

✓ The Status of Aesthetic Theory in English-speaking Canada

by Calvin Seerveld

Although the data is not plentiful for assessing the status of philosophical aesthetics in English-speaking Canada, certain points may be fairly stated:

(1) Aesthetics is formally taught as a philosophical discipline. Introductory courses and intermediate seminars follow quite traditional patterns, exposing students to the roster of possible positions on the nature, purpose, and integration of art in human society.

(2) Aesthetics is informally taught in the fields of comparative literature, art history, and semiotics. Problems of text interpretation and principles of criticism naturally surface in literary studies. Especially in advanced seminars, the issues of criteria for aesthetic judgment and the current debates in hermeneutic theory come to the fore. As a matter of curricular fact, aesthetics is a step-child in Canada. As in most North American, academic settings, aesthetic theory maintains an uneasy existence somewhere in between epistemology and value theory in a philosophy department. There is no tradition of Kunstwissenschaft at the Canadian university which Germany knows, and the large role l'esthetique plays in the academic world of France is not so here. The silent rationale for aesthetics seems to be oriented toward its historical origin in Baumgarten's philosophy as a gnoseologia inferior. The fact that "Beauty" purports to be a norm of sorts and that at least since Kant, "the beautiful" and "the sublime" have been related to ethics, supplies a form of moral argument to include aesthetics among the humanities. It is significant that the dean of Canadian aestheticians, Francis Sparshott, was originally appointed by the University of Toronto to teach in the area of Ancient Philosophy.

By and large in the past twenty years aesthetics in English-speaking Canada has been taught by those who were trained in England or the United States. This has led in the recent past to a fairly predictable concern with formalist theories of art and matters of metacriticism. The focus of aesthetics almost solely on art and literature is a reduction in scope introduced by Hegel, even in that Hegelian reduction has been transmitted to Canada by more empirical modes of philosophizing. Problems of natural beauty and style in other areas of life than art have received scant attention in aesthetic theory taught at the university.

There is a diversity and independentism in aesthetics in Canada comparable to the great breadth and regional diversity of the nation. About the only place where a "school" has somewhat formed--for which European universities are famed--is Simon Fraser University in British Columbia, where a neo-Marxist orientation is noticeable in its theoretical treatment of the arts. Otherwise, the strengths and expertise and personal interests of individual professors of aesthetics remains dominant. Good fallout from the absence of dogmatic and partisan schools of aesthetic theory is the fairly strong effort to do justice to the history of aesthetics. Close textual reading of classic texts in aesthetics, from Plato and Aristotle to Kant and Heidegger, is the rule.

Prospects for study in aesthetics to grow in attention and priority at the university level in Canada are good. Departments of literature, especially comparative literature, have been stimulated by Structuralism, the Yale Critics, and Deconstructivism, to grapple with philosophical problems of the nature of a literary text and the fundamentals of hermeneutic theory. Such concerns demand philosophically trained analysis that is sensitive to literature--aesthetics. The presence of Hans George Gadamer at the McMaster University Philosophy Department (1972-77) and the frequent seminars of Paul Ricoeur at the University of Toronto, Department of Comparative Literature (1977-84), has given flesh and blood to such cross-disciplinary studies, approaching the province of aesthetics, much the way Mikel Dufrenne's teaching at the University of Montreal for a decade has infused excitement on matters aesthetic in Quebec. If Canadian aestheticians can mediate between departments of philosophy and literature, the discipline of aesthetics will become integral to the university curriculum.

Also, specialized studies do not need to become esoteric but can function as relational, bridging disciplines. Musical aesthetics developed by Geoffrey Payzant at the University of Toronto positions others for more reflection on the theory of performance, which area until now has remained underdeveloped. Environmental

aesthetics is a natural for a theorist in Alberta, and Allen Carlson is pioneering in this area, breaking through the traditional prejudice against outdated, idealist reflection on the Beauty of Nature. Examination of the methodology of art historiography and art critique is also a way for aesthetic theory to show the relevance of philosophical questions for deepening the practice of writing art history and art critique; Calvin Seerveld of the Institute for Christian Studies, Toronto, and Paul Richter of the University of British Columbia have begun work in this field.

The direction in which philosophical aesthetics in English-speaking Canada should develop in the next decade is moot, but one might posit at least two desiderata:

(1) that aesthetics comes to be recognized and practised as a bonafide discipline in its own right, rather than as a course or two in a philosophy department taught by someone knowledgeable on the arts. If a person could major in aesthetics at the university, with studies in the theory of advertising, in criteria for city and environmental taste, in philosophical problems of style for fashion and liturgy as well as for writing, along with all the traditional philosophical problems, trained aestheticians could be theorists with relevance for more positions than those of academia;

(2) that aestheticians come to serve as theorists for various of the university studies in the arts and humanities. As North American literary studies and art history lose their positivist orientation and become more open to theoretical problems lying at the foundation of their disciplines, and as studies in theatre and dance, music and typography, come of reflective age in Canada, they need the encyclopedic, integrating theorist with a systematic bent of mind. Aesthetics is the proper discipline to effect such reflective enrichment and curricular coherence.

1984 AD is indeed the time for aesthetics to take its rightful place in the differentiating and complicated, academic world of Canada.

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