s, would come to nothing. We are told that Lessing had good reason to see Winckelmann's work in such a context because, in his December 1756 letter to Lessing, Mendelssohn had cited Winckelmann to support his own tragic theory.[70] Though no Francophile, Mendelssohn still had very French views about the purpose of tragedy: its aim was to arouse the admiration of the audience. The values of the old Greek sculptors, Mendelssohn argued, were just those he would like to see on stage.

Although it is ingenious and plausible, there are some fatal problems with this interpretation. First, Lessing states explicitly in some of the drafts of *Laokoon* that Winckelmann did *not* intend to extend his analysis of sculpture

[69] This is the explanation of E. H. Gombrich, 'Lessing', *Proceedings of the British Academy* 43 (1957), 133–56.

[70] Mendelssohn to Lessing, First Half of December 1756, DKA 11/1, 140–1.

and painting to poetry.[71] He notes that Winckelmann recognized sculptor and painter to be bound by laws of beauty that do not apply to the poet. So the danger of applying the standards of painting and sculpture to poetry and drama came more from Mendelssohn than from Winckelmann. Second, Lessing could not have been troubled by applying neo-classical standards to the world of drama for the simple reason that he was anxious to do just that himself. It would be a mistake to think that Lessing allows his actors and characters to vent wild and excessive passions on stage, for here too he subjects them to standards of moderation and restraint. In Stück 5 of the *Hamburgische Dramaturgie*, for example, Lessing cites Hamlet's advice to actors: "For in the very torrent, tempest and . . . whirlwind of passion, you must acquire and beget a temperance that may give it smoothness" (VI, 209).[72] Although Lessing allows an actor to show fire and passion, he insists that this should be only momentary and never more than circumstances permit; if the actor goes too far, he will offend the spectators' ears no less than their eyes. In no circumstances does he permit screams and contortions; in other words, there is no place on Lessing's stage for a screaming Laocoön. And so Lessing reminds us: "There are few voices that are not offensive in their most extreme exertions; and all too sudden, all too tempestuous movements are seldom noble. Neither our eyes nor our ears should be offended. . . " (210). Lessing then explains that acting stands midway between sculpture and poetry. Since, like painting, it is visible, it must make beauty its highest law; but since, like poetry, it is spoken, it need not give every passage that peace (*Ruhe*) that makes ancient sculpture so imposing. Now and then acting can allow itself "the wildness of a tempest, the impudence of a Bernini"; but in general the dramatic poet and actor must also observe the moderation and restraint that is characteristic of painting and sculpture.

Despite its difficulties, this interpretation still proceeds from a correct insight: that Lessing was troubled by Winckelmann's reaffirmation of the classical doctrine of the identity of poetry and painting. It gives a false account, however, of the reasons for Lessing's chagrin. Lessing was provoked by Winckelmann not because he used this doctrine to apply the standards of sculpture to the stage, but because he used it to elevate the status of painting *vis-à-vis* poetry. Winckelmann was a challenge to Lessing chiefly because he threatened his deeply-held belief in the superiority of poetry among the fine arts. Lessing still clung to the rationalist belief in the hierarchy of the arts, which had placed poetry, because of its greater intellectual content, at the apex,

[71] See *Paralipomena* 7, DKA V/2, 255; and *Paralipomena* 19, DKA V/2, 291. Cf. Winckelmann, *Geschichte der Kunst des Altertums* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1972), p. 166.

[72] *Hamlet* Act III, Scene ii.

and more manual arts like painting and sculpture closer to the bottom. Such a self-flattering belief was perhaps the inevitable product of Lessing's vocation as a dramatist and literary critic. Whatever its ultimate roots, the stature of Lessing's vocation now seemed under attack from the German cicerone. The very hierarchy Lessing wanted to strengthen Winckelmann attempted to topple. For it was a crucial part of Winckelmann's program in the *Gedancken* to challenge this hierarchy, to give new status to painting and sculpture by placing them on the same footing as poetry.[73] If painting were only allegorical, Winckelmann believed, it could achieve the same status as poetry. The alleged superiority of poetry over painting is that it is more intellectual and has the supersensible for its object; but painting too could have the same virtue, Winckelmann argued, provided that it became allegorical. We can now see the main reason why Lessing despised *Allegoristerei*: it is not that it diminishes the characteristic virtues of painting, but that it is an effort on the part of painting to vie with poetry. All too explicitly Lessing warns painting against such sibling rivalry: "If painting wants to be the sister of poetry, then it should be at least no jealous sister; the younger should not forbid the elder all the glamour that she does not have" (V/2, 83).

That Lessing was concerned to defend the superiority of poetry over painting in the *Laokoon* there cannot be any doubt. Constantly, Lessing seems on the defensive about poetry. Time and again he reminds us that the poet is not bound to the same restrictions as the painter.[74] The poet does not have to limit himself to the laws of beauty, to a single moment in time, or to how things appear to the senses. Poetry has a much more universal scope than the visual arts. The poet does not have to exclude the ugly from his world; he can consider an entire action rather than a single moment; he can get inside the inner world of his characters; and he can ascend to a more intellectual plateau where he grasps universal moral truths. Painting, however, can do little more than copy the pleasing appearances of the visual world, just as Plato had taught in Book X of the *Republic*.

We can now also understand Lessing's animus against descriptive poetry. Concerned to maintain the stature of poetry as the most intellectual of all the arts, Lessing had to be as opposed to "poetic portraiture" as he was to allegory in painting. *Schilderungssucht* was as bad as *Allegoristerei* for the same reason: it meant degrading the powers of poetry. If allegorizing was a conspiracy to

[73] See Winckelmann, *Gedancken*, p. 55, and *Erläuterung der Gedancken*, pp. 118–19, in *Kleine Schriften, Vorreden, Entwürfe*, ed. Walter Rehm, 2nd edn. (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2002).

[74] See, for example, chapter 4, DKA V/2, 35–36, and chapter 6, DKA V/2, 61. On this aspect of *Laokoon*, see especially the analysis by David Wellbery, *Lessing's Laocoon: Semiotics and Aesthetics in the Age of Reason* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), pp. 133, 135.

bring painting to the level of poetry, poetic painting was a plot to reduce poetry to the level of painting. Rather than penetrating into the realm of the supersensible, descriptive poetry would reduce itself to the mere imitation of appearances. If that were so, then everything Plato declared against painting in Book X of the *Republic* would be as true of poetry as painting. Poetry would then forfeit the one great defense Aristotle made in its behalf: its power to grasp universal truth.

It has been wisely said that Lessing's *Laokoon* is more a book *against* than *about* the visual arts.[75] It is necessary to add, however, that it is more a defense of poetry than a critique of the visual arts. Lessing's *Laokoon* was essentially a two-pronged counteroffensive against two current threats to the stature of poetry. The first threat, which came from allegorical painting, attempted to elevate painting to the level of poetry; the second threat, which came from descriptive poetry, attempted to reduce poetry to the level of painting. Lessing's strategy against this dual threat was simple but effective: *divide et impera!* Lessing only had to separate the realms of poetry and painting to prevent poetry from descending to painting and painting from ascending to poetry. Such a strategy is subtly Machiavellian: it seems to give equal rights to both arts because each gets its separate domain; and, sure enough, to maintain such egalitarian appearances Lessing sometimes writes as if his concern were to ensure that each art realize its characteristic virtue. Yet the point of Lessing's strategy was really to maintain a very unequal status quo; equality is scarcely achieved if both arts have unequal domains in the first place.

It is only when we recognize Lessing's intention to defend poetry that we can explain one of the most blatant shortcomings in *Laokoon*: its rough treatment of the visual arts. From the date of its publication to this day, Lessing's lack of sympathy for the visual arts has incurred the sharp censure of his critics. From Nicolai and Garve in the eighteenth century to Gombrich and Wellek in the twentieth, Lessing has been charged with downright hostility toward the visual arts. There is indeed something to complain about: Lessing conflates sculpture and painting as if they were identical; he dislikes the use of color so much that he wishes oil painting had never been discovered; he dismisses landscape painting as mere replication of appearances; and he dislikes portraiture because it is only a likeness of a single person. The entire domain of painting seemed to boil down to little more than replication of visual form. It has been remarked that Lessing's slight opinion of the visual arts is scarcely in keeping with his thesis that each art has its characteristic virtues.[76] One would think that Lessing's distinction of genres would lead to a kind of natural

[75] Gombrich, 'Lessing', p. 140. [76] Hettner, *Geschichte*, I, 751.

equality among them. The inconsistency disappears, however, once we realize that Lessing's agenda in *Laokoon* was to defend poetry. The constant demotion of the visual arts was only in keeping with his deeper designs. The truth of the matter is that Lessing never wanted an equality of genres in the first pace; his aim was rather to keep a hierarchy where poetry, as the most intellectual of the arts, stood at the very pinnacle. In this respect, as in so many others, Lessing was still a child of the rationalist tradition.

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