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Review Article
The Horizon of the Undefined

Essays on Aesthetics. Perspectives on the Work of Monroe C. Beardsley. Edited by John Fisher. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1983. Pp. xiii, 309. $24.95.

Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten, as everyone knows, invented the term "aesthetics." Since its inception in 1735, the term has evaded clear definition. What is aesthetics? As Baumgarten suggested, it involves cognition — the mental piecing together of the aesthetic object — but it is not quite intellection. Aesthetic objects give more than sensual pleasure but less than theoretical or moral truth. Aesthetics involves norms and values but not rules and laws of explanation. It gives, by definition, perceptual knowledge but this knowledge is neither referential nor wholly autonomus. Aestheticians usually follow Kant in treating the aesthetic object as purposeful but it has no specific purpose. Rarely do aestheticians dig deeper than this paradox, for to do so would seem to ruin the very possibility of aesthetic inquiry. The aesthetic object is supposed to be puzzling. Aesthetic judgment demands subtlety, impartiality and imagination; it deliberately ignores the reductive, mechanical level of "poetics," how the poem, painting or sculpture is articulated, except insofar as these mechanics may be translated into affect, sense-experience, imagination and the like.

The seventeen distinguished contributors who honour Monroe Beardsley in this collection discuss in some detail the problematic status of the aesthetic. Some of the essays qualify or respond to specific principles in Beardsley's writings, and the editor has invited Beardsley to respond to each essay. Even so, any of these essays may be read independently, for, with few exceptions, they address radical questions in aesthetic philosophy. The editor has attempted to subdivide them into broad categories such as the philosophy of art, aesthetic experience, language and literature, but these categories are not mutually

exclusive and slide into each other. The categories perhaps honour Beardsley in pointing out the great range of his interests and writings.

As a whole, the essays are disturbing precisely to the degree that they are "aesthetic." From whatever "perspective" the author begins, the horizon of the inquiry is left deliberately vague and open. The authors emulate Beardsley in their humanism, concern for broad cultural issues and technical precision of argument. Yet they all seem comfortable with some crucial concept or principle left unexplained, on the horizon, as it were. The essays demonstrate great analytic refinement — certainly an aesthetic virtue — but considerably less theoretical rigour. It is as if the aesthetic — as object, quality, experience, praxis — cannot be explained, though it may be seen in ever more complex aspects. Only three of the essays, in this reviewer's opinion, break genuine theoretical ground, though they too hold back, in a pseudo-enlightened way, from claiming too much. The others try to give what is frequently called a "strong" or "tough" definition of a problem; they clarify issues rather than speculate, and may be summarized more briefly.

The most disappointing essays are those gathered (inadvertently) towards the end of the volume. Samuel Hynes advances his interpretation of Hardy's "badness." He attacks the received idea that Hardy is at his best when he is playing the conventional role of poet as singer or narrator. He defends Hardy's awkwardness and "inverted narcissism," but the formulation of this narcissism as a direct confrontation between the particulars of nature and Hardy's self is old stuff, especially when couched in Hynes's terminology of "hovering mysteriousness." George McFadden's essay on the comic is a weird attempt to blend Husserl's phenomenology with Schiller's notion of aesthetic "freedom" and play. The argument is strained and uncertain. The phenomenological unity of the comic as an "eidetic intuition" becomes a structure of detached, serene self-preservation in the face of change. Stefan Morawski, by contrast, takes up the "ontological structure of man" in an equally strained and unconvincing essay. He attempts to summarize "briefly... the irrevocable relations we experience vis-à-vis the world," (283) and accept "muteness" as the only possible reply to his summary — a reply this reviewer accepts with relief.

A pair of essays by George Dickie and Charles Dyke address social problems. Dickie labouriously argues that no artistic invention is necessarily institutional, governed by conventions that define what art is. The thesis, as Beardsley rightly notes, is trivial when put thus. Dyke gives a spirited critique of the falsity of liberal standards of aesthetic objectivity in a consumerist society. Consumerism and the marketplace contaminate artistic standards, rendering obsolete the rational-

ism of liberal taste. Art, for Dyke, has become "emarginated." Many of his concerns have been put more deeply and succinctly by Walter Benjamin.

Göran Hermerén, refining the New Critical assumption of art's autonomy, argues that aesthetic considerations should be concerned primarily with values inherent in art when these values are mixed with moral and political ones. In practice, the two sorts of values are usually confused. His essay is a useful attempt to sort out blind assumptions but makes no claim to completeness. Bohdan Dziemidok tries to establish a closer connection between aesthetic evaluation and having a "positive or negative experience" evoked by an object. He counters the charges of subjectivism and relativism in experience by invoking Ingarden's distinction between "artistic values" — which belong to the object as schematic artifact — and "aesthetic values" — which belong to the object in its direct concrete manifestation. The former are neutral and objective; unfortunately (and this does not seem to disturb Dziemidok) they cannot be known by direct experience. We tend to confuse the two, he argues, and so differences in opinion may be reconciled by the claim that different perceivers are really disagreeing about different concrete actualizations of the same schema. Actualizations may be reconciled as approximations of artistic values — a generous conclusion, but again one that leaves the horizon undefined. Dziemidok attempts to discriminate artistic values by equating objects of cognition with manmade works, leaving beautiful natural phenomena to the realm of aesthetic experience. But this, he admits, is to diminish the range of manmade values. The two realms — art and nature, cognition and experience — fail to coincide except by diminishing each other's range. Aesthetic experience and value achieve specificity through a certain amount of ignorance.

John Fisher focuses upon Beardsley's theory of aesthetic experience. He makes the interesting argument that Beardsley's commitment to the Intentional and Affective Fallacies limits his theoretical development. Experience is conceived too narrowly, as subjective response — a response made suspect by the New Critical criticism of affect. Beardsley evades this difficulty by positing an identity between unity of experience and unity in works of art. Fisher suggests this limits the description of experience by "pushing" us back into the object. He finds this direction changing in Beardsley's recent work as more attention is paid to the actual definition of art.

Stephen Barker approaches a similar problem, the objectivity of experiencing beauty, by discussing Kant's attitude of distinterestedness in the third *Critique*. Barker elegantly paraphrases some of the most difficult passages from the third *Critique* and concludes that

judgments of beauty are "reflective:" "Unlike determinant judgments, they do not subsume particular cases under definite concepts, but they do, so to speak, subsume them under an 'indefinite' concept, that of purposiveness without a purpose" (78). The assumption of purposiveness gives organic wholeness to aesthetic objects without reducing them to a representation of a particular class of objects. The mind tries "to build up, step by step, an *indefinite* (or 'inexponible') concept of the structure of the phenomena. That is, it tries to develop a 'feel' for how this organized phenomena is put together, even though this feel cannot be conceptually articulated" (82). So we are back to the horizon of the undefined.

In a similar way, Paul Ricoeur and Seymour Chatman find a purposeful openness that cannot be fully articulated in literature's temporal, or narrative, dimension or in its theme. For Ricoeur, narrative time and human time coincide in a "hermeneutical" circle of as yet "untold stories" about ourselves. For Chatman, whose essay has a noteworthy personal eloquence, a novel's theme suggests the complexity of the "real world," which is not reducible to the mere "subject" of the novel, its specific characters and action. Themes, he carefully notes, refer to the world but make no claims. The contrast between the closure of the subject and the indefinability of the theme is, I would argue, typical of the aesthetic formulations within this collection. Chatman's distinction between theme and subject prepares the way for Alexander Nehamas' theory of plot. Nehamas draws a careful and useful distinction between the fallacy of plot as a description of part of a novel and the more accurate concept of plot as an elementary description of the work as a whole. The crucial distinction is usually blurred in literary theory. He rightly argues that a novel is to its plot not whole to part or complex to element but as object is to description. As in many of the essays, however, "novel," like "value" or "theme," is not itself susceptible to precise description. It is hypostatized as a signifying, unified but indeterminate object. The "how" of literary analysis, or what we call "poetics," is done away with, since elements of a work's composition, by Nehamas' argument, never may be abstracted. It would be difficult to work up any theory of representation from Nehamas' otherwise useful argument.

Alan Tormey and Frank Sibley have a subtler approach to the investigation of the literal properties of the aesthetic object. Unlike most contributors, they begin by sensing too much ambiguity or indeterminacy in a particular theory. Tormey rejects any attempt to explain metaphors by paraphrase; paraphrase is "incorrigibly ambiguous or indeterminate" (237). Often paraphrase merely extends the meaning of a metaphor's implicit comparison. But the meaning of a

metaphor is not at all identical with the comparison that grounds it, which has no literal sense. Juliet as the sun has meaning but is literally absurd. Tormey suggests that we concentrate on sustaining the ground of a metaphor by recasting it in what philosophers call a "counterfactual" form: thus a literally false antecedent may be elaborated in a lawlike and serious way without confusing ground and meaning. While Tormey's formulation avoids much semantic confusion and the problem of a metaphor's "falsehood," it raises serious aesthetic problems. Put in counterfactual form, the grounds of a metaphor may be reversed. Juliet may be sunlike, or the sun may be Julietlike. Tormey lets either possibility stand and invokes I. A. Richards' notion of "interpenetration," in which tenor and vehicle enter into a reciprocal transfer of properties. The boundaries of a metaphor are left open and pass from the domain of the philosopher into the non-rigorous domain of the "critic" or the "imaginative" (see 241 and 245). When philosophical rigour leads to such vagueness, its own grounding becomes suspect. Empson, Richards' student, long ago pointed out that not all metaphors are or ought to be reversible; a more precise account of semantic "equations" is needed.

Frank Sibley takes up the question of reversibility from another angle: Beardsley's argument that aesthetic judgments must be general to be positive. For Beardsley, there are only three criteria for aesthetic judgment that never "count otherwise than in a positive direction": unity, complexity and intensity of regional quality. Sibley modifies the argument to take into account a host of other qualities that seem to have intrinsic positive value: balance, wit, grace, etc. These never lose their intrinsic value, but they may create a negative effect in a context where another quality is preeminent. The distinction is not between positive and negative directions but between *prima facie* merits and actual merits, between intrinsic worth and the organic unity in which all merits cannot be equal. This formulation is better than Beardsley's safe but much too vague three criteria; for even ugly objects may satisfy Beardsley's criteria. The distinction between *prima facie* merit and organic unity also helps to distinguish a work's character from its overall value (the final balance between positive and negative qualities). Leaving aside the debatable premises of organic unity and intrinsic value, Sibley's paper is perhaps the finest of the sort that qualifies a problem.

The remaining three essays in the collection deserve special attention. They do more than analyze confused issues; they investigate the troublesome intersection of aesthetics with epistemology and poetics.

Lars Aagaard-Mogensen, in a densely wrought essay, tries to give a "cognitivist" foundation for the definition of aesthetic qualities. He

focuses upon "beauty," which Beardsley excludes from his class of aesthetic qualities on the grounds that it is indefinably "simple," unlike structurally complex qualities. Beauty may be identified but it is not "cognizable" — a problem that typifies the aesthetic in general. Aagaard-Mogensen does not try to prove that beauty is simple; instead, he shows the falsity of the distinction between simple and complex. His fascinating suggestion is that the simplicity of certain qualities reveals the poverty of our capacity to describe the aesthetic. Adequate aesthetic descriptions are inevitably metaphorical: they transfer to the "blank" object a complexity that belongs to language rather than the perceived object. Aagaard-Mogensen tries to heal this disturbing breach by aligning primary aesthetic qualities with the "explanatory axis" of language. He admits, however, the danger of superimposing ever shifting, semantically unstable terms upon these mute objects. In the end, blankness dominates and we are left with a mystical object only partly explained by our metaphors. Nevertheless, a moment of disruption has occurred. We cannot ever trust the metaphors we use. Aesthetic liveliness, autonomy, even experience now exist at the cost of suppressing the linguistic tropes that make them possible in the first place. We must treat each metaphor as if it were unique in order not to give it "as a kind of aberration, a normative perpetual life" (29). A dubious achievement, for as Aagaard-Mogensen senses, such uniquesness has "none but the most passing validity." Aberration is far more likely.

Francis Sparshott, with equal density of argument, presents an epistemology of pictorial recognition. Sparshott states that we must *assume* that pictures refer to things, but not in terms of resemblance. We "project" hypothetical objects out of the givens of a picture. For him, "Theoretical discussions of pictorial representation are plagued, as epistemology once was, by the demand for certainty" (136). Uncertainty always accompanies projection because "references are grasped ahead of referents" (137). Viewing a picture is like overhearing a conversation: we make partial characterizations and allow for lying, error, exaggeration, metaphor and other tropes. The presumption of reference nevertheless applies, whether the objects of the discourse (or picture) are real or fictive. "Intelligibility cannot wait on verification" (138). A painting need not show "whether its object is real or fictive." Formulated thus, Sparshott's "projection" is perfectly synonymous with what I have been tracing as the "aesthetic" in all these essays. All questions concerning the object's modality are suspended. Locating the ultimate reference of the picture is always risky. All projections involve a certain amount of lies and errors. How may we describe projections? Only by way of metaphors, it seems, which further com-

plicate the possibility of error. The projection is *like* a proposition, but it does not assert anything. Or it is like indirect discourse, but it is silent. Or it works in terms of a "possible-worlds trope" (144), which is inexhaustible in meaning and so uncritical. Here Sparshott's argument begins to turn on itself in a most instructive way. The rigour that has led him to give the finest formulation of the aesthetic in this collection now sends him desperately in search of ways to defer the moment of referentiality that was assumed at the outset. Pictures, he argues, cannot be "of" facts. They exist phenomenologically as a paradoxical sort of "presence" to the self. We affirm the presence of a picture "in a mode that denies it in the very act of affirming because the necessity of the affirmation testifies to the factitiousness of the presence." Sparshott, as an epistemologist, speaks of this presence in terms of understanding, but our knowledge of it is thoroughly unreliable, couched as it is in indeterminacy, error and metaphor. These are necessary before affirmation is possible. I know of no better indication of the blindness and insight which constitute the aesthetic.

Ann Banfield offers the least aesthetic of all the essays. Readers unfamiliar with Chomskyan linguistic theory or its technicalities will find her essay very tough going. They may, indeed, question its purpose in this collection. It stands out as the only attempt to combine poetics and aesthetics. The Chomskyan approach rejects from the outset all "pragmatic" arguments concerning history, biography or even interpretation. When Banfield speaks of a "SELF," she means a purely linguistic grammatical construct, not a real speaker. The SELF's point of view, and by implication subjectivity itself, is central to whatever we mean by works of literature. How may point of view be defined? What are its rules? And how does it generate literary texts? Banfield focuses upon pronouns and epithets or *noms de qualité*. These, unlike ordinary lexical nouns, have no virtual references. Their actual references occur only in specific speech contexts. "Idiots" or "darlings" does not refer to a class of objects. To identify these epithets we need to refer to some "self" that is using the word. So too for deictic verbs and first person prounouns. Banfield analyses these without ever invoking lexical "meanings." Point of view is consistently detached from any referentiality in language. Many essays in this collection arrive at this point; the aesthetic seems to depend on at least a momentary suspension of referentiality. But aesthetic theory uses this moment to suggest a new, often mystical mediation between subject and object. Banfield makes no such claim. The formal definition of the SELF, she says, "points to all that exceeds the grasp of form theory." The linguistic SELF is a "non-symmetrical" self; it marks the failed coincidence of impersonal laws of a language and a conscious subject. Banfield's

horizon belongs to poetics not aesthetics. She recognizes that the formal truth about a text can be brought into focus only when its pragmatic background is allowed to blur and become confused. Unlike aesthetic theorists, she never forgets that this background can never be explained.