

REVIEWS

Tomáš Hlobil. *Geschmacksbildung im Nationalinteresse: Die Anfänge der Prager Universitätsästhetik im mitteleuropäischen Kulturraum 1763–1805*. Bochumer Quellen und Forschungen zum 18. Jahrhundert 2. Hanover: Wehrhahn, 2012, 462 pp. ISBN 978-3-86525-247-0

The history of aesthetics has mainly been written as a history of the major texts: Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten's *Aesthetica*, Kant's *Critique of the Power of Judgement*, Hegel's *Lectures on the Philosophy of Art* (or, more common, *Lectures on Aesthetics*) and various modern theories from Walter Benjamin to Jacques Derrida. Tomáš Hlobil opts for a different and refreshing approach. He aims at studying aesthetic developments through regional intellectual history. The regions he devotes his attention to are placed at the margins of the area where aesthetics flourished in the eighteenth century: Prague and Vienna between 1763 and 1805. This approach sheds light on an area of research which is surprisingly often considered from a purely presentist angle, as though aesthetic texts from the eighteenth century would communicate directly with us. There is a lack of historical sensitivity in aesthetic research. Tomáš Hlobil's work, Élisabeth Décultot and Gerhard Lauer's project 'Ästhetik: Geschichte eines deutsch-französischen Ideentransfers (1750–1810)' / 'Esthétique: Histoire d'un transfert franco-allemand (1750–1810)' funded by the German Research Foundation and the French National Research Agency, and other similar attempts help to balance out the dominant view on eighteenth-century aesthetics.

Tomáš Hlobil, Professor of Aesthetics at Charles University, Prague, examines the material close to his own professional position; his writing is inspired by a desire to provide a history of his field at his university. The book under review is not, however, limited to this context. For comparative reasons, Hlobil also takes into account the contemporaneous developments at the universities of Halle, Leipzig, and Würzburg, and contrasts the new developments carefully with them. Being 'born' in Halle and, in part, in Leipzig, aesthetics at Würzburg – as at Prague and Vienna – profited from the so-called popular philosophy and later from speculative approaches, mainly derived from Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling. Hlobil has written extensively on the topic (in English, Czech, and German); this new book, translated from the Czech into German, presents the results of his findings.

This is the astonishing history of a discipline which was institutionalized in order to renew the taste of the whole diverse Austro-Hungarian Empire. The Austrian monarchs favoured (German) aesthetics as part of their educational curriculum, a curriculum that served as a 'supranational' tableau for the universities

and their studies. It was also supposed to push back regional and separatist cultures. Under Joseph II, aesthetics became obligatory for all students of philosophy. Gottfried van Swieten (1733–1803), the creator of Joseph's university reforms, declared good taste a matter of national interest. The contribution of aesthetics to national education remained disputed, however, throughout the second half of the eighteenth century. The main reason for this might have been the apolitical object and nature of the field. Van Swieten's adversaries in the post-Jesuit faculties favoured the study of law instead. At the core of his book, Hlobil describes the lectures on aesthetics by the Prague professors Carl Heinrich Seibt (1735–1806) and August Gottlieb Meißner (1753–1807). In his inaugural lecture (1763), Seibt, following Georg Friedrich Meier, discussed mainly the impact of aesthetic phenomena and theory on reason and the resulting need to combine aesthetics with other disciplines such as theology, jurisprudence, medicine, history, and philosophy. Yet Seibt also acknowledged that aesthetic judgement could be trained in non-academic fields as well, for example, through reading. Still, being close to the Leipzig philosophers Christian Fürchtegott Gellert and Johann Christoph Gottsched, Seibt opted for a strong position of aesthetics in the university curriculum. Similarly to Gellert, he conceived of aesthetics and rhetoric as the disciplines in which natural expression should be the focus – in contrast to pedantic and artistic conceptions of the field advocated by an adversary whom they invented. According to Gellert and Seibt, aesthetics and rhetoric were part of anthropology and, therefore, cognition, emotion and feeling were perceived as closely interlinked. As a result, Seibt's aesthetics can be described as a constructive adaptation of the 'Leipzig version of the reflections from Halle which stresses the cognitive dimension of belles-lettres' (p. 180).

Meißner, the first Protestant at the University of Prague since the Thirty Years War, delivered his inaugural speech in 1785. He expanded on two considerable moves: his physical move from Dresden to a foreign city and his professional move from being an author to becoming a professor of aesthetics. One of his main interests was in the rhetoric and style of academic teaching itself. He demanded that it should be beautiful and presented his colleagues as positive examples. Yet Meißner never published his whole aesthetics in book form. Only notes of his lectures survived, one series recorded as notes by the later philosopher and theologian Bernard Bolzano. We are indebted to Hlobil for having deciphered them (pp. 230–33). In his lectures, Meißner traced aesthetics back to antiquity. He understood aesthetics in a broad anthropological sense as well as in a narrower artistic sense, and extensively described the development of the arts, and focused on taste, genius, and sensations. As a result, Meißner's lectures reflect a pre-Kantian aesthetics typical of the second half of the eighteenth century.

Prague aesthetics was indeed closely interlinked with developments in the western German-speaking countries. One of Hlobil's most important findings is based on his examinations of the list of lectures on aesthetics delivered at Halle, Leipzig, Würzburg, and Prague (pp. 105–20). Most of these lectures are derived from Johann Joachim Eschenburg's *Entwurf einer Theorie und Literatur der schönen Wissenschaften* (1783) and some from Johann August Eberhard's *Theorie der schönen Wissenschaften* (1783). There was even an official decision to make Eschenburg's text the main source of all rhetoric and aesthetic teaching at the Austrian universities, including Prague. Hlobil strikingly remarks that this decision enabled these universities to achieve the standards of leading universities outside the Habsburg Monarchy (p. 285). This might be giving too much credit to the decision, if one takes into account the relative ignorance of Kant at these universities. Yet given the fact that the so-called pre-Kantian or popular philosophers Eschenburg and Eberhard provided the most important textbooks on aesthetics for colleagues teaching in the German-speaking countries, a re-evaluation of this kind of philosophy is much to be desired.

Apart from these thorough descriptions, Hlobil's book aims at a broader picture of Prague aesthetics in a European and mainly a German context. For instance, he mentions Christoph Martin Wieland's *commercium litterarium* with Seibt who helped him to distribute the *Teutsche Merkur* in Prague. Yet Hlobil also examines Wieland's rather negative references to Meißner, an author whom he barely knew but did not appreciate because of his own selective reading. In his *Alkibiades*, Meißner has Socrates express Meißner's own views and Wieland disliked this appropriation of the Greek philosopher. What is more, Meißner compared himself to *philosophes* like Claude Prosper Jolyot de Crébillon, which put Wieland off entirely (pp. 347–51).

Hlobil has provided us with an important work of scholarship which greatly enriches the history of aesthetics, a history that all too often refuses to apply its sensitivity for art to its own academic texts and their contexts. It is to be hoped that this study serves as an example for future research in the history of aesthetics as well as in the general history of education and thought.

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