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Aesthetics

Part 1: Synopsis of Some Contributions to Aesthetic Theory

See the accompanying PowerPoint, which offers some *very* (very!) basic introductions to several influential contributions to aesthetic theory. Note that in Burke, *both* the beautiful and the sublime are part of aesthetic experience – two sides, as it were, of one and the same aesthetic coin. Note, too, the differences between Dewey and Kant (Kant's prizing nature over art; Dewey's focus on artworks because they are made/authored).

Parts 2 and 3, below, are not summaries of a particular theory. However, they do "speak" in a fairly pronounced pragmatist "accent" (see here for a slightly more detailed overview of philosophical pragmatism). The accounts that follow are, in a general way, influenced by Richard Rorty and John Dewey.

Part 2: Some Ways of thinking about aesthetics

"Aesthetics," derived from the Greek *aisthetikos* ("things perceptible to the senses" [Gray 1992, p. 12), roughly breaks down as *the study, or science, of the senses*. You can probably remember writing lessons in English class, when you were challenged to expand and add detail to your writing by appealing to the "five senses": "how did *X* feel/look/taste/sound/smell?" You would also, I am guessing, recognise just how powerful a trigger of memory any sensory stimulus can be; how certain smells, colours, images, and textures might awaken certain memories. Some personal examples:

- Pipe-smoke will always remind of my maternal grandfather, Jack Hammond (also a bearded English teacher).
- The slightly fading blues and greys and rough texture of my one-and-only knit-tie will always remind me of my paternal grandfather, Colonel Belas.
- The opening bars of John Coltrane's *A Love Supreme* will always remind of the bedroom I slept, read, and drummed in as a teenager, and of Mike, the friend who lent me that album, along with Miles Davis's *A Kind of Blue*. He cautioned me to start with Miles, and work my way up to Coltrane. Both albums were works of genius, Mike insisted, but *Blue* was the melodic, accessible one; *Supreme* was an acquired taste, being an altogether more aggressive, muscular, overtly impassioned piece. In the event, I fell instantly and deeply in love with *Supreme*; it would take years for my respect and enjoyment of *Blue* to grow into "love," or something like it.

An early point worth making, then, is this: it is through our "sensory network" that our experiences are preserved as memories, and later triggered or reawakened. Moreover, though, it is through this same "sensory network" that we experience our experiences in the first place. Experiences may live beyond the moments in which they occur thanks to our memories (e.g., "At the age of 32, I can still remember falling off my bike when I was about 8"); but we *have* our experiences in the first place *through* our bodies. Our bodies' sensory capabilities allow us to experience the things we will later say we did, indeed, experience. To say that we *had* an experience is to say that we can recall *experiencing* and experience.

So, if aesthetics is the study, or science of, the senses, then it is also, in some way, a theory or study of the *experiencing (having) of experiences*. Let's stick to the example of falling off a bike: *the* experience itself, we might say, is the fall. But, remembering the fall, I can ask myself about this experience: "*How* did I experience that fall? As a moment of terror, of pain; but also as a moment which was simultaneously *just* a moment and seemingly endless."

So the experience lives on in my memory as something that was painful, terrifying, and as something that skewed my sense of time (something that, in reality, lasted barely a few seconds was experienced as, simultaneously, impossibly fast and endless). (We can call our experience of time our *temporal experience*.)

A simple and workable definition of "aesthetics," then, might be this: *The term "aesthetics" covers any and all discussions regarding our sensory experiences.*

However, we might wish to refine and further qualify this definition, particularly when we're thinking of the relationship between aesthetics and literary criticism/study. Why? Because, as many of you will probably be aware, "aesthetics" is often used today in a slightly narrower sense, to discuss theories and opinions of artistic beauty (as opposed to all and any sensory experiences). And if you *are* aware of this, then you are probably also aware that any talk of aesthetics in this "theory-of-beauty" sense is made rather problematic by the knotty issue of *subjectivity* (individual perspective, opinion, taste, and so on).

Subjectivity makes aesthetic discussion difficult for a number of reasons, but we should not view this difficulty pessimistically or negatively; the difficulties themselves can be productive and fascinating. Here, in a nutshell, is the basic problem (it is influenced by **Kant's** investigation of aesthetic judgement, but it is *not* a summary of his argument): We can reasonably say that aesthetic experience seems to be universal – that is, we all experience things as more or less beautiful, and we know that we all have such experience because we talk and write about them often enough. The fact that we all *experience beauty*, then, is an objective truth. However, there appear to be no "rules" governing just *what* individuals consider beautiful or not. Consider this: my friend and I are regarding two paintings in a museum, hung next to each other. My friend believes that Painting A is beautiful, while Painting B is not; I believe the opposite to be the case. In the course of our argument, it transpires that attitudes about beauty itself are fairly close, but our judgements as to what qualifies as beautiful are clearly very different.

But if there are no "rules" governing *what* counts as beautiful, then, equally, there are no "rules" governing *why* an individual finds *X* more or less beautiful. More often than not, attempts to articulate the *why?* of aesthetic experience leads us blindly round in circles. For example:

A: Why do you think *X* is beautiful?
B: Because *X* pleases me.
A: But why does *X* please you?
B: Because it is beautiful.

Conclusion

To conclude this section, then, two points:

1) Given the comments made above, some might think that it is more useful to think of aesthetics as an investigation into the *ways we experience beauty*, rather than as a theory, or "rule-book" of beauty itself. That is, aesthetics doesn't try to tell us what beauty *is*, but it does try tell us what the *structure* of our aesthetic experiences might be like. To go back to the beginning, some might consider aesthetic enquiry as the story – or narration – of the experiencing of our experiences.
2) It might help to bear the following in mind: hearing an album for the first time, falling off a bike, seeing a waterfall – all these experiences could be considered non-linguistic in their original form. Aesthetics is an attempt to transfer, or "translate," non-linguistic experiences into language. Therefore, aesthetic investigation is always a form of *narration*. Or, another way of putting this: aesthetic discourse is an act of imposing *narrative order* on an originally non-narrative/non-linguistic thing. E.g., when discussing the aesthetic nature of listening to Coltrane's *A Love Supreme*, I put an *originally non-linguistic* act – listening to music – into *linguistic*, or *narrative*, form. The view that a proper account of aesthetics cannot be separated from a proper account of one's experiences is closely associated with the work of the pragmatist philosopher **John Dewey**.

Part 3: Applications of Aesthetic Theory in Your Coursework

What has all this to do with literature, though? So far, we have focussed on issues of embodied experience, and of the interaction of our senses and memory – perhaps not obviously helpful when the task many of you are faced with is writing a coursework essay that links aesthetic theory to a work, or works, of literature. Let's consider, briefly, some approaches you might adopt; as we do so, we will attempt to make links to the commentary of Parts 1 and 2.

Beauty in the Literary Work

Let us suppose that your essay on literature and aesthetics will take "aesthetics" to be a theory or investigation of beauty in a literary work. What the foregoing comments suggest, I hope, is that discussion of beauty is perfectly possible – relatively easy, even – when it is an expression of *your* response to a text. What you will need to bear in mind, then, is the point that there are no firm "rules" governing the *what* or *why* of beauty.

An interesting route to take might be a form of **Reader-Response Criticism** (see Gray 1992, p. 239). In simplified form, Reader-Response Criticism examines the ways in which *meanings in texts are created as much by readers as they are by writers*. Readers bring a wealth of assumptions, beliefs, and experiences with them to a text. Writers might be able to manipulate readers' reactions to the text up to a point, but readers are not responding, directly, to a writer; they are responding to a text. Language is able to range far and wider over many meanings; language is, so often, ambiguous. The philosopher and literary theorist Richard Rorty once celebrated the "lubriciousness of the tangled" – that is, the oiliness, the slipperiness of language (**Rorty** 1989, p. 142). The "lubcruciousness" of language, then, paves the way for multiple, often contradictory interpretations of literary works – so much so, that the critic **Stanley Fish** (1980) suggested that there might be no such thing as an authoritative interpretation.

Done well, following this route – starting with your aesthetic response to a text, but broadening this out to consider the problems of subjectivity and the possibilities of alternative interpretations – could lead to a particularly strong AO3 (alternative readings/links to other texts) and AO2 (textual evidence) response.

Unity in the Literary Work

You might consider the ways in which the "content" or subject matter of a text is supported/reflected/contradicted by its structure. That is, you might consider aesthetic beauty in literature to be the result of unity between form and content.**

An example: In **George Saunders's** story "Pastoralia" (2001), the reader is offered a satirical view of America as a decaying and corrupt, corporate wasteland. The setting is a theme park in decline (the theme park as a **microcosm** of America is a symbol that attentive readers should be able to deconstruct at some length). Saunders's prose is highly stylized yet simple in this story – too simple, almost; and yet, it is meticulously crafted. Characters' fail with language repeatedly throughout the story, and readers are treated to artless repetitions, grammatical fragmentations, empty neologisms, and a deliberately crude lampooning of contemporary "managese" (management-speak). So we might say that the social-culture decay Saunders wishes to his reader to "see" is not merely *described* by his language. Rather, it is made to "live," as it were, in his careful construction and presentation of decaying, corrupt language; and the monotony of the workers' daily routines is reflected in the almost formulaic repetition, not of phrases and sentences, but of entire paragraphs.

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***However, it is worth bearing this possibility in mind: if literary texts are nothing more than the sum-total of the words they are built out of, then separating form and content is not as easy or logical as it first seems. Why? Try asking yourself these questions: 1) What gives a text its overall structure? 2) What gives a texts its meanings? It is possible to answer, in both cases, "language." How, then, do you separate words from themselves, when trying to separate form from content? As with so many conceptual models in literature studies, the Form/Content model is a useful, perhaps even essential, teaching model; but, like a picture composed of many small dots, it becomes increasingly less clear, the closer you get to it.*

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Writing About the Past

You might want to develop the points considered above, about sensory experience, memory, and so on. If this does appeal, you might consider texts in which someone's past is recalled. You could pay close attention to the ways in which memory itself is treated, and the ways in which the details of the things remembered are rendered.

An example: Bernard MacLaverty's story "On the Roundabout," from his collection *Matters of Life and Death* (2007), is deceptively simple piece of only four-or-so pages. It is not misleading to call it a short story; the context in which appears – the first in a collection of stories – makes this natural enough. However, paying more than passing attention to MacLaverty's style will make the reader realize that this could as well be read as the text of a short, dramatic monologue as it could a short story. So, MacLaverty's rendering of a nameless narrator's past leads to interesting, productive generic ambiguity. The student interested in viewing this story through the lens of aesthetic theory might consider the ways in which MacLaverty:

- indicates that considerable time has elapsed between the event happening, and the narrator's telling of the event;
- restricts what the narrator is able to tell us, because of his memory (what seems more/less important to the narrator, years after the event); because of his role in the event; because of physical position and the restrictions on his movements as the event unfurled;
- uses language to indicate that this piece of writing is, or might be, represented speech;
- uses a simple, pared down prose style to render, with brutal vividness, the sensory impact of the event – the sights, sounds, textures, smells and so on, that make the event so poignant.

Writing about the Senses and/or Memory

Finally, you might wish to take aesthetics-as-a-theory-of-the-senses in a slightly different direction. You might wish to consider the **synaesthesic** qualities of a poem or short story; or, you might wish to analyze a text as a piece of **ekphrasis**. If this is an avenue you wish to pursue, you may well want to concentrate on the way language is used to invoke the senses. Such an approach may well make the essay on metaphor on this site, as well as the metaphor section in the AQA's "Critical Anthology" relevant to you.

A relatively recent text which might lend itself to this approach is **Geoff Dyer's** *But Beautiful*, a series of **vignettes** about jazz musicians, and their contributions to jazz history. The book blends historical research with novelistic "license," so, again, you might comment on the generic ambiguity of the book that arises from the aesthetic task Dyer sets himself. For, interestingly, the book is both homage and fantasia, the starting point for which was a series of photographs of jazz musicians. Dyer's starting point is writing "the" story, as it were, of the photograph – *why is X reaching for…?; why is Y laughing, and at what?*, and so on. Each **vignette** has one influential jazz musician as its protagonist; and, in each **vignette**, Dyer will at some

point attempt to render the idiosyncracies of his protagonist's musical style and contribution to the "language" of jazz.

Dyer's writing is undoubtedly impressive in places, displaying the almost hard-boiled incisiveness often found in the best of both journalistic and *noir* writing. However, an interesting analysis might emerge from asking whether, as the book goes on, Dyer's musical descriptions begin to tend towards the repetitious, even the formulaic. If they do, this would surely stand in ironic contradiction to the uniqueness Dyer hears and reads into his protagonists. Such an investigation could effectively be done through a comparison of two or three vignettes.

Works Cited and Further Reading (hyperlinked where possible)

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[Something of a classic: clearly written, useful, and usable, it contains short essay entries on a wide range of lit. theory issues and terms.]

For help with some terms, see these links:

Aesthetics

Ekphrasis/Ecphrasis

Reader-Response Criticism

Synaesthesia (1)

Synaesthesia (2)