

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-51830-7 - The British Aesthetic Tradition: From Shaftesbury to Wittgenstein

Timothy M. Costelloe

Excerpt

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Introduction

A Brief History of “Aesthetics”

Today the term *aesthetics* refers to an identifiable subdiscipline of philosophy concerned with the nature and expression of beauty and the fine arts. The discipline covers a broad spectrum of issues, problems, and approaches, but students and practitioners generally agree that its origins can be traced unequivocally to eighteenth-century British philosophers working predominantly, though not exclusively, in England and Scotland. Many of these writers were based in and around the old universities of Edinburgh, Glasgow, and Aberdeen, where (with the exception of David Hume who was denied a position twice on account of his religious views) they held chairs in philosophy and related disciplines; these thinkers were the intellectual force at the heart of what has come to be known as the Scottish Enlightenment. Other eighteenth-century writers, such as Anthony Ashley Cooper, third earl of Shaftesbury, Joseph Addison, and Edmund Burke, were involved in politics or cut central figures in the polite society of English letters, or, like William Hogarth and Sir Joshua Reynolds, were practicing artists. The earliest works in the tradition are Shaftesbury's *Characteristicks of Men, Manners Opinions, Times* (1711), and Addison's essays on the “Pleasures of the Imagination” in *The Spectator* (1712), with Francis Hutcheson's *Inquiry into the Original of our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue* (1725) often cited as the first systematic and self-conscious attempt to address questions that came to define a new area of philosophical inquiry, which, by the beginning of the twentieth century crystallized into the discipline complete, in its modern form, with all the attendant paraphernalia of academic respectability.

Although the intellectual roots of modern aesthetics are buried deep in British soil, the term *aesthetics* is of distinctly German stock. Its linguistic heritage lies in the Greek nominal *αισθητικός* (*aisthetikos*), sensitive or sentient, derived in turn from the verb *αισθάνησθαι* (*aisthanesthai*), meaning to perceive, feel, or sense. Famously, Immanuel Kant used the term for that part of his *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* (*Critique of Pure Reason*) (1781/1787) concerned with the principles of “a priori sensibility” given in the “pure” intuitions of space and

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time.¹ In doing so he was following the lead of the precocious twenty-one-year-old Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten (1714–62), who had already traded on the Greek in his master’s thesis, *Meditationes philosophicae de nonnullis ad poema pertinentibus* (*Philosophical meditations on some requirements of the poem*) (1735), coining the phrase *episteme aisthetike* both to designate knowledge based on sense perception and name the faculty that makes it possible. In his lectures from 1742 onward – the basis for the two-volume *Aesthetica* (1750 and 1758) – Baumgarten subsequently extended the term to designate a “science of sensual cognition” more generally.² By the middle of the eighteenth century, the term felt quite at home in the beer cellars and lecture halls of Germany, a state of affairs confirmed in 1781 by Kant, who, though rejecting as “abortive” Baumgarten’s attempt “to bring the critical treatment of the beautiful under rational principles,” at once acknowledges that the “Germans are the only people who currently make use of the word ‘aesthetic’ in order to signify what others call the critique of taste” (CPR A21/B35–6n).

Making the short journey across the Channel to visit those “others” was to enter a different world. In England and Scotland, “aesthetics” did not become common currency until well into the nineteenth century, and was long disparaged as bastard offspring of the German brain – Kant’s in particular – with much handwringing for decades at the lack of an acceptable English alternative. British writers had been discussing for decades matters to which their Teutonic kin came somewhat later, but used “taste” – as Kant pointed out – for the affective faculty and the species of knowledge derived from it, and assigned the term *criticism* to the inquiry that attempted to elucidate its principles. *Aesthetics* is absent from Samuel Johnson’s *A Dictionary of the English Language* (1755), and in 1798 William Taylor could still regard it coolly as part of the “dialect peculiar to Professor Kant.”³ Things developed apace over the next two decades, however, and by 1821 at least this element of the peculiar dialect had made sufficient inroads that Samuel Taylor Coleridge lamented the lack of a “more familiar word than *aesthetic*, for works of taste and criticism”;⁴

¹ See Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, in *Kant’s gesammelte Schriften*, Königlichen Preussischen (later Deutchsen) Akademie der Wissenschaften, 29 vols. (Berlin: Reimer [later Walter de Gruyter], 1900–) (KGS), vols. 3/4; *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Paul Guyer and Alan E. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), A19–22/B33–36 (CPR).

² See Kai Hammermeister, *The German Aesthetic Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 3ff., and Paul Guyer, “The Origins of Modern Aesthetics: 1711–35,” in *The Blackwell Guide to Aesthetics*, ed. Peter Kivy (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), reprinted in Paul Guyer, *Values of Beauty: Historical Essays in Aesthetics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 3–36.

³ William Taylor, *Monthly Review* 25, 585, quoted in *Oxford English Dictionary*: “In the dialect peculiar to Professor Kant, his *receptivity* for *aesthetic* gratification [is] not delicate.” According to the entry in *Le Trésor de la Langue française*, “*éthétique*” has a similar history with the earliest references being to Baumgarten and Kant.

⁴ *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, 16 vols. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983), *Shorter Works and Fragments* II, ed. H. J. Jackson and J. R. de J. Jackson, 11:938.

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that Coleridge should be expressing the sentiment is ironic, to say the least, given that he was almost single-handedly responsible for introducing Kant and German Idealist philosophy into Britain. This irony notwithstanding, by 1846 John Ruskin could report in *Modern Painters II* that “aesthetic” was “commonly employed” with reference to impressions of beauty, and in the 1883 edition of the work he inserted the word *now* before *commonly* and added that “It [aesthetic] was, of course, never so used by good or scholarly English writers, nor ever could be.”⁵ This was a piece of wishful thinking and willful reconstruction on Ruskin’s part, a fact attested by Sir William Hamilton’s grudging but clear acknowledgment in his *Lectures on Metaphysics* (1859) that the term was by then entrenched and immovable. “It is now nearly a century,” Hamilton reports,

since Baumgarten ... first applied the term *Æsthetic* to the doctrine which we vaguely and periphrastically denominate the Philosophy of Taste, the theory of the Fine Arts, the Science of the Beautiful and Sublime, &c., – and this term is now in general acceptance, not only in Germany, but throughout the other countries of Europe.

Hamilton could not resist adding that the “term Apolaustic” – meaning “devoted to enjoyment” – “would have been a more appropriate designation,”⁶ but his plea fell on deaf ears and by the time Walter Pater published *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* in 1873, and George Santayana gave the first course explicitly titled “Aesthetics” at Harvard University in the early years of the same decade, there was no longer any question that the term had arrived and was here to stay. Rather than complaining about its presence, philosophers now made the term welcome and concentrated their efforts on explaining what the concept and the discipline founded in its name might amount to.

Whether one focuses on the term or concept, however, it is clear that the first part of the eighteenth century saw the birth of a new and distinct discipline, which one might appropriately call “philosophical aesthetics” to distinguish it from its related but recognizably different kin. For there is an “aesthetics” before aesthetics, if by that one means philosophical reflection on beauty and the arts, and as any decent anthology will attest, the likes of Plato, Aristotle, Longinus, Plotinus, Augustine, and Aquinas all have more or less interesting things to say about aesthetic value, human creativity, and what we now call the “arts,” itself a relatively new invention.⁷ In addition to the

⁵ John Ruskin, *Modern Painters II* (1846), *The Complete Works of John Ruskin (Library Edition)*, ed. E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn, 39 vols. (London: George Allen, 1903–12), 4:42.

⁶ Sir William Hamilton, *Lectures on Metaphysics I* (1859), *Works of Sir William Hamilton*, ed. H. L. Mansel and John Veitch, 7 vols. (London: William Blackwood and Sons, 1828–1960), 3:124.

⁷ See P. O. Kristeller, “The Modern System of the Arts: A Study in the History of Aesthetics Part I,” and “The Modern System of the Arts: A Study in the History of Aesthetics Part I,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 12, 4 (1951): 496–527 and 13, 1 (1952): 17–46, respectively. R. G. Collingwood had made much the same point, albeit it in less detail, in *The Principles of Art* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1938), 5–7.

philosophical literature, there is also a tradition of the “art treatise” – including Roger de Piles’s *L’Abrégé de la Vie des Peintures* (1699) (*The Art of Painting and the Lives and Characters of the Most Eminent Painters*, 1706) and Jonathan Richardson’s *Essay on the Theory of Painting* (1715) – and, closer to concerns of the nascent discipline, that of “literary criticism,” the systematic inquiry into and informed judgment about writing or discourse according to rules or principles governing (primarily) works of literature. This tradition has its roots in Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* and Longinus’s *Peri Hupsous* (*On the Sublime*), and found its most self-conscious expression in late-seventeenth-century Europe, associated in particular with French writers Pierre Corneille (1606–84), Jean-Baptiste Racine (1639–99), Jean-Baptiste l’Abbé Dubos (1670–1742), and Nicolas Boileau-Despréaux (1636–1711); these figures also had their now less-famous counterparts in England, in the shape of John Sheffield, first Duke of Buckingham (1647–1721), Wentworth Dillon, fourth Earl of Roscommon (1630–1685), and the better-known John Dennis (1657–1734) whose *The Advancement and Reformation of Modern Poetry* (1701) and *The Grounds of Criticism in Poetry* (1704) are often read as broaching issues – notably the concept of the sublime – that were taken up soon after by Shaftesbury and Addison. The tradition of criticism blended seamlessly with its younger rival and even retained some independence in the shape of Hume and the “literary” essay, and Henry Home, Lord Kames, who, as if to make the point, decisively titled his main work on the subject *Elements of Criticism*.

Whatever shared moments or points of intersection it enjoys with these intellectual traditions, however, philosophical aesthetics remains singular and, as the suggestions of various commentators have shown, a little prodding quickly reveals some distinguishing marks of its birth. These include, as Paul Guyer has enumerated them,⁸ a new conception of subjectivity and the individual (Peter de Bolla and Luc Ferry), a concern with “genius” (M. H. Abrams), the rise of new aesthetic categories of the sublime (Samuel Holt Monk) and the picturesque (Christopher Hussey), and the beginning of modern ideology (Terry Eagleton).⁹ One might also add George Dickie’s contention that the period marks a shift in emphasis from “objective notions of beauty to the subjective notion of taste”; Ronald Paulson’s observation that aesthetics was an

⁸ See Guyer, “The Origins of Modern Aesthetics,” 4–5.

⁹ The works in question are Peter de Bolla, *The Education of the Eye: Painting, Landscape, and Architecture in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), and introduction to *The Sublime. A Reader in Eighteenth-Century Aesthetic Theory*, ed. Andrew Ashfield and Peter de Bolla (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 1–16; Luc Ferry, *Homo Aestheticus: The Invention of Taste in the Democratic Age*, trans. Robert de Loazia (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1993); M. H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1953); Samuel Holt Monk, *The Sublime: A Study of Critical Theories in Eighteenth-Century England* (New York: Modern Language Association of America, 1935); Christopher Hussey, *The Picturesque: Studies in a Point of View* (London: Putnam, 1927; repr., Hamden, CT: Archon, 1967); and Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990).

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“empiricist philosophy based on the sense rather than reason or faith”; James Engell’s contention that the Enlightenment created the idea of the “creative imagination”; and Guyer’s own suggestion that the “central idea” of aesthetics was the “freedom of the imagination.”¹⁰ There is no doubt some or even a good deal of truth to each of these proposals, but the aim of the present study at least is not to endorse one in particular or reduce any other period of the discipline’s progress to some theoretical slogan or handy historical tag. The aesthetic tradition stands proudly and independently apart, sovereign over its own domain rather than an afterthought to metaphysics and epistemology or in service to religious dogmatism, artistic instruction, or literary style. The pudding and its proof, as we shall see in the chapters that follow, are very much in the eating.

DESIGN OF THE BOOK

Before readers dig in, however, they are owed at least a brief account of the rationale behind the book’s title and its organization. First, it will be immediately obvious to any reader that not every writer considered in what follows is British; the majority of them do fall under that epithet, but there are exceptions, especially as one follows the narrative into the twentieth century where philosophy in general and aesthetics in particular becomes thoroughly professionalized and moves, at least in part, to the institutionalized setting of American higher education. The “British” in the title of the book, it should be emphasized, is not intended to claim national affiliation for a body of work or denote the citizenship of its practitioners; it is meant instead to convey the continuity of a *tradition* of philosophical reflection that transcends the narrower and artificial category of state or nation. Because this tradition originates in Britain at the beginning of the eighteenth century and remains largely on that soil for the next two centuries and beyond, *The British Aesthetic Tradition* is simply the most appropriate and accurate title among the available alternatives.

Second, although many would agree, I hazard, that the work of writers considered in this book forms the historical backbone that supports what is now called aesthetics, it is by no means the only element that gives the discipline shape. This might be obscured in focusing on the British aesthetic tradition, and some might interpret it as willful dismissal of the discipline’s wider origin, namely, the international context in which stretches of its history moves, and

¹⁰ See George Dickie, *The Century of Taste: The Philosophical Odyssey of Taste in the Eighteenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 3; Ronald Paulson, editor’s introduction to *William Hogarth, The Analysis of Beauty* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997), xix; James Engell, *The Creative Imagination: Enlightenment to Romanticism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), ch. 1; and Guyer, “The Origins of Modern Aesthetics.” This latter thesis is elaborated (along with much else) in Paul Guyer, *A History of Aesthetics*, 3 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming).

the complex reciprocal influences at play between Britain and the Continent: the importance of Dubos for eighteenth-century British writers, for example; the effect of the Scottish Enlightenment on Kant and later German philosophy; and the impact of Benedetto Croce on English philosophy during the early decades of the twentieth century. The plan, aim, and focus of the book do prevent exploring such wider terrain, and dictate that these and other matters be acknowledged rather than explored, the reader being provided with background sufficient only for the purposes of the developing narrative, signposts to vistas unseen from the path along which the reader is led. This might be seen legitimately as a downside to the present study, but one might also emphasize the positive result: the rewards of sharper focus are rich because, as we shall see in what follows, the somewhat narrower perspective taken discourages distraction and facilitates detailed scrutiny of the flora and fauna at hand to reveal the internal coherence and continuity of a tradition that might be lost to a more promiscuous and less discerning eye.

Third, turning to matters of organization, it is now commonplace to consider the eighteenth century as the “Age of Taste,” and I follow that convention in characterizing writers considered in Part I of the book, although I break with some earlier scholarship – notably Walter J. Hipple’s *The Beautiful, The Sublime, & The Picturesque in Eighteenth-Century British Aesthetic Theory*, a justly classic study to which any student of aesthetics owes a debt – by dividing the discussion thematically, rather than chronologically, into “internal sense theorists,” “imagination theorists,” and “associationist theories.”¹¹ As with arrangement of material, this choice has its drawbacks. It threatens, for one, to distort variations of emphasis among thinkers into principled differences of doctrine, and risks underplaying the degree to which eighteenth-century writers were engaged in a common project with almost every contributor to the Age of Taste ranging across the full spectrum of contemporary concerns. This intellectual eclecticism on the part of the writers leads, inevitably, to methodological questions over how precisely to categorize them, and some do refuse obstinately to fall in line easily or unambiguously under one banner or the other. Alexander Gerard and Archibald Alison – association theorists – have a good deal to say about the imagination, for instance, and Hume, perhaps the most difficult case, adopts at least in part Hutcheson’s model of internal sense but shares more philosophically with those who focus on the imagination. The other downside of the chosen division is managing the anachronism that follows from introducing certain thinkers before considering earlier work on which they relied: Thomas Reid, for example, writes in the 1760s but as an internal sense theorist appears in the narrative (Chapter 1) before Addison

¹¹ I am indebted to James Shelley for this general way of organizing the discussion. See his entry on “British Aesthetics in the Eighteenth Century” in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, plato.stanford.edu/entries/aesthetics-18th-british (2006; rev. 2010), accessed May 15, 2007.

(Chapter 2), an imagination theorist, who makes his influential contribution near the beginning of the century.

It might be noted in response to these potential problems that, as Hipple expresses it succinctly at the end of his own study, there is “no tendency for multiplicity to reduce to unity in the British speculations of the eighteenth century, and in consequence no simple historical progression from adequacy to completeness, from error to truth.”¹² This is surely an accurate assessment, for although eighteenth-century writers often draw on work accomplished by their predecessors and contemporaries – albeit selectively and often without acknowledgment – they tend to treat their subject matter on its own terms and are not conscious of themselves as parties to a common effort moving toward a collectively realizable goal. With this in mind, it becomes less crucial to consider the eighteenth-century tradition as a plot moving to a *dénouement* than it is to present each contribution for its own sake and intrinsic value, while also trying to convey connections, indicate anticipations, and recall echoes where possible and appropriate. Cases of both ambiguous categorization and egregious anachronism are rarer than one might expect, and, on balance, the drawbacks of organizing the discussion thematically are far outweighed by the great advantage of being able to highlight for the reader both the main philosophical movements of the century and how the work of different philosophers cohere around them.

Anybody writing a history of the British aesthetic tradition runs into something of an impasse when the Age of Taste comes to end, rather abruptly as conventional wisdom has it, with Dugald Stewart’s *Philosophical Essays* of 1810. After that date, “philosophical aesthetics” in a strict sense moves across the Channel, where it finds place as the purview of the big hitters and system builders of German Idealism. In Britain, and this is a fact overlooked or underappreciated by students of the discipline, the advances are made more obliquely, but no less profoundly, in the prose writings of poets and critics of Victorian England, defined by the sensibility of what we now call “Romanticism”: this denotes a tenor of thought and best describes the arc of the tradition as traced in Part II of the book from William Wordsworth through John Keats (Chapter 5) to the criticism of William Hazlitt, John Ruskin, John Stuart Mill, and Walter Pater (Chapter 6). The bridge, moreover, from the Age of Taste to the Age of Romanticism is both more solid and traversable than might at first sight appear: it emerges in the debates over the “picturesque” (Chapter 5) that begin in earnest with the writings of William Gilpin in the latter part of the eighteenth century, joined, as the eighteenth century wanes and turns, by the often loud and sometimes eccentric voices of Uvedale Price, Richard Payne Knight, and Humphrey Repton in a complex babble of

¹² Walter J. Hipple Jr., *The Beautiful, The Sublime, & The Picturesque in Eighteenth-Century British Aesthetic Theory* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1957), 284.

philosophy, art, and the practice of “landscape gardening.” These figures might be unfamiliar to many contemporary aestheticians, but it is through them, by way of the prose works of Wordsworth, that the discipline discovers its course, desultory and uncharted as it might be, from its origins in Hutcheson and his contemporaries, to the more recognizable figures at the end of the nineteenth century in whose hands it moves into the “Age of Analysis,” the most appropriate title for Part III of the study.

Analysis is a contested term, but like *taste* and *Romanticism* it captures the philosophical spirit of an age. The narrative here begins with “theories of expression” (Chapter 7), a phrase that gathers collectively the contributions of George Santayana, Roger Fry, Clive Bell, John Dewey, and R. G. Collingwood, the latter, with a philosophical and biographical foot in either century, standing as a transitional figure between Romanticism and the analytic turn made decisively in mid-century under the influence of Ludwig Wittgenstein and the burgeoning field of philosophy of language. Wittgenstein’s aesthetics (Chapter 8) bear marks of the discipline’s eighteenth-century origins – one cannot escape “taste” and “appreciation” whatever one’s methodological predilection – but at once signals the arrival of a brave new world, where from the 1950s onward aesthetics confronts “problems” and creates “views,” and the debates that emerge take on a gloss of technical detail largely absent from earlier eras.

The aesthetics of the period from the mid-twentieth century onward is also distinguished by its exponential growth, expanding to occupy the space provided by the modern academy, which gives the discipline a shape, molded by the institutional forces of the university replete with its professional structures and assembly of research and publication. The two principal journals of the discipline by themselves account for many hundreds of articles – the *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* was established in 1942, and the *British Journal of Aesthetics* in 1960 – and if one adds to that number other relevant venues in philosophy and the humanities along with the steady stream of monographs, edited collections, guidebooks, handbooks, dictionaries, and encyclopedias, one has a mountain of material that few have either time, inclination, or energy to climb. A separate volume might be a suitable occasion for attempting at least a partial assault, but to conclude this history of aesthetics in such a way would be foolhardy and terminate at best in a literature review that would bloat the whole and blur the lines that have given the narrative definition. To avoid this eventuality, *The British Aesthetic Tradition* runs its course and concludes, as it must somewhere, by indicating three directions the discipline has taken “after Wittgenstein” and that point forward to contemporary work in the field. The volume thus ends, though the British aesthetic tradition marches on, and does so, whether players are aware of it or not, in time to a tune learned long ago and committed to a collective memory of which current practice is surely the product, summation, and living body. At least a part of that, it is hoped, has been captured and conveyed in the pages that follow.

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PART I

THE AGE OF TASTE

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