

The Beautiful, the Sublime, and the Grotesque

The Beautiful, the Sublime, and the Grotesque:
The Subjective Turn in Aesthetics
from the Enlightenment to the Present

Edited by

Michael J. Matthis

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P U B L I S H I N G

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This book first published 2010

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

12 Back Chapman Street, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2XX, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

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ISBN (10): 1-4438-1963-8, ISBN (13): 978-1-4438-1963-3

This book is dedicated in loving memory of my mother and father.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Preface	ix
Introduction: The Enlightenment and the Tension between Subjectivity and Objectivity	1
Michael J. Matthis	
Section I: Empiricism and the Problem of Aesthetic Judgment.....	9
Winkelman on the Trapeze: The Delicate Balance of Aesthetic Theory....	11
James Mock	
Hume's Worlds of Taste.....	19
Kenneth L. Buckman	
David Hume's and Guy Sircello's Aesthetics	29
James Mock	
Section II: Kant and the Beautiful	41
Kant and the Disinterestedness of Beauty	43
Kenneth L. Buckman	
Utopia in Beauty.....	53
Kevin E. Dodson	
Subjectivity and Relationality: Kant's Copernican Revolution in Aesthetics	63
Michael J. Matthis	
Section III: From the Sublime to the Grotesque:	
Issues in Aesthetics and Morality.....	71
Sublimity and Infinity: Kant and the Foundations of Morality	73
Michael J. Matthis	

It Don't Come Easy v. Taking it Easy: Two Radically Different Reflections on Utilitarianism and the Blues	85
Michael Patton and E. M. Dadlez	
 The Museum as Moral Agent	99
E. M. Dadlez	
 Section IV: Subjectivity in Modernism and Postmodernism.....	107
 The Workings of the Artworld: Articles of Faith	109
James Mock	
 Going to the Devil: Lewis's Science Fiction and Academic Postmodernism	117
E. M. Dadlez	
 Poe, Socrates, and Zombieism: The Art of Dying in the Land of the Undead	127
Michael J. Matthis	
 Contributors.....	149

PREFACE

This book of essays consists of papers read by their authors at various conferences in the last several years. The majority of papers were presented in philosophy panels at the annual meetings of the South Central Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies. The panels reflected their members' interests in topics in aesthetics, particularly those that concern the beautiful, the sublime, and the grotesque. I wish to thank my colleagues, whose papers are included in this book, for their help in preparing their specific papers for publication. I wish also to thank Amanda Miller of Cambridge Scholars Publishing for her assistance in the preparation of the manuscript for this book, and to thank her as well for presenting to me the suggestion of bringing together these papers in book form. Recognition for their contribution to this project must be extended also to the Faculty Senate and the administration at Lamar University in Beaumont, Texas, for granting me a Faculty Developmental Leave for the purpose of developing and editing this book. In particular I want to extend my gratitude to Dr. Steve Doblin, Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs, for his support of this project and his continued encouragement of research and scholarship at Lamar University, and to Dr. James Simmons, President of Lamar University, for his commitment to research and faculty development at our university.

Specific recognition also is due to Dr. John Gossage, Chair of the Faculty Development and Research Committee of the Faculty Senate, for his work with the committee in the evaluation of my proposal for this project, and to Dr. Terri Davis for her contributions toward support of projects such as this and her efforts in presiding over the Faculty Senate. Gratitude also is most sincerely extended to Dr. Pamela Saur and Dr. Kevin Dodson for their letters of support in my pursuit of a Faculty Developmental Leave, and to my Department Chairperson, Dr. Steve Zani, and to the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, Dr. Brenda Nichols, for their help in securing the funds for faculty replacements during my leave. I want to extend my gratitude to Dr. Joachim Jäger, Director of the Neue Nationalgalerie in Berlin, for allowing me to interview him in relation to topics central to several sections in this book. His insights concerning the museum's aesthetic and moral responsibilities in the presentation of art to the public were of great assistance to me.

In addition, I wish to offer my appreciation to Dr. Lynne Lokensgaard, Professor of Art History at Lamar University, for assisting me in my efforts to contact various European and American museum directors in relation to topics in this book. Above all I wish to convey my deepest gratitude to my wife, Rose, whose patient and careful reading of my written contributions to the book was invaluable, and whose advice in general throughout the development of the book was indispensable. Her own background in the arts, as well as her good judgment as to what a proper sentence and paragraph should look like, were essential aids to me, as was her ability to uncover and correct my own tendencies toward the obscure. Finally, the works by Redon and Goya that appear in this book and on the book's cover were selected based on my wife's helpful recommendations.

INTRODUCTION: THE ENLIGHTENMENT AND THE TENSION BETWEEN SUBJECTIVITY AND OBJECTIVITY

MICHAEL J. MATTHIS

The eighteenth-century Enlightenment in Europe consisted of various threads of thought, which, taken individually, were antithetical to many other strands within the intellectual fabric of the Enlightenment, but which, taken collectively, added up to a liberation of the individual, unfettered by what Kant characterized as a “self-incurred . . . tutelage”¹ So liberated, in Kant’s view, individuals as well as societies gain the freedom and strength to question the assumptions, that is, the dogmas and traditions, on which hitherto they had relied precisely for the false sense of protection and security offered by the tutelage, or governance, of such assumptions. Inconsistencies in theory, however, can be important, in a practical sense, where they help the individual to face a world that is itself filled with problems that are not entirely amenable to the systems and logic that many pre-Enlightenment theories attempted to impose upon a world that was never in reality as tidy and unified as these theories insisted it had to be. The Enlightenment therefore consists of a courageous turning toward the objective world, the one that is not especially attractive, ethically, politically, and otherwise, when the veils of metaphysics and religion are removed and the problems of humans are exposed for what they are. Exposure, however, of problems, no matter how intractable they might appear to be, is at least an indispensable condition for the proposal of a solution, and the Enlightenment, to this extent, represents also a turning toward the subject, the experiencing and active agent, which, for all of its metaphysical modesty, becomes the center around which this new age of enlightenment revolves, a subject that cannot hope to revitalize and

¹ Immanuel Kant, “What is Enlightenment?” in *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals and What is Enlightenment?*, trans. Lewis White Beck, Library of Liberal Arts (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1959), 85.

repair a world without in turn orienting itself toward the objective world as an inseparable correlate to its actions and perceptions.

The sciences, for example, exemplify the Enlightenment spirit of confidence in the power of human insight, when perception is turned critically toward the world, an insight that Hegel will characterize as the essence of the Enlightenment.² At the same time, this insight, if it actually exists, is limited to laws and generalizations that are based upon individual perceptions, as opposed to insights gained through examination of ideas contained within reason itself; the scientist ventures into the world, seeking to add, inductively and synthetically, to what is already known, not merely to analyze what is already known or to reason deductively from first principles. The spirit of scientific inquiry therefore is distrustful of grand theoretical schemes, but then, too, is suspicious of any metaphysical claims that might lurk within those generalizations. Going to phenomena themselves, letting nature speak for itself, in response to inquiry and experimentation, liberates the individual from the dogmatism both of custom and transcendent reason, but at the same time makes the quest for objectivity to be continuously tentative and always a matter *only* of phenomena, rather than of metaphysical things themselves, as Kant, in the German Enlightenment, well understood. So, too, does cautiousness with respect to conclusions, and suspicion with respect to metaphysics in general, characterize the thinking of the leaders of the French Enlightenment such as Fontenelle, Maupertuis, and d'Alembert, with their distinctively positivistic approach to science and therefore distrust of the occult forces that science seems inevitably to uncover. Without the occult in some capacity, however, the objectivity or reality of the natural world comes to be replaced by a phenomenality of mere perception only, a subjectivism that does little to enhance the intellectual sense of purpose and direction in the natural sciences, or to engender rationality, in the broad sense of that term, as a skeptical but committed search for truth. Enlightenment thought in general develops out of the tension between these two choices, the metaphysically obscure and the subjectively clear, as ultimately its most celebrated thinkers, in particular Hume, Rousseau, and Kant, are unwilling to part entirely with one or the other choice.

For example, the distrust of occult, unverifiable forces extends into the political sphere, into the democratic revolt against traditional authority with its appeal, quite often, to a source within the divine. Again, however, a merely phenomenal approach to democratic rule undercuts its own claim

² See G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 328 ff.

to moral legitimacy, reducing the argument for democracy to an appeal for the avoidance of a state of nature, in the Hobbesian sense of war of all against all; but if social stability is the justification for government, then the claims of despotism are as legitimate as, and perhaps even more compelling than, those of democracy. With this in mind, Rousseau seeks to introduce at least a sense of the metaphysical into his argument for democracy, a form of governing wherein moral authority is based on the notion of a “general will,” a will that legitimizes, indeed makes absolute, the claims of democratic rule, without, however, identifying the democratic with the factual outcome of any legislative assembly or electoral process. The individual, as a contracting party to the sovereignty of the general will, is no longer the Hobbesian entity governed solely by self-interest, an atomistic entity that never grants to society the moral legitimacy that liberal democracy demands of it, as liberal democracy seeks to replace the self-interested individual with an active and informed citizenry concerned with the rights of all. Tension remains, however, between the poles of objectivity and subjectivity, between individual rights that no assemblage of people can remove, and the sovereign concerns of the public interest that seem, in Rousseau, to be the source of those rights.

Complementing this turn toward the subjective, or experience, that underlies the experimental enterprise in both the sciences and emerging democracies in the eighteenth century, a transition of equal significance occurs in the realms of the ethical and aesthetic. Here, too, we find theories in these areas moving toward a personal, intuitive source for principles, and at the same time we find that the primary developments in ethics and aesthetics carefully avoid an essentially unenlightening move toward crude subjectivism or relativism, a move that would obviate the context of moral and aesthetic criticism and dispute, and would eliminate as well, particularly in the artistic, the distinction between greatness and mediocrity, a distinction that subjectivism cannot explain, without resort to the shifting winds of popular opinion. By the time we get beyond the Enlightenment, and the so-called “modernism” which has roots that are nourished by Enlightenment theories, the distinction between greatness and mediocrity in the artistic will essentially vanish, and the era of the post-modern, the post-philosophical, and in general the post-objective, will have begun in earnest.

The Enlightenment, however, while turning to experience, in general, will seek to find a point of tension, or reconciliation, between an objectivism that dominates much of philosophy prior to the Enlightenment, and a subjectivism, or relativism, in metaphysics, but in other areas as well, that will come to dominate philosophy in the twentieth century.

When Wittgenstein announces that philosophy is dead, and that the temptation to engage in philosophy should be viewed as a sign of some sort of mental disorder, since reality is essentially identical with appearance, Wittgenstein is not defending a subjectivism of mental appearances beyond which there might lurk a reality worthy of philosophical investigation. Rather Wittgenstein is defending, and developing, an ontological relativity, or a world-dominating subjectivism, one in which objects in the world come to have a directness or immediacy of relation to the human subject without being limited to the mental objects that, in subjectivisms prior to Wittgenstein's, had required such an immediacy. To this extent Wittgenstein, in his later incarnation, is saying that objects and events in the world just are as they appear, that the reality-question of traditional metaphysics cannot conceivably be pursued, without reintroducing a subject-object dichotomy that leads philosophically nowhere, and which, if pursued with enough persistence, might well endanger the unity of the world, or "drag everything with it and plunge (the world) into chaos."³ Wittgenstein's world-unity is one that depends not on the metaphysical presence of existence, but on the absence of any question that might endanger the equivalence of reality with appearance, an equivalence that essentially makes meaningless the reality-question.

This demystification of the object, if we might so call it, contributes to the removal of the sense of the "aesthetic" in the realm of the arts, an aesthetic wherein, within modernism, the artwork contains more than what visibly or auditorily appears to the contemplator of the work of art. In the realm of the aesthetic, the museum, for example, is called upon to enhance, within an environment of solemnity, the importance of the work of art, an invisible importance that can only be revealed to those willing to submit to an aesthetic experience that the museum seeks to make possible or available, an experience that is similar to a philosophical or religious revelation of reality. The museum does not thereby determine the aesthetic status of the artwork, but merely makes an aesthetic experience possible, an experience that requires usually a disinterestedness on the part of the spectator that will then correspond to the universal or essential character of the reality or idea revealed in the aesthetic experience. In the twentieth century, however, after an intense experiment in modernity in the form of abstract art, we find developed both in theory and in the arts an opposition to the educational or even quasi-mystical aspirations of aesthetic experience, at which point again appearance and reality converge, and, as

³ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, ed. G.E.M. Anscombe and G.H. von Wright, trans. Denis Paul and G.E.M. Anscombe, Harper Torchbooks (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1972), 81.

Wittgenstein declares, “Since everything lies open to view, there is nothing to explain.”⁴ In this event, the artwork is indeed nothing more than what the curators, critics, and even the public, determine it to be, there being nothing significant or hidden, requiring exegesis or explanation, within the artwork, other than perhaps some narrative that can be understood without one’s having to rely on any special insight or inner experience. In this case, the public does not go to the museum because it contains art, along with the possibility of enlightenment, but the museum contains art because the public says that it does by going to the museum.

In general, Enlightenment-era philosophers, while sowing the seeds, in their transition toward subjectivity, for such a turn of events, would not be happy with this offspring of their thought. While cautious, and in some cases scornful, of many of the metaphysical claims of their predecessors, these thinkers are not ready to abandon the ideal of the pursuit of ethical and artistic truth. Thus Shaftesbury and Hutcheson will reject the doctrine of innate ideas, along with a developmental model of moral selfhood, the realization of moral, and intellectual, virtue, in favor of a model wherein the self discovers moral truth directly, but also outwardly, in the social arena. In this case, moral reality, or the moral qualities of individual and social conduct, is not identical with visible appearance, but is nevertheless directly available to a moral sense or sentiment. Such directness in the cognition of value involves an attempt clearly to preserve moral objectivity and a meaningful sense of moral enlightenment, while not abandoning at least some relation to experience, even if that experience will be too suggestive of the occult and the non-empirical for someone such as Hume, who no doubt would be all too ready to commit the moral-sense theory to his already brightly-burning flames—not that Hume, however, is entirely free of moral-sense theory. Indeed in Hume we find a universal moral sentiment, or passion, instinctively guiding most humans toward virtuous conduct and repelling them from vice, or at least helping them to recognize its moral deficiency. Subjectivity, however, begins to assume a more prominent position in Hume than in other Enlightenment moral theorists, as Hume is clearly averse to the idea that a moral sentiment has the sort of cognitive capacity that the other senses have, and certainly is not directed outwardly toward the obscure moral qualities that Hutcheson and Shaftesbury deem to be present for such a faculty, or for what we sometimes call moral conscience.

⁴ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1968), 50.

Although “reason is the slave of the passions,”⁵ for Hume, and the passions themselves are universal, not in relation to any universal moral qualities, but only as a result of the universal or common structure of the human mind, Hume himself is unwilling to give in entirely to a reduction of moral value to feeling, or the reduction of moral judgment merely to emotional expression, even if both elements are present clearly in his moral theory. One’s own private feeling of pleasure, for example, is one thing, but one’s feeling of approbation, or disapprobation, directed to the conduct of someone else, is another thing; the question being, what is the source of this uniquely moral feeling? If I feel pleasure from drinking wine, I will observe the pleasure, and perhaps have another glass of it. To observe the conduct of someone distant from me, to approve it, feel pleasure with respect to it, and to enjoin it, not just for myself, but universally, is a response that cannot easily be explained within a naturalistic model of stimulus and response: the person’s action is not directed toward me, and a universal idea, that which the action represents, is not an individual thing that can cause pleasure in me, as a glass of wine can. Hume’s solution corresponds more closely to that of Hutcheson’s, as well as Butler’s, and is essentially non-natural and phenomenological: the self is animated by something outside itself, something that elicits its attention in a way that a fact does not. What this something is Hume does not tell us, although he declares that “the simplest and most obvious cause which can . . . be assigned for any phenomenon is probably the true one,”⁶ and in this case the phenomenon of a disinterested and yet active response to something in the situation itself has more to recommend it than does an account that would derive the phenomenon of benevolence from self-interested and personal pleasure alone.

Unlike Hutcheson, Hume will not speak of objective moral qualities, nor will he speak of objective beauty, as a kind of quality of a thing, but like Hutcheson, Hume will speak of *discernment* with respect both to ethical and aesthetic responses. In this sense Hume will emphasize the role of reason, for example, in relation to aesthetic taste, so that the arbiter of aesthetic disputes possesses a way of discerning qualities in objects that are likely to produce the universal sentiment that is itself equivalent to the beautiful. Hume rests his appeal for a universal sentiment of beauty on a common human nature, one with which the aesthetic expert, so to speak,

⁵ David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, in *Hume’s Moral and Political Philosophy*, The Hafner Library of Classics (New York: Hafner Publishing Company, 1948), 25.

⁶ David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, in *Hume’s Moral and Political Philosophy*, 273.

appears to have greater rapport than do those unpracticed in art criticism and judgment. Why, however, the agreeableness of a work of art that corresponds to one's inner nature is superior in degree or intensity to one's more superficial taste, Hume never makes clear: why *ought* we get in touch with our more "natural" self, in the absence of any final causes or ends that direct us to do so? In the absence of a meaningful source of the "ought," Hume's idea of human nature becomes a source of relativism on a larger scale, making dubious the prospect of any genuine aesthetic criticism.

Immanuel Kant, on the other hand, will not be limited by an empiricism that gives little, if any, support to the possibility of assessing blame or censure in the context of aesthetic judgment. As such, Kant will issue the indictment that states famously: "The first commonplace of taste is contained in the proposition, with which every tasteless person proposes to avoid blame: everyone has his own taste."⁷ More than any other Enlightenment figure, Kant is concerned with criticism—"... to criticism everything must submit"⁸—and in his three *Critiques*, Kant challenges traditional dogmas that attempt to resist criticism, whether they take refuge within the metaphysical obscurity of pure reason or within the privacy of mere subjectivity. In his third *Critique*, wherein judgments concerning matters of taste come under Kant's critical purview, Kant seeks a balance between the demands of objectivity and subjectivity that had eluded him in his first two *Critiques*, as indeed it had eluded the Enlightenment in general. To this end Kant will begin to expand the vocabulary of philosophy in ways that hitherto had never been attempted, writing now of universal, *a priori* feelings, such as those of aesthetic pleasure, that cannot be avoided by contingent circumstances of psychology in relation to which again we either feel or do not feel something, but can hardly be *required* to feel, or be *blamed* if we fail to feel.

In the presence of what we take to be the beautiful, we speak as if the beautiful were there, an object or quality to be seen, something that we *ought* to see, as we do not speak about matters of *mere* pleasure and feeling. Kant is concerned with this ought-experience in his third *Critique*, an experience of a feeling that is not merely subjective, but one that is concerned with a sense of beauty wherein the beautiful seems to be there, objectively before us, an aesthetic presence which *elicits* our attention in ways that objects that *factually* are there do not. By allowing

⁷ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. J.H. Bernard (New York: Hafner Pres, 1951) 183.

⁸ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Kemp Smith (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1965), 9n.

the *a priori*, that which is necessary and universal, to enter into the subjective recesses of what hitherto had been regarded as private and incommunicable, Kant hopes to bring the realm of subjectivity, of feeling and desire, into the common world wherein enlightenment is no longer reserved merely for matters of objectivity and assertions of fact. To this end, Kant will examine the beautiful and the sublime as experiences in which the universal, in its objectivity, comes into relation with subjective experiences that thereby become matters of communication and criticism, and so too will explore subjectivity in a way that opens up the subjective precisely to this communication and criticism in ways that philosophy, with its metaphysical dogmas, hitherto had been unable to achieve.

In this collection of essays, we will be examining issues in aesthetic and moral theory that arise out of the Enlightenment, and out of the tension with which philosophers of this era must in some way come to terms, as the metaphysical principles of the past become matters subject to question and criticism when placed for inspection under the lens of experience. While pre-Enlightenment philosophers often rejected the claims of experience as unworthy of the beauty and integrity enjoyed by aesthetic and moral principles, Enlightenment thinkers are willing to place such principles within the court of common experience, out of which truth will emerge, if it really exists, or fail to emerge, if its claim is an illusion. The themes of the beautiful, the sublime, and the grotesque represent ways in which truth can be magnified or disturbed within the lens of human experience, and by the time we get to the twentieth century, with its social and political upheavals, our willingness to explore the grotesque will be an indication of the distance separating us from the metaphysical purities of pre-Enlightenment philosophers, and the aesthetic experiences of Enlightenment thinkers. The object simply as it is, neither representing anything beyond itself, nor containing, in its abstractness, a window into the spiritual (as Piet Mondrian says it should), neither existing nor not existing, but merely and ambiguously being, comes to dominate the post-philosophical and post-aesthetic world. In the absence of tension, neither philosophy nor art will prosper, and then reason returns to the sleep that releases the forces of the grotesque and allows them to dominate in the areas of the aesthetic, moral, and political. Kant, aroused from his “dogmatic slumbers,” generated a critical regimen that brought into relation the realms of objectivity and subjectivity. So, too, today, when reason seems to slumber, the shock of the grotesque might finally be what is needed for a new tension to arise, with a new sense of subjectivity and of objectivity, and ultimately a new answer to Kant’s question: “What is enlightenment?”

SECTION I:

EMPIRICISM AND THE PROBLEM OF AESTHETIC JUDGMENT

The tension between subjectivity and objectivity, which was explored in the Introduction, translates metaphorically into a balancing act on a philosophical trapeze in the first essay in this section. James Mock examines a figure, Johann Winkelmann, who, as the father of art history and of modern archaeology, digs deeply into the historical roots of the Enlightenment and finds in ancient Athens the counterpart to the intellectual fecundity of his own era. Winkelmann's trapeze artistry involves an emphasis upon historicism in art, the relativistic theory that art is a product of the socio-political environment in which it arises, balanced against a neo-Platonic desire (in the soul) for the contemplation of beauty in its objective purity, a theory to which Winkelmann appeals in an effort to understand the sense of the timeless in great works of art. Winkelmann represents a transition between pre-Enlightenment metaphysics, which involved reality as a distant, super-sensible object, and the demands of the Enlightenment for direct confirmation of all cognitive claims in experience, or at the very least indirectly through scientific inductive reasoning.

The two remaining essays focus their attention on one of the most important of Enlightenment thinkers, David Hume, a philosopher whose greatness, of course, cannot be limited to the Enlightenment era. Kenneth Buckman continues the investigation of a tension or balancing act between objectivity and subjectivity, and expands the theme to include a tension between modernism and postmodernism, anticipating Section IV's concern with postmodernism in art. Buckman explores the idea that skepticism toward objectivity in beauty, which Hume appears to reject, prefigures postmodern views on cultural influences with regard to the beautiful. James Mock's second essay in Section I likewise explores Hume's aesthetic theory as a theory that emphasizes a naturalistic idea of beauty, one wherein a unique aesthetic experience disappears. Mock believes that Hume, in doing so, finds common ground with the contemporary aesthetic thinker, Guy Sircello. Mock's essay also

prefigures the investigation of the grotesque, in Section III, wherein the question arises as to whether the morally repulsive can be aesthetically pleasing without moral consequences for the perceiver.

WINKELMANN ON THE TRAPEZE: THE DELICATE BALANCE OF AESTHETIC THEORY

JAMES MOCK

Johann Joachim Winckelmann's reputation occupies a rather precarious position in the history of art and aesthetics in the English speaking world. He is generally noted in passing as one of the founding fathers of art history, and as the first scientific archaeologist, yet what he did to rate as a founder of art history is seldom clearly explained, and his aesthetic theory is infrequently discussed. He is noted as vital to the formulation of neo-classicism, the prime promoter of Greek art, especially for those taking the Grand Tour to Rome, yet he is now readily faulted for never having gone to Greece himself and having based his theory only upon the very few authentic Greek works (and many Roman copies) that were available to him in Rome. My intention in this essay is to draw attention to someone of whom everyone seems to have heard and few appear to have read.

I believe it is fair to say that the number of references to Winckelmann that one tends to find in English language publications is small. Even allowing for James Barry's and Walter Pater's observations, all but the most recent prove uninformative at best. His work is noted in passing, if at all, in surveys of the history of aesthetics. For example, it is covered by one sentence in Paul Oscar Kristeller's "The Modern System of the Arts: A Study in the History of Aesthetics," where he notes that "Winckelmann's studies of classical art are important for the history of our problem for the enthusiasm which he stimulated among his German readers for ancient sculpture and architecture, but not for any opinion he may have expressed on the relation between the visual arts and literature."¹ The problem referred to is the sorting out and definition of the canon of fine arts, of what was to count as a fine art. Winckelmann is not mentioned at all in Monroe C. Beardsley's *Aesthetics: From Classical Greece to the Present*.

¹ Paul Oscar Kristeller, "The Modern System of the Arts: A Study in the History of Aesthetics" (*Renaissance Thought and the Arts*, II: 1951) 35-36.

There is no individual entry on Winckelmann in the new Blackwell *Companion to Aesthetics*, and I can find no entry, or information, on Winckelmann in any of the multitude of aesthetics surveys and introductory texts on the shelves in my office. Lionello Venturi, in the *History of Art Criticism*, while granting Winckelmann's erudite work in art history, states that "(t)he aesthetic ideas of Winckelmann are without originality, traditional, of the current neo-Platonism,"² and claims that "(s)ince he had an exceptional influence upon the aesthetics and art history of the nineteenth century, he was one of the greatest obstacles to the direction of art criticism."³ Benedetto Croce rapidly dismissed him and his friend Anton Mengs as exponents of "fallacious profundity."⁴ Jeffrey Morrison, in his splendid 1996 book, observes that Winckelmann's aesthetic was expressed in a style described as "'barock' (sic), or 'wunderlich' to the point of obscurity."⁵

Yet, it should also be kept in mind that Winckelmann's first book (published in 1755), *Reflections on the Imitation of Greek Works in Painting and Sculpture*, the cornerstone of his aesthetic theory, was immediately successful, and, as Elfriede Heyer and Roger C. Norton note in the preface to their 1987 translation, rapidly appeared in various languages and became a topic of conversation in London, Paris, and other centers of intellectual activity. Lessing's *Laocoön* was written as a direct response to Winckelmann's work. But no new translation of Winckelmann's work into English appeared for more than two hundred years, and Heyer and Norton flatly state that the translations read by those studying Winckelmann are outdated, or wrong, or that commentators base many of their opinions on the comments made by Lessing, since modern English translations of Lessing are available.⁶

It is my intention to briefly clarify the status of Winckelmann's status as a founder of art history, to briefly sketch his influential position in Rome as a promoter of the classical, and then to attempt a clarification of Winckelmann's aesthetic theory, which I allude to in my title as a precarious balance upon a trapeze, easily tipped into contradiction or ruin. It is bluntly said that Winckelmann's aesthetic leads him to an illogical

² Lionello Venturi, *History of Art Criticism* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1964), 138.

³ Venturi, 331.

⁴ Benedetto Croce, *History of Aesthetic* (Boston: Nonpareil Books, 1983), 270.

⁵ Jeffrey Morrison, *Winckelmann and the Notion of Aesthetic Education* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 36.

⁶ Elfriede Heyer and Roger C. Norton, translators. Johann Joachim Winckelmann, *Reflections on the Imitation of Greek Works in Painting and Sculpture* (La Salle, Illinois: Open Court, 1987), vii, viii.

conclusion, called by Heyer and Norton a "'Janus'-faced vision"⁷ in which he is a modern historian and a conservative aesthetician, "caught . . . on a one-way road looking back with nostalgia while erecting signposts pointing in the opposite direction."⁸

Winckelmann's presentation of art history and cultural unity described the artistic masterpieces of the fifth century B.C. as the outcome and reflection of the totality of Greek civilization. Art is not an isolated phenomenon, but embedded in a cultural matrix. As David Irwin states:

Winckelmann helped to lay the foundation for the historical interpretation of the art of a period as the general index of the spirit of the time. This pervasive spirit, or *Zeitgeist*, was to be formulated into a proper philosophy of culture by Hegel, and elaborated in the context of art history by subsequent nineteenth-century writers.⁹

Irwin locates Winckelmann's concept of history in the cyclical tradition, as opposed to an apocalyptic one. Basically, the apocalyptic sees history as declining from a golden age, while the cyclic, which Irwin notes as deriving ultimately from Plato's *Laws*, presents a movement from primitivism to sophistication to decline to extinction.¹⁰ However, by the mid-eighteenth century, writers inclined to the cyclic tradition had omitted the phase of decline. History was "seen as an evolution of continual progress."¹¹ Winckelmann saw the greatness of Greece rise, fall, somewhat revive under the Renaissance, fall, and once more—faintly—revive with certain artists in the eighteenth century. Winckelmann introduces historicism, a form of relativism involving the relationship of art to historical period. A key innovation of Winckelmann's historicism is style, a term he introduces in the modern sense, as he discusses variations between periods and evaluates the results of the variations. Irwin makes special note of E.H. Gombrich's entry on Winckelmann in the *International Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences*. Gombrich describes this treatment of Greek style: ". . . as an expression of the Greek way of life. . . , [it] encouraged Herder and other writers to do the same for the medieval period, thus firmly establishing art history in terms of succeeding period styles."¹²

⁷ Heyer and Norton, xix.

⁸ Heyer and Norton, xix.

⁹ David Irwin, editor, *Winckelmann: Writings on Art* (New York: Phaidon, 1972), 53.

¹⁰ Irwin, 53.

¹¹ Irwin, 53.

¹² Irwin, 54.

Winckelmann's *History of the Art of Antiquity* redefined the history and aesthetics of the classical tradition. Alex Potts, in *Flesh and the Ideal: Winckelmann and the Origins of Art History*, states that Winckelmann's work "was singled out as the inspiration for establishing a new history of art that would define larger patterns of historical development and seek to explain how and why the visual arts evolved in the way they did, rather than merely provide a chronological survey of biographical facts."¹³ Goethe in 1805 published a tribute by the classical scholar Friedrich Wolf which allows that errors in detail brought to light in subsequent years did not detract from the achievement of Winckelmann: "We are in no way claiming that [it] was an unqualified success, yet he showed, and was the first to show, how antiquities were to be ordered on the basis of their manifest characteristics in a sequence of rise and decline, regulated according to taste, style and workmanship."¹⁴ Before Winckelmann, one has, following upon Vasari, lives of artists with appended theoretical speculation, while, after Winckelmann, one has the analysis of style.

I believe that the rapid acceptance of Winckelmann's work is clearly the result of the assemblage, in energetic writing and charismatic personal contacts, of trends that were obviously ready for amalgamation. Morrison, in *Winckelmann and the Notion of Aesthetic Education*, claims that Winckelmann crystallized contemporary thinking, assembled the strands. He says that "(i)t would not be too harsh to describe his contribution to art history as a quantitative rather than a qualitative one."¹⁵ Morrison details the trends that were current, noting six especially important ones that find development in Winckelmann's work. Simplifying these, and drawing upon Morrison's work, I will attempt to tease out several of the more noteworthy strands of Winckelmann's thought.

First is the idea that art is dependent upon the physical environment and the socio-political atmosphere in which it arises. Morrison, with adequate citations, demonstrates that this was an eighteenth century commonplace. Liberal government and a proper climate were accepted as generative of artistic success. The idea of modern failure in the arts led to frustration and, following on the first point, art as embedded in the proper environment, a belief in the decadence of contemporary culture. As Morrison observes:

¹³ Alex Potts, *Flesh and the Ideal: Winckelmann and the Origins of Art History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 13.

¹⁴ Potts, 14.

¹⁵ Jeffrey Morrison, *Winckelmann and the Notion of Aesthetic Education* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 24.

Art has always been associated with educational purposes of various kinds. In the eighteenth century, its major purpose appears to have been the moral improvement of the audience.¹⁶

This moral underpinning plays out rapidly in a call upon the viewer to develop taste: "It was assumed that 'a taste in the fine arts goes hand in hand with the moral sense, to which indeed it is nearly allied.'" ¹⁷ Winckelmann adds to this moral formulation the manner of seeing: it is not simply recognition of moral truths, but the moral improvement is to come from a refinement of insight into art. Morrison very carefully develops this vital point: for the other thinkers, moral improvement comes from the work itself as a "codification of moral truths."¹⁸ This approach is not accepted by Winckelmann, who allows that while one can understand some general truth, aesthetic response is more than a simple utilization of art to extract moral messages. Another standard approach to art that Winckelmann does not find exciting is the intellectual games approach, where one demonstrates skill in the detection and exposition of allegory: Winckelmann uses allegory as either a starting point for aesthetic engagement or as a device for historical location of the work. Winckelmann says:

Let the artist's brush, like Aristotle's pen, be imbued with reason. He should leave our minds with more than he has shown our eyes, and he will attain this goal if he has learned to use allegory not to conceal his ideas but to clothe them. Then, whether he has a poetical object of his own choice or someone else's, his art will inspire him and kindle in him the flame which Prometheus took from the gods. The connoisseur will have food for thought and the mere admirer of art will learn to think.¹⁹

It was standard to assume that the artist chose those elements that were considered the best, the most ideal, in nature and assembled, or amalgamated, them in his work. The Earl of Shaftsbury simply said that "'tis from the many objects of nature, and not from a particular one, that those geniuses form the idea of their work."²⁰ Winckelmann, despairing of modern artists, and assuming the path toward beauty through nature to be far more difficult than through the study or imitation of the best of ancient art, arrives at the rather standard position favoring imitation. The notion of

¹⁶ Morrison, 24.

¹⁷ Henry Home, in Morrison, 25.

¹⁸ Morrison, 26.

¹⁹ Winckelmann, in Heyer and Norton, 69.

²⁰ In Morrison, 30.

art as superior to nature because purified and idealized finds my personal favorite expression in Giovanni Bellori: ". . . the Trojan War could not possibly have begun over an imperfectly beautiful woman but must have been started over the perfect, idealized beauty of Helen in the form of a plundered statue."²¹ On morality and art, Shaftsbury says: "Who can admire the outward beauties, and not recur instantly to the inward, which are the most real and essential, the most naturally affecting, and of the highest pleasure, as well as profit and advantage."²²

It is clear from the biographical record that Shaftsbury was a very important influence on Winckelmann, and Irwin notes that Alexander Pope was well known to Winckelmann also, an echo of Pope's "(t)he proper study of mankind is man" appearing in his "Instructions for the Connoisseur" as "The highest object of meditation for man is man."²³ Winckelmann, in so far as the development of formalism is concerned, as exemplified by Hogarth's famous serpentine line of beauty (probably well known to him), approved of the serpentine line and outline or silhouette, but did not find any incompatibility between formalist investigations of properties and the investigation of content. The father of art history seems to have captured many of the ideas of the age, adding to them a vast historical apparatus and, in his writings, demonstrating a unique sensitivity to artworks.

Winckelmann, to sum up his personal impact in the days of the Grand Tour, was sought out by scholars and noblemen. His fame was such that Frederick the Great attempted to lure him back to Germany with a prestigious position as director of the Court library. And, tragically, his fame led to his award of medals by Maria Theresa in Vienna, which were the cause of his death in a botched robbery in Trieste.

Those who sought out Winckelmann as a teacher, those whom he believed capable of profiting from his instruction and developing an aesthetic sensitivity, had to be of a certain type and to have specific real-world advantages. Art appreciation is time-consuming, hence primarily the preserve of the upper classes and those supported by them. Wealth does not guarantee success, but it is necessary. Winckelmann is cutting about nobility who have no innate sensitivity to develop:

Heaven has given all intelligent creatures the capacity of perceiving beauty, but in very varying degrees . . . Some people have such a minute degree of this capacity that they could appear to have been overlooked by

²¹ Quoted in Irwin, 36.

²² Quoted in Irwin, 40.

²³ Irwin, 41.

nature in the dispensation of the same; and of this type was a certain young Briton of the highest class who was in his carriage and did not even show a sign of life and of his presence when I gave him a talk on the beauty of Apollo and other statues of the highest quality.²⁴

It is also assumed in Winckelmann's work, whether this is a function of the climate of his times or whether it is related to his homosexuality (as many critics have inferred), that students of the arts will be male. Responsiveness to literature is one firm indicator of aesthetic sensibility for Winckelmann, and literature should be used to heighten the aesthetic sensitivity of the student. As the student's literary awareness, the instructor will carefully expose the student to the visual arts, and it is fair to claim that much of the cataloging of artworks by Winckelmann is intended to provide a guide for the development of the student in graded exposures.²⁵ The responses to artworks can be ranked, and there is such a thing as a good response to art. This good response is a special faculty, ". . . a fine internal sense," as Venturi styles it,²⁶ which is free of "all intentions or passions of instinct, inclination or pleasure."²⁷ Here one sees the neo-Platonism of Winckelmann in full activity. The object which is apprehended by the soul in responding to beauty is an unseeable beauty, a transcendental beauty which is aroused by sensible beauty. The sensible is a mere stepping stone to the real. As Monroe Beardsley notes in his discussion of the neo-Platonism of Plotinus, there is a tension here, since the unseeable, aside from problematizing the value of the artwork, must be held to satisfy the appetite for the visible beauty that begins the process.²⁸ For neo-Platonism, especially the neo-Platonism of Marsilio Ficino, to which I believe Winckelmann's is closely related, love is the desire for beauty, and beauty must be incorporeal. As Winckelmann puts it: "In the masterpieces of Greek art, connoisseurs and imitators find not only nature at its most beautiful but also something beyond nature, namely certain ideal forms of its beauty, which, as an ancient interpreter of Plato teaches us, come from images created by the mind alone."²⁹

In the mind, there is the ideal Form which is matched against actualities. Beauty lures love upward to contemplation of the divine. The

²⁴ Winckelmann, "Essay on the Beautiful in Art," in Irwin, 89-90.

²⁵ Covered in Morrison, 37-41.

²⁶ Venturi, 264.

²⁷ Venturi, 264.

²⁸ Monroe C. Beardsley, *Aesthetics From Classical Greece to the Present: A Short History* (New York: Macmillan, 1966), 86.

²⁹ Winckelmann, in Heyer and Norton, 7.

neo-Platonic contemplation requires withdrawal from bodily concerns and corporeal things. It is then that the creative contemplator attends to the Forms with calmness and in a state of serenity.³⁰ The viewer responds neither simply to the work, nor simply to his sensations, but to a third element. This is standard neo-Platonism, and it is standard Winckelmann. We are not passive vessels, but creative ourselves, operating with ideals in order to appreciate art.

The central contradiction in Winckelmann, the Janus-faced element, as Heyer and Norton style it, is that Winckelmann locates the pinnacle of artistic achievement in fifth century Greece. One cannot logically assert the absolute value of Greek art and simultaneously argue that it is the result of specific historical circumstances. As Morrison states, theorists following this model are “stranded between historicism and idealism.”³¹ As Irwin tidily puts it: “If Greek art and its greatness in the fifth century B.C. had been made possible by the whole of Greek civilization, its total unity—its politics, its drama, and its art together with its climate—how would a study of Greek art help to make the art of Europe great if such cultural conditions were no longer operative there?”³²

The neo-Platonism of Winckelmann, his aesthetics as briefly sketched above, can be called retrograde, a turning backward, a contrast with the forward thrust of his historicism, a balancing act, but it cannot be dismissed on that ground. In a short but suggestive chapter, Morrison clarifies Winckelmann's aesthetic by means of the work of Roman Ingarden, the twentieth century phenomenologist famous for *The Cognition of the Literary Work of Art*, noting surprising similarities between Ingarden and Winckelmann, both in the creation of the aesthetic object, and the development of the concept of sensitivity. There is a relationship to be explored between what Husserl styled the “eidetic intuition” which has, as my colleague Darian DeBolt, a specialist in twentieth century philosophy, notes, a clear and unambiguous derivation from neo-Platonism, and what we find in Winckelmann. This might improve Winckelmann's aesthetic status, swing his trapeze forward into twentieth century aesthetic speculation and a significant connection with phenomenology.

³⁰ Beardsley, 119.

³¹ Morrison, 22.

³² Irwin, 51.

HUME'S WORLDS OF TASTE

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Philosophy, it seems, contrary to the pronouncements of Socrates that it frees one from the body so that the soul can commune with the divine and the unchanging, is as subject to the weaving and unweaving of Penelope's web as any other concern in life. It is a refined pleasure to be sure, but a pleasure shackling one as readily to the cell of the earth as any other fetter produced by pleasure or by pain. It might not be surprising then that the debate concerning Hume's theory regarding a standard of taste evokes dissimilar views as to what the philosopher intended, and of course the philosopher himself kindles the difficulty in a number of aggravating passages, for in it are a world of worlds: worlds of sentiment, worlds of standards, and worlds of judges. We seem to be much like the horse caught between two bales of hay, aesthetically starving ourselves to death in our inability to choose among the many bales. In this essay I will contend that though Hume is mired in a thoroughly modernist interpretation of a standard of taste, he foreshadows the expectations of a post-modernist or pragmatic view. This is a world in which the resonance of metaphors heightens our sensitivity to some works of art as opposed to others. This resonance of metaphors seems to produce a probability of the regularity of some judgments, which allow, through the admission of degree and at certain times, conformity of attitude as regards taste.

Perhaps due to the great dissimilarity of views with regard to what kinds of works constitute great works of art Hume says, early in his essay, "On the Standard of Taste," "It is natural for us to seek a Standard of Taste; a rule, by which the various sentiments of men may be reconciled; at least, a decision afforded, confirming one sentiment, and condemning another."¹ In his essay, Hume articulates two elements necessary to the development of a standard of taste. These elements exist on separate

¹ David Hume, "Of the Standard of Taste," (Hoboken, N.J.: BiblioBytes, eBook ISBN: 0585049238), 2.

tracks of justification.² The first of these tracks appears to maintain that there are rules of taste that can be applied, but additionally, Hume maintains that one must look to a group of ideal critics to determine the standards which are to be applied: "But though poetry can never submit to exact truth, it must be confined by rules of art, discovered to the author either by genius or observation."³ The standard is also conveyed to us by the critics who not only determine the standards, but apply them as well.

Some argue that the first of these criteria involves the establishment of "objective" norms and a way to determine these norms must be established and this causes a paradox in Hume's account.⁴ The difficulty is, according to Noel Carroll, that common sense tells us both that aesthetic taste, like gustatory issues, is "subjective" and yet common sense also tells us that objectively there are some artworks that are better than others. Hume himself points out this difficulty.

As a matter of observation Hume indicates that among small numbers of acquaintances there is a wide range of conflicting aesthetic preferences and that there are further cultural aspects determined by distance and time that reflect the wide range of disparity as concerns conformity.⁵ People seem to agree on specific principles, ". . . certain terms in every language, which import blame, and others praise; and all men, who use the same tongue, must agree in their application of them," and Hume continues, "(e)very voice is united in applauding elegance, propriety, simplicity, spirit in writing; and in blaming fustian, affectation, coldness, and a false brilliancy,"⁶ but the consensus vanishes when applied to particulars. This is no less evident among persons from widely different background, times, or cultures as it is among acquaintances.

Theodore A. Gracyk's article, "Rethinking Hume's Standard of Taste,"⁷ clearly articulates the difficulties that both Hume and we encounter in Hume's essay "Of The Standard of Taste." Gracyk says,

Hume distinguishes two problems in defending a standard of taste. First, he must lay out the conditions of taste. However, the superiority of some

² See James Shelley, "Hume's Double Standard of Taste," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 52, 4 (Autumn, 1994), 437-445.

³ "Of the Standard of Taste," 3.

⁴ Noel Carroll, "Hume's Standard of Taste," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 43:2 (Winter 1994): 181.

⁵ "Of the Standard of Taste," 1.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Theodore A. Gracyk, "Rethinking Hume's Standard of Taste," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 42:2 (Spring 1994): 169-182.