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CHAPTER 4

Art and Beauty in Antiquity and the Middle Ages

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In everyday language, when we speak of art we refer mainly to works of art (primarily visual). When we speak of "the arts" we mean "fine arts." This was not so for the ancient Greeks and the Medievals. The Greeks coined two words—*téchne* and *poiesis*—that mean "to make," "to produce something," such as any kind of artifact, tools, and also works of art. These terms did not signify exclusively the specific activity of the artist, as we conceive it today. *Téchne* and *poiesis* could be translated as "craft," "skill," and "dexterity," hence also as "fine art." They signified also the knowledge employed in the process of making.

The Latins classified the arts by distinguishing two subclasses: *artes liberales* and *artes vulgares*. The first comprised human pursuits that require intellectual application; the second those that involve physical effort. The late Medievals renamed *mechanicae* the "vulgar" arts, and, especially with the foundation of the new universities, the word *artes*, without further qualification, simply stood for "liberal arts." They were subdivided into the *trivium*: grammar, rhetoric, logic; and the *quadrivium*: arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, music. These made up the syllabus in the Arts Faculties (Kristeller 1952).

The word "art" derives, in its etymology, from the Latin. *Ars*, however, originates from the Greek etymon *ártios*. This attribute means complete, perfect of its kind, suitable, in accordance with its purpose, correct, sound, well made.

As in the case of *téchne* and *poiesis*, the Greek tradition offers a wealth of connotations for the word *kalón*, which derived from the Sanskrit *kalja* and conveyed the following meanings: sound, vigorous, excellent; organically healthy, fit, useful, serviceable; ordered, harmonious, proportionate, pleasant,

attractive, lovely, beautiful. In addition to physical qualities, the word stood also for spiritual and moral attributes. Hence, it meant graceful disposition, honorable behavior, noble sensibility, moral goodness.

The meanings of the word *kalón* are significantly close to those of *ártios*. We can infer, therefore, that for the Greeks, and for the entire classical or premodern tradition, the concept of art, even in its wide sense, is closely associated with the idea of aesthetic beauty. For this, beside *tó kalón*, the Greeks used the word *tó prêpon*: graceful, clearly seen, conspicuously fitting. The word points to formal properties, and corresponds to the Latin concept of *convenientia*.

The polysemic use of the mentioned concepts is particularly obvious in the earliest writings of antiquity. Subsequent efforts aimed precisely at progressively clarifying the specific meaning of aesthetic beauty and of fine art. Different philosophers privileged one or other of the three main meanings of "beauty," and just as some focused their attention on beauty, others focused on the nature of art. Of course, this was never a matter of mutual exclusion, but only a question of emphasis.

EARLY THEORIES OF ART

Numerous references to art, craft, and beauty can be found in the poetry of Homer and Hesiod. In particular, the pseudo-Homeric *Hymn to Hermes* (Gould 1982, 363–405) outlines a sophisticated conception of art-craft as creative transformation of nature into culture. The baby god transformed the tortoise into music, "for it was Hermes who first made the tortoise a singer" (*Hymn*, v. 25). The word *téchne* is poignantly present in the poem and Hermes is portrayed as a crafty god of metamorphic creation. Hermes saw the tortoise as the lyre (Santoro-Brienza 1993, 1–7).

In the early stages of classical antiquity, reflections on the nature of art focused on poetry, which was considered the supreme form of *poiesis*. Poetry was understood as a mythological narrative telling the story of past origins and prophetically anticipating the order of things to come. It functioned as the repository of the collective wisdom of the people. (In epochs that precede the invention of writing, or in cultures where writing is not universally adopted, the transmission of knowledge happens orally. The structure of poetic diction, with its mnemonic devices, facilitates the communication and preservation of knowledge.) Apart from absolving a pedagogical function, poetry was seen also as a source of pleasure and, negatively, as a possible means of deceit and misrepresentation.

In the early philosophical attempts at refining the specific meaning of art, we encounter two main tendencies. The first, of Pythagorean origin, conceived art—chiefly music and poetry—in a mystical and moralistic key. Art was seen as a therapy of the soul and the body, as a path to attunement with the secret harmony of the universe, and as a key to decode the order of reality.

Art was thus conceived of as *eteronomous*: its aim lying beyond itself. The second, of Eleatic and Sophistic origin, argued that art has no function beyond itself and that its nature consists in giving pleasure.

According to Pythagoras and his followers, the entire universe is ruled by mathematical laws. In the words of Aristotle, "The Pythagoreans supposed the elements of numbers to be the elements of all things, and the whole heaven to be a musical scale [*i.e.* harmony] and a number" (*Metaphysica*, 985b 23). From these metaphysical presuppositions, the Pythagoreans could outline a definition of beauty. Furthermore, they had very original ideas concerning musical sounds. They discovered the mathematical laws in acoustics by observing that strings produce different sounds according to their length, therefore according to numerical relations. An octave is produced by the relation 1:2, a fifth by the relation 2:3, and the relation 1:2/3:1/2 generates the chord C-G-c. In this manner, they could scientifically explain the phenomena of pitch production and of harmony in terms of number, measure, and proportion. Thanks to them, the art of music was grounded on scientific principles. The intimate connection established between the cosmic order, numerical proportions, and musical harmony, when seen in conjunction with the conception of beauty as order, measure, proportion, and harmony, signals an initial understanding of the nature of fine art. The Pythagorean findings informed the numerous subsequent theories and treatises on architecture and music, to begin, but also on sculpture, painting, and poetry. A telling example of their influence is Vitruvius's *De Architectur*.

The Sophists' greatest contribution is to be found mainly in their emphasis on the subjective side in the understanding of *beauty* and in their attempts at defining art in general, and fine art in particular, as kinds of human activity to be distinguished from natural processes. The distinction between nature (that proceeds according to chance) and art (that operates according to design) is clearly marked (see Plato, *Laws*, X, 889 A). The Sophists were in a position to further distinguish between primarily pedagogical and useful art on one hand and pleasurable art on the other (see Isocrates, *Panegyricus*). Numerous texts indicate, for instance, that sculptures of humans and of gods give joy to the beholder but serve no useful purpose; that statues afford pleasure to sight; that paintings give delight to the eyes, because of their colors and shapes. Finally, in the light of the highly developed rhetorical techniques of persuasion and of sophisticated illusionist effects of *trompe l'oeil*, some Sophists warned against deception especially in painting, poetry, and drama.

PLATO

Plato's understanding of art, and the arts in general, rests on idealistic presuppositions and leads to a moralistic view, with the corollary condemnation and censorship of some aspects of particular forms of art. For Plato, as for all Greek and Medieval culture in general, the ground of reality is objective and

presupposed by any human activity. If we translate this basic principle in terms of human production, we reach the conclusion that the artist or craftsman does not invent things originally new, but copies the ontologically preexisting order of things. Objective reality precedes, and hence guides, the artist's activity. Empirical reality itself is, in turn, a copy of the true reality that is constituted by eternal substances, perfect forms, archetypal ideas. Plato suggests, to begin, a broad distinction: "There are two kinds of art. . . . There is agriculture, and the care of living creatures, and the art of making or shaping vessels; and there is the art of imitation" (*Sophist*, 219 A). The distinction reappears in the *Republic* (601 D), with the addition of a further qualification: "There are three arts concerned with any object: the art of making it, the art of using it, and the art of representing it." In his *Laws* (889 A), we find the distinction between nature and art, as craft, and then between craft and fine art.

Imitation, Appearance, and Deceit

Plato's theory of art as imitation is presented—in highly critical terms—in Books III and X of the *Republic*. To clarify the concept of imitation, Plato gives the example of three kinds of bedstead: one made by the god (i.e., the idea of bedstead), the other produced by the carpenter, the third represented on a canvas by a painter (*Republic*, 597 B). The painter produces the representation as a poor copy of the physical bedstead made by the woodworker. This, in turn, imitates the divine idea or the essence of bedstead. The painter, in other words, imitates imitations of reality, which is in the ideas. The artist can only produce things twice removed from reality and truth—and hence quite inferior to the true essence of things, or ideas, and to the functional copies produced by the craftsman (*Republic*, 598 A). Being twice removed from ideal truth, works of art are inevitably deceptive.

Condemnation and Celebration of Art

Plato saw that art can be dangerous precisely because it is alluring and charming. In the *Republic*, the condemnation is strong and explicit, because art arouses passions that should be kept repressed and be left to wither away. Thus Plato advocated the practice of censorship and even expulsion of the arts from the ideal city-state (*Republic*, 605 A).

There are places in his writings where he praises art and especially poetry. In the *Ion*, the *Symposium*, and *Phaedrus*, in particular, artistic creativity is linked to the idea of divine inspiration. In these Dialogues, Plato has penned enchanting pages of rhapsodic eulogy for art, poetry, and the artist. The artist is elevated, by divine inspiration, and transported into a world beyond rationality and onto realms of divine harmony. In this supra-rational sphere, as the *Ion* (534) puts it,

A poet is a light and winged and sacred thing, who is unable to compose until he has been inspired and put out of his senses, and his mind is no longer in him. . . . The poets are merely the interpreters of gods, according as each is possessed by one of the heavenly powers.

ARISTOTLE

Aristotle's definition of art in general runs as follows: "art is a productive ability exercised according to true reason" (*Nicomachean Ethics*, 1140a 9). This formulation reminds us that art implies knowledge. There are five kinds of productive processes:

Change of shape, as a statue; addition, as things which grow; taking away, as the Hermes from the stone; putting together, as a house; alteration, as things which change in respect of their matter. (*Physics*, 190b 5ff)

All art deals with bringing something into existence; and to pursue an art means to study how to bring into existence a thing which may either exist or not, and whose efficient cause lies in the maker and not in the thing made; for art does not deal with things that come to existence of necessity or according to nature, since these have their principle in themselves. (*Nicomachean Ethics*, 1140a 10ff)

The distinction between art or craft and nature is not new. Aristotle, however, was in a position to make full sense of that distinction, because he was the first philosopher to extensively ponder the nature of nature. At the beginning of Book II of the *Physics*, we read:

Some things exist by nature, some from other causes. By nature the animals and their parts exist, and the plants and the simple bodies (earth, fire, air, water)—for we say that these and the like exist by nature. All these things plainly differ from things which are not constituted by nature. For each of them has within itself a principle of motion and of stationariness, in respect of place, or of growth and decrease, or by way of alteration. (*Physics*, 192b 8–18)

Having thus defined natural phenomena and organisms, Aristotle proceeds to define nature itself, which is understood as the immanent principle of organic beings and hence as the immanent ontological process of self-unfolding from itself to itself. This means to say that nature is its own beginning and its own end or *telos* (*Physics*, 192b 21–24). Natural beings have the principle of their coming to be and change within themselves, while artificial products have their cause in some external agent. Nature is an immanent process; art is external production. In so far as it is produced from without, the work of art is ontologically thinner.

Having established the ontological difference between nature and art in general, and having indicated the substantial superiority of nature's immanent processes over art's extrinsic production, Aristotle establishes some similarities between nature and art.

If a house had been a thing made by nature, it would have been made in the same way as it is now by art; and if things made by nature were not only by nature but also by art, they would come to be in the same way as by nature. . . . If, therefore, artificial products are for the sake of an end, so clearly also are natural products. (*Physics*, 199a; see also *Poetics*, 1450b 38)

Mimesis

Mimesis, far from signifying only copy and imitation, hence the subservience of art to reality, was understood by Aristotle as the distinctive property of fine art (Santoro-Brienza 1980). "Art [in its generic meaning] either brings to an end [it realizes and fulfils] what nature cannot achieve, or it mimesises nature" (*Physics*, 199a 15 [my translation]). The primarily useful arts and crafts—those that complement and perfect nature—are distinguished from the set of fine arts that "mimesise" nature. *Mimesis* is the distinguishing feature of the fine arts (*Poetics*, 1447a 3ff). And the diverse forms of art differ from each other in three ways: either in their medium or in their object or in the manner of their respective mimesis.

Mimesis refers also to the act of copying and the miming skill of actors (*Poetics*, 1448b 2ff). However, there is more to be said. A passage in the *Rhetoric* reads as follows:

Since the experience of learning and of wonderment is pleasant, it follows that delight is granted by any act of imitation, such as painting, sculpture, poetry, and by every kind of skilful copy, even if that which is imitated is unpleasant; for we do not delight in the thing itself. There is, rather, a kind of cognitive experience whereby we say: "that is it!" And so it happens that we learn something. (1371b 4 [my translation])

Having indicated that *mimesis* signifies—to begin—copy and imitation, Aristotle concludes with a statement that points to another, aesthetically pertinent, meaning of the concept. "If we never happened to see the original object, our delight comes not from the imitation, but from the technique or the colour or some other similar cause" (*Poetics*, 1448b 4ff [my translation]).

Verisimilitude

There are two specific "objects" of mimesis, namely nature and action. In the *Physics* (194a 22) we read, *he téchne mimeitai tēn phûsin*, customarily translated as "art imitates nature." Mimesis cannot signify copying, if we consider what art imitates. Art mimesises not just natural things, but *nature itself*: the very universal immanent process of self-unfolding from itself to itself, hence the internal principle that produces and manifests itself in natural beings. Nature is not a thing, nor an object, nor a set of things or objects. Hence, nature cannot be copied. "The process of artistic production is mimetic of

nature, for it proceeds toward a goal, following the laws of the organic and ordered process that constitutes nature's essential activity. Therefore, art does not imitate, in the sense of copying or portraying nature, but simply proceeds—like nature—toward an appointed goal" (*Physics*, 199a 8–19, and 194a 28ff [my translation]).

Having analyzed the relationship between mimesis and nature, we must now consider the second "object" of artistic mimesis, namely action. "The poet is a poet by virtue of his mimesis, and the other things he mimesises are actions." This idea is often repeated, especially in the *Poetics* (1449b 24, 36; 1450a 4; 1450b 3, 24; 1451a 31; 1452a 2). Once again, to translate *mimesis* as "imitation" is inadequate and incorrect, if we realize that, by actions and action (*praxis*), Aristotle meant the immanent activity or "doing" of human beings: their spiritual essence. This point is made clear in another passage of the *Poetics* (1460b 8 [my translation]). "The poet being a 'mimetist,' like painters and any other artist, must of necessity 'mimesise' one of three objects: things as they were or are, things as they are said or thought to be, or things as they ought to be."

The material or object of poetry is quite different from the subject matter of historiographers. These gather and reconstruct past given events, embedded as they are in particular and accidental settings. Poetry, on the contrary, articulates what could be according to probability and what ought to be according to necessity. The possible, the probable, "things as they are said or thought to be, and things as they ought to be" are not given to be copied and reproduced.

That Aristotle did not hold a representational conception of art, and that he did not, therefore, follow Plato's eteronomous conception of art as copy and imitation, can be seen from his insistence on the idea that artists deal with probability, possibility, and inner—ontological and poetic or textual—necessity, in one word, with verisimilitude: with imaginative, creative, fictional constructions of symbolic, ideal worlds. In this is to be found the precise meaning of mimesis. "Even if the poet deals with a historical event, he is none the less a poet: in fact there is no reason why some events that have actually happened should not conform to the laws of probability and possibility, and in force of that he is still a poet and their maker" (*Poetics*, 1451b 25ff [my translation]).

Poetic Strategies and Rhetorical Devices

In his *Poetics* and *Rhetoric*, in particular, Aristotle examined in great detail literary works of art, especially tragedy and epic poetry, and the formal strategies that lend to a verbal text aesthetic value and persuasive power. In these writings we find a complete and convincing instance of his *poetic* approach, which focuses on the very structure of the aesthetic or on persuasively oratorical linguistic artifacts.

More central and important, also for our contemporary understanding of art and of aesthetic effects, is the analysis and detailed discussion of diction (*léxis*; Santoro-Brienza 1993, 29–38).

The excellence of diction is for it to be at once clear and not mean. The clearest is diction made up of ordinary words for things, but it is also mean. . . . On the other hand diction becomes distinguished and non-prosaic by the use of unfamiliar terms, that is, strange words, metaphors, lengthened forms, and everything that deviates from the ordinary modes of speech. But a whole statement in such terms will be either a riddle or a barbarism. . . . A certain admixture, accordingly, of unfamiliar terms is necessary. These—the strange word, the metaphor, the ornamental equivalent, and so on—will save the language from seeming mean and prosaic, while the ordinary words in it will secure the requisite clearness. (*Poetics*, 145a 18ff)

Centuries before the findings of structuralism, linguistics, formalism, and semiotics, Aristotle had already seen that the work of art, the aesthetic message, the pleasure of reading, the delight of discovery, the epistemic value of artistic messages, are the result of highly informative—because ambiguous—*wonderful* (*Poetics*, 1460a 11ff), surprising, and estranging diction, within a context of recognizable ingredients. The effective poetic diction is structured as a symbiotic interaction of familiarity and unfamiliarity, of estrangement, violation, deviation, and of the obvious, the rule, and the conventional norm (*Rhetoric*, 1422a 12ff).

THE MIDDLE AGES

The briefly outlined concepts of art, with the basic distinction between the useful and the aesthetic forms of art, elaborated in Greek philosophy, were widely adopted by the Romans and, later, by the Medievals. In Rome and Alexandria, much work was done on issues of rhetoric, in particular. The Middle Ages produced a wealth of treatises on beauty, music, poetry, architecture, and various crafts. The Greek concept of art remained unchanged and the Medievals had little to add, mostly to expand on ancient concepts. They produced more elaborate divisions and classifications of the arts. For instance, Plotinus divided the arts into two main categories: those that make and employ their own specific tools and those that exploit natural powers. In the second place, he identified five types of arts and crafts: (a) those that produce physical objects, such as architecture; (b) those that improve nature, such as medicine; (c) those that induce a sense of harmony and rhythm, such as music and dance; (d) those that primarily generate beauty: fine arts, poetry, and music again; (e) finally, those primarily concerned with knowledge, such as geometry.

The refinement of these distinctions allowed the Medievals to develop the idea of the autonomy of art. These advancements were further aided by the abandonment of the Platonic assumption according to which fine art is fun-

damentally mimetic of existing reality. "The arts do not simply copy visible objects, but reach out to principles of nature; the arts provide much themselves, for they can add where there is deficiency; they can do so since in themselves they possess beauty" (Plotinus 1966–88, *Enneades*, V 8, 1 [my translation]).

The indissoluble link between art and beauty was finally established and, with this, the conviction that art is superior to nature. These were the necessary consequences of the characteristic Medieval conception of the universe, whereby God is thought of as supreme artist. The whole cosmos, therefore, is a work of art, so that one could invert the old equation according to which art imitates nature, and think rather that nature—a work of divine creation—imitates art. The artist was conceived as a small creator, emulating God's activity. His task was deemed to be the transformation of matter into form, of nature into spirit. Plotinus was the first to grasp this new idea. He understood that the task of art consists in the creation of beauty by a process of the spiritualization of matter. This has been referred to as Plotinus's greatest contribution to aesthetic theory.

Another significant idea was elaborated in the Middle Ages. With reference to the illusionist and deceptive power of the arts, Augustine argued that works of art are partially false, precisely in so far as they are the result of artificial processes and of imaginative fiction. This kind of falsehood is essentially necessary, however. Without it we could not have works of art, as such. In painting, for instance, a unicorn must be an unreal unicorn. The subject of a painting is not, and is not supposed to be, the real thing (Augustine 1953b, *Soliloquia*, II, 10, 18). In the light of this, we can say that Augustine secured for the future one of the central ideas of aesthetics and poetics, according to which there is a kind of truth that is specific of art: an invented, imagined, fictional truth.

Finally, the cognitive character of art, together with the idea that art makes us understand the world (for it produces tokens and symbols of divine perfection) progressively established itself. These ideas were preserved and found their most elaborate articulation in the highly formalized philosophy of Thomas Aquinas.

Beauty as Harmony

Four conceptions of beauty prevailed in ancient Greece and Rome. They defined beauty in terms of harmony, functionality, goodness, and sensual pleasure (of sight and hearing), respectively. The Pythagoreans conceived beauty as an objective and ontological property of the entire universe. Artistic beauty was seen in the light of metaphysical principles and hence absorbed into a universal and generic definition.

We owe to the Pythagoreans the first definition of beauty as order, measure, proportion, and harmony. These properties imply the idea of regularity,

whereby even the simple repetition of the same element indicates the presence of a rule and induces a sense of order. They imply also the idea of symmetry: the arrangement of different elements with respect to a common point of reference, or the measure of some element by comparison with another. Symmetry allows us to compare different elements and to relate each to each in a rational system. The "golden section" is the perfect example. It is the proportion between two unequal segments or lengths—AB and BC—constructed in such a manner that $BC:AC = (AC + BC):BC$. In mathematical terms, this disposition yields "the golden ratio" $\Phi = 1:0.618$. The study of Greek buildings and extensive measurements of Greek vases have detected the ubiquitous presence of the golden section and of the golden ratio. These regular proportions were supposed to correspond to the measures and structure of the human body and its different limbs. The properties identified by the Pythagoreans were destined to remain essential attributes of aesthetic beauty throughout the Western tradition.

Plato adopted the Pythagorean theory. Beauty can be secured in its universal and objective value if identified with mathematically verifiable properties. In the *Philebus* (64 E), where beauty is presented as identical with goodness and kin to virtue, Plato holds that "measure and symmetry/proportion occur when there is beauty and virtue." The *Timaeus* (87 C) stresses the identity between beauty and goodness, and their correspondence to the criterion of symmetry: "What is good is beautiful, and what is beautiful cannot lack proportion." Measure and proportion are essential ingredients of beauty because they are connected to and cause unity (*Timaeus*, 31 C). The theme of unity was to be echoed by the Medievals.

Aristotle subscribed also at first to the Pythagorean theory. "The main concepts of beauty are order, symmetry and definiteness" (*Metaphysics*, 1078a 32). This traditional definition is further developed, however.

Beauty consists in magnitude and ordered arrangement. From which it follows that neither would a very small creature be beautiful—for our view of it is almost instantaneous and therefore confused—nor a very large one, since being unable to view it all at once, we lose the effect of a single whole; for instance, suppose a creature 1000 miles long. As then creatures and other organic structures must have a certain magnitude and yet be easily taken in by the eye, so too with dramatic plots: they must have length but must easily be taken in by memory. (*Poetics*, 1450b 38ff [translation by W. H. Fyfe])

The objective properties and criteria of beauty are here considered with reference to the structure of natural organisms, on one hand, and with view to the subjective act of perceiving an artifact, on the other hand. So, objective considerations are, at once, related to subjective perception and the ensuing experience of aesthetic delight. The objective properties of a successful work of art point to the coherence of the work as a structural arrangement (*Politics*, 1284b 8).

In force of its internal coherence, which resembles the organic unity of natural beings, the work of art stands as a co-reality or a verisimilitude of reality. By the same token, in force of its teleonomic and intentional procedures that mimesis the immanent teleological processes of nature, art is a process of spiritualization of nature and a production of ideal forms. In this sense, we encounter the seemingly paradoxical situation whereby works of art—ontologically inferior to natural beings—by their mimetic power to create verisimilitudes of ideal reality, turn out to be spiritually superior to natural beings (*Politics*, 1281b 10).

In the early Middle Ages, Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagiticus also spoke of beauty as harmony and unity.

The "beautiful" which is beyond individual being is called "beauty" because of that beauty bestowed by it on all things, each in accordance with what it is. It is given this name because it is the cause of the harmony and splendour in everything, because like a light it flashes onto everything the beauty-causing impartations of its own well-spring ray. Beauty "bids" all things to itself (whence it is called "beauty") and gathers everything into itself. (Pseudo-Dionysius, 1987, *Divine Names*, IV, 7; PG 3, c.701)

The same idea is to be found in Augustine's writings, in particular. "Unity is the form of all beauty. In turn, unity implies and generates order. There is no ordered thing which is not beautiful" (Augustine 1953a, *De vera religione*, XLI, 77 [my translation]).

Measure, shape, proportions, and order stand as corollary attributes of unity. This, in turn, is closely associated to the concept of numerical arrangement and rhythm, especially in the context of Augustine's reflections in *De musica*. In this work, not surprisingly, the Pythagorean influence is most explicitly felt. Distinguishing five kinds of rhythm, resting on the principle of numerical arrangement and ordered unity, Augustine points again to the intellectual or cognitive side of aesthetic apprehension and, at once, indicates his strong interest in psychological insight. "Of the five kinds of rhythm, let the first be called rhythm of judgement, the second rhythm of action, the third rhythm of perception, the fourth rhythm of memory, and the fifth rhythm of sounds" (*De musica*, VI, 6, 16 [my translation]).

Goodness

Beauty was identified with goodness in two ways, according to the two meanings of goodness itself: the first as the object of desire, will, and love and the second as moral rectitude. These two meanings are merged in Plato's concept of *kaloagathia*, which, as the word literally indicates, also merges beauty and goodness into one. Plato spoke of this as the supreme idea and "the most loved." In the *Symposium* (206 A), which is the first comprehensive treatise on love, we read that the object of love is "the perennial possession

of that which is good." The experience of love is portrayed as a progressive journey that begins from the pursuit of physical beauty and bodily pleasure. But love refines itself and moves on to seek spiritual beauty: of character and soul, of deeds and occupations, of moral conduct, of knowledge and wisdom, finally of the very transcendent idea of *kaloagathia*.

In the *Republic* and the *Laws* we find the absorption of beauty into moral rectitude and virtue, in the light of Plato's demand that art should absolve a pedagogical and ethical function. By the same token—in the *Symposium*, the *Phaedrus*, and the *Philebus*, in particular—beauty is associated also with truth, which is another form of *kaloagathia*.

Also, Aristotle noted the presence of goodness in beauty. However, he kept them separate. Beautiful things are also good, because they delight us thanks to their formal properties. "That is beautiful and distinguished, which—being desirable for its own sake—is to be praised and, being good and desirable, is delightful" (*Rhetoric*, 1366a 33 [my translation]). "A work of art is good or bad in itself, all that is required is that it should possess certain qualities" (*Nicomachean Ethics*, 1105a 27 [my translation]).

In the Middle Ages, which adopted much of Plato's metaphysics, goodness, as a transcendental property of all being, was associated with the concept of beauty. With the exception of Pseudo-Dionysius and other neo-Platonists, however, the two concepts were never fully merged and identified with each other. Clearly, on this issue Aristotle's approach won the day.

Utility

If adopted as a criterion of aesthetic judgment, useful fittingness means that we consider things beautiful because they fulfill their function. This implies that the aesthetic experience should presuppose the knowledge of aims to be achieved and of the means by which such goals are achieved. We must, however, distinguish between two kinds of functionality: an extrinsic teleology, or functionality in the strict sense of the word, and an internal teleology that, in its formal properties, produces a sense of beauty. In other words, we need to distinguish between the relation that links an artifact to the satisfaction of a need and the relation that unites a natural organism to its activities.

The two mentioned conceptions of utility or fittingness are widely present in ancient thought. Socrates argued that beauty cannot be separated from utility or suitability. Very likely, this idea expresses an extreme polemical stance against the Sophists' relativist view of beauty. Functional fittingness points to an objective aspect in the thing and, hence, vanquishes any possibility of subjective opinion. In his attempt to salvage the objective meaning and value of beauty, however, Socrates ignored the specificity of art and of aesthetic beauty. Plato, with most philosophers after him, held that beauty cannot be defined in terms of utility. There are things that we value for their own sake, quite independently of any functional criterion. With this, he announced

a fundamental principle of a strictly aesthetic theory. Against his stronger convictions, Plato hinted at the autonomy of art. Also, Aristotle spoke against functionalism. "To aim at utility in every endeavour is quite alien to generous and liberal minds" (*Poetics*, 1338a 38ff [my translation]).

As I have noted, the modern concept of "fine art" was unknown also to the Medievals. With the sole exception of music, all the others that we consider fine arts were categorized as "vulgar" or "mechanical" forms of production. Nonetheless, Medieval theorists did not fail to recognize the autonomous value of formal perfection in artifacts (*Summa Theol.*, I-II, 57, 3 co). Aquinas stressed the principle that the artist must be concerned primarily with the perfection of the work produced and not with the external function the work can absolve. The work of art—as with every kind of artifact—is primarily a form. However, the perfection of a form was further distinguished into a primary and secondary perfection: *perfectio prima* and *perfectio secunda* (*Summa Theol.*, I, 73, 1 co; II-II, 169, 2 ad 4). Whereas the former consists in the purely formal quality of the object produced, the latter concerns the proper end of the artifact. In other words, a knife, for instance, is beautiful if it is made according to the requirements of formal order and harmony. Given the primarily useful nature of the artifact, however, a knife has formal perfection—is beautiful—if it is well-suited to its function. Also, works of art, although primarily autonomous in their "first perfection," can be viewed in the light of their "second perfection" or the use to which they can be put. That use and end are implicit in the formal perfection of the object.

Pleasure

There is physical pleasure that comes from the satisfaction of purely biological needs. The delight granted by an aesthetic experience, on the contrary, is free of biological constraints and issues from the immediate response, both sensory and intellectual, to formal elements in a beautiful object. The Greeks and the Medievals considered as properly aesthetic sensory faculties only sight and hearing. Taste, smell, and touch were seen to absolve solely biological functions.

Plato quotes, in his *Hippias Major* (298 A), the Sophists' opinion that "the beautiful is that which gives pleasure through hearing and sight." Plato criticized the Sophists for holding a relativist conception of beauty. In the *Dialectics* (2.18 [my translation]) we read: "If all men were told to throw on a pile all things which they judge to be ugly and to remove all things which they consider beautiful, I believe that nothing would be left on the pile because all people differ in their opinions" (see Kranz 1952). The idea that beauty is explainable primarily in terms of subjective physical pleasure inevitably implies the risk of relativism.

Plato agreed that beauty is a cause of delight. Something is not good and beautiful because we like it and are delighted by it, however, but rather we

like and delight in something because it is good and beautiful. Aristotle is much more definite about the significance of pleasure in aesthetic experience. In works of art, we encounter metaphors and epiphanies of probable worlds. The verisimilitudes of art, which follow the laws of ideal probability and necessity, engender in us a heightened experience of knowledge and delight. These, in turn, are connected with properties objectively present in the work of art. So, clearly the function of art is to grant delight through the production of beauty. Therefore, even the purpose of instruction in painting and drawing is "to make one attentive to the beauty of bodily forms" (*Poetics*, 1338a 38ff). We find the same idea in the *Politics* (1339b 4ff).

Aesthetic delight, coupled with knowledge and intellectual insight, is the aim of art and the effect of beauty. With this thesis, Aristotle has grounded the principle of the autonomy of art and the possibility of an independent enquiry into the nature of aesthetic experience. That experience, however, is, in its turn, grounded on objective properties of artistic artifacts and a rigorous analysis of poetic processes and devices. Anticipating the findings of twentieth-century formalism, Aristotle announced, especially in his *Rhetoric*, that the aesthetic experience is triggered by formal elements charged with novelty, ambiguity, and unfamiliarity, although contained within an ordered structure.

Another series of important observations concerning the role of the perceiver deals with the distinctions of sensory pleasure. For Aquinas, the senses of sight and hearing are those that afford pleasure in autonomous or specifically aesthetic beauty. This Aquinas understood as closely connected with cognition.

In the presence of beauty, we experience a feeling of pleasure, the pleasure of seeing (*delectatio visus*) or of contemplation (*delectatio contemplationis*). This pleasure has a character of its own. Other kinds of human pleasure are mainly connected with the sense of touch [and we should add taste and smell] and are shared with other living beings; they occur in the performance of necessary and useful activities and serve the preservation of life. Aesthetic pleasure, on the other hand, is not connected with one's natural needs nor with the preservation of life. It is man's privilege, as St. Thomas says, to be the only being capable of loving beauty and of enjoying it for its own sake. (quoted in Tatar-kiewicz 1970–74, Vol. II, 250)

Feelings of pleasure totally dependent on biological needs cannot produce aesthetic experiences, just as objects of biological desire cannot be called beautiful as such. Aquinas, however, recognized an aesthetic value in some pleasurable feelings that are partially generated by instinctual satisfaction and gratification. He distinguished between two kinds of aesthetic feelings: "Some are purely aesthetic and are evoked by colours, shapes or sounds and enjoyed for their own sake (*secundum se*); the others are mixed, i.e., both biological and aesthetic. They are derived not only from harmony of colours or sounds,

but also from the satisfaction of natural needs and desires" (quoted in Tatar-kiewicz 1970–74, Vol. II, 250).

THE MIDDLE AGES OF THOMAS AQUINAS¹

Let us consider two main ideas in Aquinas's philosophy that were also quite central to Medieval thought in general: the principle of *analogy* and the problem of the *transcendental properties* of being.

Everything participates, in various degrees, in the perfection of being. By the same token, the different entities in the universe share among themselves some fundamental trait. It is in the light of this principle that we fully understand the Medieval preoccupation with symbolism in general and the conviction that everything is linked to everything else.

The analogical structure of all reality points to the other assumption encoded in the metaphysical theory of the transcendental properties of being. The theory holds that being in general is one, true good. As Aquinas put it, being and unity, being and truth, and being and goodness, *convertuntur*: coincide, are co-extensive. In simple terms, unity means identity with itself and separation or distinction from everything else; truth means lack of contradiction and therefore intelligibility and openness to the inquiring mind; goodness means appetibility, desirability, and therefore capacity to act as a goal for the will. Everything that is, precisely in so far as it participates in the activity of being, also shares—*analogically*—in the transcendental properties: it is one, true and intelligible, good and appetible.

Vision and Delight

Of beauty Aquinas has two definitions: "Those things are called beautiful which, when seen, grant us pleasure" (*Summa Theologiae*, I, q.5 a.4 ad 1 [my translation]). This is an objective definition of beauty. The subject of the sentence is "the things" that give pleasure when seen. The second definition is, in contrast, of a subjective character, focusing on the experiential side of the equation. "Let that be called beauty, the very apprehension of which pleases" (*Summa Theol.*, Ia IIae, q.27 a.1 ad 3 [my translation]). Here, "apprehension" is the subject of the sentence and is the cause of delight.

If we seek the central ingredients of the mentioned definitions, we find that these are sight or vision (*visio*) and pleasure or delight (*complacentia*) in the first definition, and apprehension or sense perception (*apprehensio*) and again pleasure or delight (*complacentia*), in the second definition. To begin, *visio* is further qualified as *apprehensio*. Sight stands for all perception in general, but particularly for the perception of sight and hearing, and not for taste, touch, and smell, if reference is to beauty. *Visio*, furthermore, also stands for intellectual apprehension and therefore cognition. Even our modern linguistic

practice warrants the use of *seeing* to signify intellectual grasp and understanding. Knowledge is a kind of sight: an insight.

The second vital ingredient in the definition of beauty and of our experience of beauty is delight (*complacentia* or *delectatio*). Pleasure and delight stand for (a) the gratification of the senses when confronted by objects that have particular properties and that we call beautiful and (b) the mental satisfaction we experience when we have adequately grasped the form or internal structure of a physical object. Fundamentally, however, pleasure is primarily connected with (c) *appetitus* (desire, the will, and love). "The cause of pleasure is love. Everyone, in fact, delights in the possession of what one loves" (*In Ethicam Nicom.*, III, lectio 19, n. 600 [my translation]).

So, beautiful things act also as goals of love and desire, and this means that they are not only sense-perceptible and knowable but also loveable and good. For *goodness properly concerns desire and will*. There is goodness in beauty and, hence, the experience of beauty involves—along with sense-perception and cognition—our desire, will, and heart. The distinction between goodness and beauty is clearly made: goodness being the proper object of the will, whereas beauty is primarily the proper object of sensation and cognition. "Although beauty and goodness are the same in so far as the real object is concerned (as both are inherent in the object), for lustre and harmony are contained in the concept of goodness, they differ conceptually, because beauty adds to goodness a reference to cognition: the knowledge that something is the way it is" (*In De Div. Nom.*, IV, lectio 5 [my translation]).

The Harmonies of Beauty

We can now reconstruct a picture of what is involved in the aesthetic experience triggered by beautiful things. In the presence of beauty, our senses perceive sensory properties that stimulate and gratify the sensory functions. Furthermore, in their immediate apprehension of physical properties, the sensory experiences lead to an intellectual insight into the structure, order, and form of the object, so that the intellect is, in turn, stimulated and gratified by an intuitive grasp of the form. That which is sense perceived and intuitively known in its form is, by the same correspondence that it holds with sense and intellect, felt as desirable and, hence, it solicits an affective response. In the harmonious correspondence of the object to all our faculties and, in turn, of all our faculties to the object, our senses, our intellect, our will are satisfied and rest in a condition of delight.

In this experience, all our faculties are active and perfectly harmonized among themselves, just as they are perfectly attuned to the object of contemplation. The aesthetic experience is, in other words, a harmonious and unifying experience of immediate and intuitive fusion in which subject and object cannot be separated and distinguished. That experience of fusion is kin to the experience of love, both physical and spiritual, and of deep reflection, prayer,

and anticipated beatific vision. These intuitive, powerfully engaging, deeply gratifying experiences are most aptly rendered by the word *contemplatio*.

We are now in a position to appreciate the claim according to which beauty was considered implicitly by Aquinas to constitute the fourth transcendental property of being in general. More so, beauty would constitute the synthesis of the other three transcendentals: unity, truth, and goodness. If we were to accept this claim, we would be compelled to hold that, indeed, everything is beautiful in its own way! This, however, would turn the specifically aesthetic meaning of beauty into a metaphysical transcendental category applicable to everything that is. Aquinas seems to be quite close to this position. Anyway, it was congenial to the Medieval mind to think that the whole universe is a beautiful masterpiece issued from the hands of God as supreme artist.

Integrity, Proportion, Clarity

In many places Aquinas announces what he considers to be—in line with traditional thought, to a certain extent—the objective properties of beauty. *Proportion* and *clarity* are very often mentioned. "As may be assumed from the words of Dionysius, the concept of beauty comprises both clarity and proper proportion. He says that God is called beautiful as the cause of harmony and clarity in all things" (*Summa Theol.*, IIa IIae, q. 145 a. 2 [my translation]). Elsewhere in the same work, we find the concise formula: "Beauty consists in a certain lustre and proportion" (IIa IIae, q. 180 a. 2 ad 3). Another passage worth mentioning is to be found in the Commentary to *Divine Names* (IV, lectio 5 [my translation]): "The name of beauty is given to all that which has the clarity proper to its kind, whether spiritual or physical, and which is constructed in proper proportion." To the two mentioned properties, *proportion* and *clarity*, Aquinas added a third: integrity. "Beauty demands the fulfilment of three conditions: the first is integrity or perfection of the thing, for what is defective is, in consequence, ugly. The second is due proportion or harmony. The third is clarity, so that things which have glowing and clear colour are said to be beautiful" (my translation).

Let us briefly consider each of these properties, to illustrate their more precise meaning.

1. *Integrity* or *perfection* signifies the completeness of the thing in question, and hence something can be called beautiful provided it exhibits all the structural and organic elements that its essence implies. Aquinas makes clear his understanding by contrasting integrity with the lack thereof. A thing cannot be beautiful if it lacks any of its ontologically necessary attributes and elements. A human body is disfigured by the absence or privation of any member or organ. It is, therefore, imperfect and ugly. Aquinas was suggesting that beauty rests on the ontological completeness and perfection of the thing in question. Obviously, this criterion and property is particularly and primarily applicable to natural organisms and phenomena, rather than to works of art.

2. *Proportion* or *harmony* was an aesthetic property already identified by the Pythagoreans who, however, understood proportion primarily in quantitative and mathematical terms or, as Aquinas put it, as a fixed relation of one quantity to another and *commensuratio*. In Aquinas we find a qualitative conception of proportion, announced by Augustine before him. This he called *convenientia*, which means intrinsic attunement and could refer to both the physical and the spiritual world. It signified the correspondence between inner and outer reality, appearance and essence, matter and form. "It included not only the relation between a thing and the soul, but also the relation of a thing to its exemplar, such as that of a picture to what it represents; and the relation of a thing to the idea we have of it, which, in the case of a picture, is the idea in the artist's mind. It also included relations in the ontological structure of things, such as the relation of form to matter; and even the relation of a thing to itself: namely its inward harmony, the fact that it is as it should be" (Tatar-kiewicz 1970–74, Vol. II, 251). Proportion, as *convenientia* and *debita proportio*, a proper and adequate attunement, meant also accordance with something's appointed goal, whether extrinsic or immanent.

3. Finally, *clarity* (*claritas*) meant—in accordance with the prevailing taste of the time—bright color (*color nitidus*). Aquinas, furthermore, spoke of the clarity and beauty of virtue and, more radically, stated that "clarity is caused by the super-abundant glory of the soul in the body" (my translation). In this sense, clarity signifies the shining forth of form, essence, and internal structure, in the material and physical appearance. Augustine had defined beauty as "the splendor of order" and Albert the Great had defined it as "the splendor of form." Aquinas was aware of his predecessors and, hence, could understand clarity as the splendor of an intelligible order and form, shining through material manifestations. Clarity is the self-revelation and the self-transparency of inner truth, in its material embodiment. The splendor of physical and bodily appearances is due to the clarity of the spiritual principle—soul and essence—that manifests itself in every material body or structured artifact. Beauty is seen as the splendor of unity, truth, and goodness.

The Role of the Reader

I have underlined the direct engagement of all the human faculties in the experience of the beautiful. In the aesthetic experience, we must acknowledge the role of the perceiver. In other words, if it is true that beauty is to be found in, and emerges from, objects endowed with particular properties that trigger in us a sense of pleasure, delight, and contemplative disposition, it is equally true that objectively identified beauty is a correlative of a subject: the "reader" who delights in it. Aquinas implicitly accepted this position, and he paid attention to the subjective side of aesthetic experience. In general, however, and especially with reference to his understanding of beauty as a natural and ontological property, he could still maintain a nondialectical conception whereby

beauty would still be there in the world, regardless of an apprehending human receiver. At the same time, he had no difficulty in recognizing the fact that only human subjects rejoice in sensuous beauty for its own sake. As he put it, "Only humans delight in the beauty of sensuous things as such" (*Summa Theol.*, I, q.91 a.3 ad 3 [my translation]).²

NOTES

1. For further discussion, see Eco 1986 and 1988.
2. For a fuller commentary on the topics covered in this chapter, see Bredin and Santoro-Brienza 2000.

~~IN AESTHETICS AND TRUTH~~
ART AND ESSENCE