

8 Afterword

by Gabriel Trop

The founding mythology underlying the genesis of aesthetics in the work of Alexander Baumgarten circles around an initial audacious idea. To lose sight of this initial idea and its audacity risks dissolving the extraordinary intensive and extensive dynamism of Baumgarten's thought into a static system of scholastic distinctions, lifeless typologies, and overly complicated conceptual nuances. Baumgarten expresses this idea in the introduction to his *Meditationes philosophicae de nonnullis ad poema pertinentibus* as follows: "to demonstrate that many things that have been said hundreds of times, but scarcely ever proven," can in fact be proven, and most importantly, such things "can be proven from the single concept of the poem" (MED, [preface], 4; Ut enim ex una, [...] poematis notione probari plurima dicta iam centies, vix semel probata posse demonstrare).¹ The concept of the poem, as an evidentiary source heretofore unexplored, constructs a paradigmatic body from which cognitive, affective, metaphysical, ethical, and veridical operations can be drawn out of their latency. The work of art becomes not just one source of intelligibility among others, but *the* archetypal model through which an ideal order manifests itself, and even distorts itself, phenomenally (distorting itself inasmuch as the poem as an analogue of reason introduces a gap between itself and absolutely ideal, logical order). It is not the philosophy of the logicians that comes to light in the order of the poem. It is a lived and embodied philosophy, one intimately connected to the "sensate" truth that forms the primary interface of human beings with the problematic, ambiguous world surrounding them.

The power of the foundational myth surrounding the origin of aesthetics in Baumgarten's work derives not merely from the epistemological and metaphysical gains henceforth attached to the poem qua literary object, but also perhaps from a submerged narrative of fetishization, a kind of erotic cathexis: the poem as the transgressive and unruly erotic object that is eventually reconciled with the norms of philosophical thought through sheer force of passionate dedication and intellectual will. At first, then, the origin of aesthetics has the structure of a love story. Baumgarten broaches the emergence of the attraction to the poem through narrating his own personalized history in the introduction to the *Meditationes philosophicae*: the story of a young man who passed "scarcely a day [...]"

¹ Translation into English lightly modified from Grote, *The Emergence of Modern Aesthetic Theory*, 72.

without verse” (paene nulla dies sine carmine), who was drawn to other academic interests and yet, who “never entirely renounced poetry” (MED, [preface], 3; ut poesi tam a castissima iucunditate), only to finally dedicate his entire life to the elevation of this supposedly diminutive object to a status commensurate with philosophical dignity.² While the love story that gave birth to literary theory began when Baumgarten was nineteen years old, it continued until the day of his death, and then beyond his death, in the testament left behind in the fragments of his *Aesthetica*: unfinished and hence, in proper erotic fashion, always calling out for completion as an infinite task.

Such a self-representation – originally written as a young man and then, whether intentionally or not, enacted over the course of his life – belongs to a genre of rhetorical performance and hence is unapologetically self-mythologizing, even when it purports to be self-denigrating. The performative and rhetorical elements of any such self-mythologization would be unproblematic for the new type of philosopher eventually proposed by Baumgarten, the sensate philosopher who is also a joyful aesthete. Such rhetorical and figural elements would represent precisely the proper form in which sensate truth could concretize itself: the shape of a life become poetry, poetry as a vehicle for the force of life. It was indeed such a mythology that was transmitted through many of Baumgarten’s eighteenth-century disciples and biographers, until the heroic narrative – the story of the improbable audacity of aesthetics – eventually was overcome by other aesthetic tendencies less ensconced in a seemingly scholastic idiom (Winckelmann, Lessing, Herder) and less committed to rationalistic ontological tendencies. Finally, Baumgarten was to be submerged by the currents driving the history of the discipline that he helped found.

In spite of the relegation of Baumgarten to a moment in often teleological historiographies of aesthetics that posit a robust thesis of autonomy as the culminating point of modern theoretical aesthetic achievement, Baumgarten’s meditations on poetry in the light of the absolute surpass in their force of aesthetic cathexis many of the supposed sources that could otherwise claim foundational status for the birth of a theory of literature. In terms of the epistemological and metaphysical burden that is to be borne by the literary object, Baumgarten goes beyond early German Romanticism’s poetization of theory and theorization of poetry, Schelling’s philosophy of art, Nietzsche’s aesthetic affirmation of existence, or the late Heidegger’s poetic thought as an alternative mode of dwelling to the enframing of technology. In each of these instances, the poetic object is an element in a more capacious philosophical project rather than the singular ar-

2 See Grote, *The Emergence of Modern Aesthetic Theory*, 67–68.

chetyal paradigm of order in phenomenal being. In its most extreme formulation, Baumgarten's project seems like an improbability at the heart of rationalist philosophy, something that harnesses the very heterocosmic power that it otherwise ascribes to fiction: to make the illumination of the normative structure of all sensate experience, the *ordo plurium in uno*, depend upon the analysis of literature.

Such is the provocative idea that animates the emergence of aesthetics, and exploring the consequences of this idea – what it would mean to think about the literary object in this way, as generative of an entire way of looking at the world, a theory (theoria) in the proper sense of the term – has been the subject of much of Frauke Berndt's seminal work on Alexander Baumgarten, from *Poema / Gedicht: Zur epistemischen Konfiguration der Literatur um 1750* (2011) to the current work, *Facing Poetry* (2020). Above all in German-language scholarship, Berndt's work has played and continues to play a significant role not only in reawakening interest in Baumgarten, but also in exploring the ramifications of such aesthetic investigations as they extend into unexpected territories (narratological theory, media theory, psychoanalysis, ontologies of ambiguity, to name a few of these directions).

Baumgarten in Berndt's work does not appear as a figure of antiquarian or merely intellectual historical interest. Rather, his work represents a suppressed foundational moment in literary theory that both informs implicitly what literary theorists do (a descriptive element), suggests what they ought to do (a normative element), and indicates what they *could* do (a poetic element). Berndt's own work functions here paradigmatically in these respects, above all in this latter sense, by indicating what lies within the range of the possible – or even what lies just outside the possible – in the medial, rhetorical, affective, and semiotic potentialities and tendencies not just of literary art, but of theories of literary art that themselves harbor an irreducibly poetic element.

Berndt revives what is living in Baumgarten by framing his work as the first modern theory of literature, where literature becomes an epistemic object with its own distinctive methodologies, epistemologies, metaphysics, narratological frames (i.e., theories of fiction), and ethical concerns. Her critical approach is at one and the same time conceptual, historical, and most importantly, energetic. For what is needed in the case of Baumgarten is not yet another scholarly reevaluation of his work, but reanimations, discursive interventions dynamically organized around impetus and stimulus. It is precisely such a reanimation that takes place in *Facing Poetry*.

In meeting this challenge, Berndt follows Baumgarten's own program of an epistemology, aesthetics, and ethics of vivification. The program of aesthetics includes an energetics; a notion of force – material, epistemological, metaphysical,

semiotic – subtends Baumgarten’s thought. Just as bodies at rest tend to maintain themselves at rest, so too is knowledge itself – its forms, signs, and practices – subject to the force of inertia (see MET § 669).³ Part of the ethics of aesthetics entails countering the force of inertia in the life of the mind by cultivating works of art as sources of aesthetic exercises. This pragmatic dimension of aesthetic thought introduces an anti-speculative dynamic into the aesthetic field, albeit in a particular sense of the word “speculation.”⁴ Speculation, for Baumgarten, refers to an inert, bloodlessly theoretical, insensate form of knowledge: “perfect” (complete) and thus without lack or excess, but empty, hollow, and dead. In speculation, as the absolute limit point of epistemological inertia, the corpus of knowledge becomes a perfect corpse. In response to speculation as inert, immobile knowledge, aesthetics sets up a counter-attraction: the counter-perfection of sensate, living perfection, namely, the beautiful.

One of the byproducts of the beautiful consists in the systematic *impurification* of theory. Aesthetics provides a remedy for the fatal illness of speculation by connecting knowledge up to the motive and emotive forces that drive bodies and minds. This theoretical impurification is at the same time a rejuvenation, an animation of theory. In the function of the beautiful as an impurification of theory, error and falsehood thus become endowed with a generative potential. One of the most significant sections of *Facing Poetry* discovers the “birth of narratology out of the spirit of deviation”: deviations not as mistakes, but as “achievements within the wide spectrum of possible kinds of narratives.”⁵ The “catalogue of mistakes” becomes an aesthetic and narratological resource.

If aesthetics is meant to counter the inertia of knowledge – and by extension the tendency of signs, texts, and ideas to fall into a state of atrophy and torpor – it is one of the great ironies of philosophical history that Baumgarten’s texts themselves were particularly vulnerable to this inertia. There still remain strong impediments to the reanimation of Baumgarten’s works. Among the many tendencies conspiring to keep Baumgarten in a philosophical limbo may be counted: the legacy of the multiple critiques of rationality that continue to inform the theoretical landscape; the sheer complexity of rationalist philosophical discourse and a stylistic aversion to the *more geometrico* (which seems to exempt thinkers with strong heretical tendencies such as Spinoza); the development of nationalist programs of literary and philosophical schools that consciously or unconsciously prioritize vernacular works, especially after 1800; the dearth of

³ See 3.1.2 Desire.

⁴ According to Menke, “‘force’ and ‘proficiency’ both designate the *faculty of the subject*” for Baumgarten. Menke, *Force*, 21.

⁵ 5.2.2 Mediation.

adequate modern translations, which is only now being remedied; an association of processes of aesthetic subjectification with a Foucauldian analysis of discipline that dampens the emancipatory potential of rationalist and heteronomous aesthetic theories (even those that, like Baumgarten's, exhibit nascent tendencies toward harnessing a power of normative deviation in aesthetic representations); a general skepticism towards aesthetic ideologies; and historicizing and periodizing tendencies that do not adequately grasp the "heterocosmic" power of seemingly defunct ways of looking at the world.

In each of these impediments, however, lies an energetic potential waiting to be realized. Untimeliness can suddenly and unexpectedly become contemporary. The revitalization of Baumgarten could thus spawn its own set of heretical gestures and questions: What if Kant were not to be seen as the initial event of aesthetic modernity, but rather, to draw on Nietzsche, already symptomatic of a decline, of a weakening and impoverishment of the aesthetic field and its set of technical repertoires linking the work of art to lived practices? What if the imaginative potential of Baumgarten lay precisely in the malleability and cultivation of characterological capacities emerging from the frictions and tensions between norm and the sensuous gap *from* the norm held open by the operation of the analogy (the work of art as sensate analogue of reason rather than reason itself)? What if Baumgarten's contribution to aesthetic philosophy lay not in the emergence of a notion of the subject (reading Baumgarten retrospectively through the lens of Kant), but in the cultivation of a more capacious – more anthropologically determinate and yet open – human type, namely, the happy aesthete, the joyful philosopher of the senses or the philosophically-minded producer of art? Or, as Berndt claims, what if Baumgarten's theory of literature reveals an order of beings suffused with an ineliminable and constitutive ambiguity, both as a source of risk and creativity? Revisiting Baumgarten in a way that would do justice to the "energetics" of aesthetics requires asking such questions.

Rekindling the ambition of Baumgarten's aesthetic project proposes that imaginatively emancipatory tendencies might yet be uncovered where many would least expect to find them: in the epistemological, rhetorical, mediological, and semiotic operations of philosophical holisms and aesthetic heteronomies. If heteronomous aesthetic tendencies imbricate the work of art in as many mutually determinative sources of order and value as possible, sources that are indeed metaphysically one (*ordo plurium in uno*), the aesthete does not remain limited to these sources as static givens, but moves among new and different worlds. The aesthete is always translating self into text and text into self. Heteronomous ten-

dencies, or the activation of the “translation machine”⁶ between discursive orders, can thereby drift into a heterocosmos, where the aesthete can be exposed to the laws of an “other” order. Facing literature in such a theory entails encountering an object whose power derives from its many faces.

⁶ See 2.3 Etymology.