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OF THE TERM AESTHETICS.

To keep out a new word is as hard as to keep out an imported weed from our cornfields; and we may as well sit down contented with some of the recent inventions, as we have done with the dandelion and the Canada thistle. It is not long since the word *Aesthetics* was as strange in Europe, as it still is to some in America. Like the modern *reliable*, stamped by Sir Robert Peel, it is made in an unscholarlike manner, against analogy; but we needed it, and it will pass into the currency. The Greek adjective *αισθητικος*, from the verb meaning *perceive, be sensible of*, is employed by ancient writers to denote whatever belongs to perception, sensible apprehension, especially by feeling; then, secondarily, for one quick of perception; and sometimes, by later authors, passively, for that which is perceptible. No classical instance can be produced, in which it is applied to the cognizance of the fine arts, as objects of taste. In the nomenclature of modern German philosophy, however, *ästhetisch* and *ästhetik* have become common and indispensable terms. Hence what was once called simply *taste*, with or without a qualifying epithet, is familiarly *ästhetisches Gefühl*, or aesthetic feeling.

The time can be nearly fixed, when it began to be used in

the Latin treatises of the German scholars of the last century. The followers of Wolf made frequent use of the word. We were surprised to find it in a title of Baumgarten's, as early as 1750, *Aesthetica*. Again in 1779, a work appeared at Buda, by Szerdahelly, intitled, *Aesthetica, seu Doctrina boni gustus ex philosophia deducta in scientias et artes amoeniores*. Here it will not escape the classical reader, that even *gustus* is used in a sense unknown to the ancients. Heyne was probably the earliest author of purity in style who ventured to adopt it into elegant Latin. It is unnecessary to say that Heyne is a great authority. To him and Winckelmann the modern philology owes its chief impulses. In point of time, Heyne stands between Ernesti on one side, and Wolf and Hermann, who carried on the work which he began. But scarcely less noted was the great Ruhnken, a Pomeranian, but usually referred to Holland, where he lived and laboured. Among modern Latinists he has a high reputation. He is universally preferred to his friend Valckenaer, and has been placed by some among the best of the Romans. Indeed he almost forgot his mother tongue. These statements give peculiar interest to any contest between two such classics as Heyne and Ruhnken, on a point of Latinity; and we have an instance germane to our subject. In the preface to his celebrated Virgil, Heyne had employed the word *aesthetica*, unknown to Caesar, Cicero, or the poets; and it grated on the Augustan ear of Ruhnken, who thus berated his German correspondent.

“In praefatione ad Virgilium, et alibi, tibi excidit vox *aesthetica*, quam belli homines, qui nunc in Germania bellas literas colunt, voluntque Graecis et Romanis, a quibus toto differunt coelo, similes videri, quam igitur illi minus belle finxerunt. Eam graecam non esse hoc sensu, inde colligas, quod vir in Graecis literis primarius, Valckenarius, ex me, qui ut Germanus scire deberem, quid hoc vocis esset, quaesivit, et ubi dixissem, Germanorum ineptias risit.”

In explanation, let it be observed, that Valckenaer, of

Franeker, in Holland, was the most accomplished Grecian of his day, and that he is commonly named after Hemsterhuys, whom Ernesti pronounced the prince of all philologists. Valckenaer was as great a reader of Latin as his friend, but it was for purposes of Greek illustration, and he could not command the purity of Roman style which Ruhnken possessed. Yet Ruhnken considers an appeal to him as final, when the signification of a Greek word is in question; and we find the learned Hollander altogether ignorant of what aesthetic means, and going to Ruhnken to interpret the German innovation. As a curiosity of literature we have recorded this incident in the history of a term, which many regard as a fair derivative from philosophical Greek. Krebs, the modern arbiter in regard to Latin usage, stigmatizes the word. It is however firmly established in German, and widely, though often improperly, used in English. It may be regarded as fairly embalmed in our technical glossary.

The later cycle of German philosophy begins with Kant and ends with Hegel. We equally exclude Wolf and Leibnitz at one end, and the contemporary strugglers and would-be improvers at the other. The circle seems to be complete; and if, as is likely, metaphysics has new courses to run, it will be in other periods, perhaps in other lands. But each of the German systems gave a large place to aesthetics. We shall advert to the first and the last of the series.

Kant treats concerning the subject in most of his works, but in one of them he professedly analyzes the idea of Beauty. His very first proposition is that "the judgments of taste are *aesthetic*." The term here acquires that meaning which has prevailed in Germany, and which received renewed currency from the essays and the poems of Schiller. The theory of Kant with regard to the Beautiful is worthy of more attention than it has received from English and American writers; and as the book is untranslatable, it ought to be condensed into an intelligible form; which

would be easy, if some one would do for Kant what Dumont has done for Bentham. "Taste," according to this earlier definition, "is the faculty which judges of an object, in or out of the mind, under conditions of pleasure or displeasure, and *without interest*," or disinterestedly; that is, not as means to an end. It is this which mainly enters into aesthetic views as such. Burke's whimsey may be compared with the German. Our readers must be quite Germanic to accept the following, which is one among several definitions of beauty given by Kant. "Beauty is the form of *aptitude* in an object, so far as it is viewed without the perception of an *end*." Whereupon the philosopher makes the following characteristic note.

"As an instance contravening the definition, it may be alleged, that there are things, in which we discern adaptation, *without knowing for what end*. For example, a stone implement is dug out of a mound, with a hole in it, as if for a cord. Here is manifest adaptation or design; yet for what particular end—we know not. But is there any one, say they, who will pronounce this stone implement beautiful? I reply; in the very act of recognising this as a work of art, we acknowledge its configuration to be adapted to a given end. There is therefore no immediate complacency in the contemplation. But a flower, as for example a tulip, is considered *beautiful*; because it shows *aptitude*, which however in our thoughts is referred to no end."

Though Schiller adopted this singular definition of beauty, it was too severely Kantean for most of the art-critics, and they more and more revolted against it. Schelling and the Schlegels, among others, indulged lofty ideal views of the beautiful, as something transcending all limits of fitness or form; views which have become somewhat prevalent even among ourselves in this era of art-idolatry. Jean Paul, the most unsystematic of men, published an introduction to *Aesthetics*. Almost every philosopher and poet broached his hypothesis; but the one which now most flatters the pride of

scholars, is that of Hegel, whose opinions influence to a certain extent whole schools in France, and occasionally re-appear, imperfectly, or disguised, in English treatises of the newest fashion.

Besides occasional notices in other works, Hegel has professedly treated of Aesthetics, to such an extent as to fill three volumes of his collected works. In the judgment of some, no part of his speculations is so valuable as this, which is accepted by many who care little for the other portions.

Hegel's system is antipodal to every thing taught in English or American books. Morell may give as much as most readers will care to know. It might have been expected that the theory of beauty would naturally rise high in a philosophy which maintains that thoughts are the only concrete realities. In the philosophy of Absolute Mind, there is this order; we have first Aesthetics, secondly Religion, and thirdly Philosophy. In the progress of civilization, first comes Art, next Religion, and then Science. In the "Lectures on Aesthetics," edited by Hotho, we find the subject thus divided, (1.) Beauty in the mind, or idea; (2.) Beauty in the object, or historically, in what we call the Fine Arts; and (3.) Beauty in its perfect realization.

Into the caverns of the absolute aesthetics we know not how to descend; and it is not necessary here, where we are treating thus cursorily of a favourite term, and not of a science. "The object of Aesthetics," says Hegel, "is the wide realm of the beautiful; and its field is, more particularly, Art, and especially the Fine Arts." He admits the impropriety of the term; *aesthetic* would strictly denote the *science of sense*. He also rejects the term *Kallistics*, as too wide; because the science regards artistic beauty alone. "The proper phrase would be the *Philosophy of Art*, or more definitely the *Philosophy of the Fine Arts*." This of course excludes the beauty of nature. "Beauty in Art is mind-born beauty, and re-born beauty; and as much as

mind and its products are higher than nature and its phenomena, so much is artistic beauty higher than natural beauty." This is all consistent with the philosophy which resolves every thing into Mind or Spirit. The statement opens a view into the course which the speculation takes.

Though not within the purposes of these pages, it deserves passing notice, that Hegel's volumes on Aesthetics contain many remarkable details of criticism on the stages of literary and artistic development. His scheme obviously exalts the Beautiful to a seeming parity with the True and the Good; an equality which had been dreamed of by Plato, but which has become the reigning principle of the modern beauty-worship. Associated in the Prussian metropolis with the representatives, of modern painting, sculpture, architecture, and dramatic art, Hegel gave himself unreservedly to the luxury of taste. It was, in some sort, his religion. He connects it with the philosophy of history. He treats of the heroic period of art; of Greek and Roman works; of sculpture, in its idea; of architecture and painting and music; largely and ably of the Greek drama and the chorus; of the wonderful and the romantic; not omitting War, as an aesthetic object; and he reduces these particulars to the few elements, into which all the complex of matter and mind resolves itself in the almost chemic analysis of the modern idealism.

Though repudiated by Ruhnken on the part of the philologists, and by Hegel on the part of the philosophers, the term *Aesthetics* is as well fixed in our language as the equally vague *Metaphysics*, which no two writers explain alike. It has its place in the omnibus of Dr. Noah Webster, as "the theory or philosophy of taste; the science of the beautiful, or that which treats of the principles of the belles lettres and fine arts." The definition is a good one.

J.