

Aesthetics

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AESTHETICS was the bad object for a surprising diversity of critical traditions in the 1970s and 1980s. Poststructuralists, sociologists, and Marxists all argued that the Enlightenment notion of aesthetic judgment as transhistorically detached from contingency, praxis, and ethics was an expression of bourgeois ideology.¹ Theodor Adorno's dialectical *Aesthetic Theory* (1970) discerned antinomies rather than pure ideology. The idea of the aesthetic as an autonomous realm of useless activity was surely indefensible from the perspective of historical materialism—but this very idea of aesthetic autonomy refused what Adorno called the “total exchange society” and what we today call neoliberalism.² More recently, the tables have turned; critiques of these critiques have given rise to a return to form or to “new formalism,” to a burgeoning interest in the affective dimensions of aesthetic experience, and to “neuroaesthetics” as a possible interface of the humanities and the hard sciences. But a shared feature of the critique of and return to aesthetics is that the foundational touchstones are assumed to be German idealism and romanticism, from Alexander Baumgarten to Friedrich Schlegel.

From this perspective, Victorian Britain looks like a philosophical backwater: no Kants or Hegels here; just the pious essays of John Ruskin or the campy effusions of teapot-loving aesthetes. Terry Eagleton asserts outright that “much in the Anglophone [aesthetic] tradition is in fact derivative of German philosophy.”³ It is true that aesthetic philosophy was often viewed and eschewed by Victorians as a Teutonic invention. But we misunderstand the history of aesthetic thought if we disregard its intellectual life in British nineteenth century. Two intersecting threads of Victorian aesthetics challenge the assumptions of critiques and defenses of the aesthetic in critical theory. The first is an openness to the possibility of scientific rather than philosophical explanations of aesthetic experience. The second is an interest in corporeality and materiality, as distinct from abstract, disembodied cognition. These strands intersect in that embodied cognition first becomes an object of scientific knowledge in the Victorian period, and this is a hint as to what is most distinctive and important about Victorian aesthetics.

First: aesthetics as a science. The empirical study of aesthetic experience was mostly rejected by German idealists and romantics but

flourished in Victorian Britain. The possibility of a science of beauty was foreshadowed by design and color theory early in the century, as figures like the paint manufacturer George Field and the interior designer David Ramsay Hay revived ancient Greek attempts to discover a unified, mathematical model of harmonies of color, form, and human proportion. At the same time, disciplines were shifting and professionalizing. Physiology and biology claimed the human mind as one of their knowledge objects, and, along with it, questions about the sense of beauty that had previously been in the possession of philosophy. Grant Allen's *Physiological Aesthetics* (1877), one of the only British works on aesthetics widely read in Europe, synthesized Alexander Bain's physiological psychology and Herbert Spencer's evolutionary theory to theorize aesthetic response as an evolved animal behavior rooted in the nervous system.⁴ The professional and romantic couple Vernon Lee and Clementina Anstruther-Thomson later used empirical introspection, quantitative analysis, and statistical surveys to study empathy, understood by them as a "bodily alteration" directly induced by visual, verbal, or musical form.⁵ By the turn of the twentieth century, the first experimental psychology laboratories in the U. K., the U. S., and Canada included studies of aesthetic experience in their research programs.⁶

This attention to the body as a receptor of aesthetic stimuli draws our attention to a second distinguishing feature of Victorian aesthetic thought: the importance of corporeality and materiality. Perhaps no intervention in aesthetic philosophy is more significant or controversial than Kant's distinction between aesthetic judgment and sensuous pleasure: only judgments untainted by bodily gratification can truly be called aesthetic. Adorno acerbically describes Kant's idea of aesthetic pleasure as "castrated hedonism, desire without desire."⁷ One might imagine that the Victorians would wholly embrace "desire without desires"—and indeed, the young Ruskin did attempt to castrate hedonism, distinguishing "degraded" and "morbid" *aesthesia* (a merely sensory response) from *theoria*, a sort of "reverent" and contemplative pleasure in beauty.⁸ But in fact, Victorian writers and artists repeatedly emphasized the sensuous materiality of aesthetic experience. In their painting and poetry, Ruskin's Pre-Raphaelite followers focused so much on the body that they were viciously attacked by Robert Buchanan for embracing "fleshly feeling."⁹ William Morris's socialist aestheticism placed at its center not the judging mind but the laboring body. Poiesis *was* praxis: in a utopian economy of unalienated labor, the making and using of art would both exist for the "service of the body."¹⁰

These materialisms—scientific, aesthetic, corporeal—resisted and transformed German idealism, reconfiguring the terrain of the aesthetic. They also reframe our usual understanding of aestheticism, Britain’s best-known contribution to the history of aesthetics. Aestheticism is sometimes reduced to the slogan “art for art’s sake,” as though it were just a popularization of Kantian autonomy. But it was, instead, a devious reinterpretation of continental traditions. Walter Pater’s *The Renaissance*, that holy book of aesthetes, is subtly and closely engaged with major figures of German aesthetic philosophy (Winckelmann, Goethe, Hegel, Schiller)—but it also repeatedly embraces empirical and scientific knowledge practices. The “Preface” invites readers to examine aesthetic impressions “as a chemist notes some natural element,” while the “Conclusion” describes the pursuit of “art for its own sake” as a pragmatic response to a scientific materialism that reduces consciousness to “the modification of the tissues of the brain.”¹¹ Oscar Wilde is most famous for repurposing Pater’s and Ruskin’s thought as the vehicle of mass-culture celebrity. But Wilde’s gambit was scientifically and philosophically informed: Lord Henry applies the “experimental method” to Dorian Gray in order to conduct a “scientific analysis of the passions”; Winckelmannian queer Hellenism is Wilde’s strategy for destroying the distinction between aesthetic and erotic pleasure.¹²

This infusion of embodied pleasure and empiricist thought make it difficult to describe British aesthetics as simply derivative of German philosophy. It also suggests that the nineteenth century may have something to teach us about recent developments in aesthetic theory. Having moved beyond debates over whether or not the aesthetic is an obfuscating strategy of bourgeois ideology, many are now drawing attention to the interface of aesthetics with the neurosciences; to the possibility of quantifying the study of cultural objects; and to the affective embodiment of aesthetic judgments.¹³ Victorians thought deeply about scientific and embodied aspects of aesthetic experience that were ignored for much of the twentieth century but that have returned to us today. Their writing begins to look less like an epiphenomenon of idealist aesthetics, and more like an overlooked history of our critical present.

NOTES

1. Significant interventions include Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1990); Paul De Man, *Aesthetic Ideology*, ed. Andrzej Warminski (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996); Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social*

- Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984); Hal Foster, ed., *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture* (Port Townsend: Bay Press, 1983).
2. Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, ed. Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 226.
 3. Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*, 11.
 4. See Benjamin Morgan, *The Outward Mind: Materialist Aesthetics in Victorian Science and Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017).
 5. Vernon Lee and Anstruther-Thomson, *Beauty and Ugliness and Other Studies in Psychological Aesthetics* (London: John Lane, 1912), 167.
 6. See, for instance, the experiments described in August Kirschmann, ed., *University of Toronto Studies: Psychology Series*, Vol. 1 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1900).
 7. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 11.
 8. John Ruskin, *Modern Painters, Volume 2*, ed. E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn, Library Edition, Vol. 4, *The Works of John Ruskin* (London: George Allen, 1903), 35–36, 47.
 9. Robert Buchanan, “The Fleshly School of Poetry: Mr. D. G. Rossetti.” *The Contemporary Review* 18 (August 1871): 334–50.
 10. William Morris, *The Collected Works of William Morris: Signs of Change and Lectures on Socialism*, Vol. 23 (Longmans, Green, and Co., 1915), 165–66.
 11. Walter Pater, *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry: The 1893 Text*, ed. Donald L. Hill (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), xiii, 190, 186.
 12. Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, in *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*, Vol. 3, ed. Joseph Bristow and Ian Small (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 219. On Winckelmann see Whitney Davis, *Queer Beauty: Sexuality and Aesthetics from Winckelmann to Freud and Beyond* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).
 13. See Sianne Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012); Semir Zeki, *Splendors and Miseries of the Brain: Love, Creativity, and the Quest for Human Happiness* (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009); Gabrielle G. Starr, *Feeling Beauty: The Neuroscience of Aesthetic Experience* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2013).

