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LE BEAU ET LA BEAUTÉ AU MOYEN ÂGE

The relatively recent birth of Aesthetics as an independent branch of philosophy has posed many challenges to those who wished to investigate aesthetic themes such as art or beauty before the XVIII century. Baumgarten's definition of aesthetic philosophy as the science of sensible knowledge – whose aim is the perfection of this inferior kind of knowledge, namely beauty – allows it to break free from other fields' grasp, but it also implies a limitation: does this independence mean that those philosophical positions that tie together aesthetic themes and ethical or metaphysical ones cannot be considered part of Aesthetics? Could Baumgarten's definition be applied to the ancient and medieval thoughts on beauty, or is it a risky move, passible of anachronism? Is it even possible to talk about Aesthetics in the modern sense while analysing authors way antecedent to Baumgarten?

These questions, while not always explicit, represent the leitmotif of the collection edited by Olivier Boulnois and Isabelle Moulin, *Le beau et la beauté au Moyen Âge*. It is no coincidence that the title of the collection avoids the term *esthétique*, preferring instead the broader *beau/beauté* (beauty). This choice does not imply an outright rejection of the works of Jacques Maritain (*Art et scolastique*), Edgar de Bruyne (*L'esthétique du Moyen Âge*) and Umberto Eco (*Arte e bellezza nell'estetica medievale*), but it underlines the complexity of the vexed question of the existence of a medieval aesthetic philosophy. In his Introduction to the volume, Boulnois points out one of the main aims of the collection: the core of the book is the analysis of the gap between the theories of beauty and the technicians' skills and fine arts. Did artisans adhere to certain theoretical paradigms or was there no communication between theorists and manual workers? The answer cannot be sought by adopting a single perspective – namely, a philosophical one: it is impossible to account for the complexity of medieval thought from a single point of view; thus, the nature of the inquiry

itself urges the contribution of authors from different research fields – philosophy, theology, art history – to gain a wider perspective on medieval beauty than a merely philosophical one.

Were the choice to group together papers from various fields not clear enough, in the first essay Boulnois remarks the distance between modern Aesthetics and the medieval concept of beauty – as it is evident from the title, *De l'esthétique médiévale, derechef, qu'elle n'existe pas* ("On the medieval aesthetic that, once more, does not exist"). Boulnois admits that some authors, such as Umberto Eco, were properly cautious in discussing a modern interpretation of medieval aesthetic problems; however, many others – mostly neo-scholastic philosophers, for instance the already mentioned Maritain, or Card. Mercier – maintained the existence of medieval Aesthetics on the basis of three propositions: 1) that beauty is considered a transcendental in medieval thought; 2) that medieval philosophers gave value to sensible perception; 3) that art was identified with fine arts. In proving those points of departure wrong, Boulnois shows the multifaceted approach to the complex problem of beauty and its role in medieval culture. These three hypotheses are then recalled and thoroughly investigated in a specific period or author by the following papers. The collection is not explicitly organised in distinct sections, but the first half of the book is dedicated to the medieval theories of beauty, while the second half presents the essays concerning the problem of figurative and architectural arts. Thus, Boulnois' contribution gives unity to a book which intentionally does not examine the problem of beauty in the entire Middle Ages – a task nearly impossible for a monography, even more for a collection –, but that aims to focus on some of the main authors and problems of the medieval tradition.

Considering the roots of the discussion on beauty, Anca Vasiliu analyses the relationship between love and beauty as presented differently by Plato in the *Symposium* and in the *Phaedrus*; thereafter, she first takes into consideration the reception of these two dialogues – mostly, the *Phaedrus* – in the Platonic Academy and then the paradigm shift operated by Plotinus. Since a different conception of the soul requires a different approach to beauty, Plotinus gives a metaphysical interpretation of the *Phaedrus* (instead of an ethic one), suggesting a detachment from the sensible world in order to take the first step into an initiation process that will culminate with the unification to oneself. Beauty expressed by

images and the connection with the sensible world are also what Kristina Mitalaité analyses in her paper on Theodulf of Orleans' *Opus Caroli* and on the *In honorem sanctae crucis* by Rabanus Maurus: the problem of matter is fundamental in the Carolingian conception of beauty, since images can be an *ornamentum eccle-siae* – it is the case of sacred images, representing materially the beauty of the Church – and, at the same time, they may represent the filthiness of material life, such as vices or pagan beliefs. The materiality and corruptibility of images are opposed to the eternal perfection of the Christian Truth, so that the solution of this tension is the exclusion *tout-court* of artificial images (Theodulf of Orleans) or their simplification in simple *signa* or *formae*, namely geometrical abstractions (Rabanus Maurus). In such manner, the sensible beauty of nature is always connected to the invisible beauty of God, which reveals its own intelligible order in the universe's perfection: as Dominique Poirel shows in his essay, Hugh of Saint Victor focuses extensively on natural beauty because global harmony and order are the visible traces of God's actions and they are proofs of His wisdom. The platonic theme of participation is strongly affirmed, since creatures are beautiful for they resemble the Creator (whose beauty is unique and unmovable), but are essentially imperfect compared to Him. Men shall then love the invisible beauty of God by means of the world's beauty, while trying to restore their own beauty and harmony with the help of sacraments (that remove sin's deformities) and good manners – which have an ethic and aesthetic value and prove that men are created in God's likeness.

The first proposition challenged by Boulnois (on beauty as a transcendental) is extensively discussed in Laure Solignac's contribution: considering a rough draft probably related to Saint Bonaventure's *Commentary on the Sentences*, the *pulcrum* appears next to the *bonum* in the title of one of the articles dedicated to transcendentals; however, the *pulcrum* is a transcendental *sui generis*, for it does not present a specific trait which distinguish it from the others, but it is shared by the other three (*unum*, *verum*, *bonum*). The fact that *pulcrum* is not easily defined as a transcendental is probably the reason why in a fundamental text for the Franciscan order, the *Summa Halensis*, the *pulcrum* is not a transcendental, being somewhat absorbed by the *bonum*. This element can be found in Bonaventure's *Commentary* and *Breviloquium* as well, where the transcendentals are employed to describe the

Trinity and beauty is a feature (not a transcendental) of the *Verbum*. In conclusion to the theoretical section of the collection, there are the contributes of Henryk Anzulewicz and Olivier-Thomas Venard: Anzulewicz deals with Albertus Magnus' analysis of the distinction between *pulcrum* and *bonum*, and the role attributed to beauty, which presents a double status as affective (tied to sensible desire) and rational (since it participates to divine beauty and form); in Albertus Magnus there is also the first step toward a connection between fine arts and liberal arts, based on the fact that what engenders beauty also engenders the soul's freedom. On the other hand, Vernard's paper opposes directly Umberto Eco's book *Il problema estetico in Tommaso d'Aquino* (1956; 1970), examining in detail its reasoning and pointing out some supposedly misleading interpretations. What Eco considers an aesthetic and philosophical problem in Thomas Aquinas' thought is in fact, for Vernard, a theological issue: Eco's considerations show the anachronistic perspective previously mentioned, since he applies to his study a modern aesthetic sensibility. According to Vernard, the core of Thomas Aquinas' doctrine is not the problem of sensible beauty (aesthetic), but the intelligible one (theological), which leads him to provocatively affirm that there is no aesthetic problem in Thomas Aquinas, but rather in Umberto Eco.

The section dedicated to art opens with Florian Meunier's essay on monumental beauty, or architecture and sculpture: his intervention puts in evidence some major problems in connecting theoretical texts on beauty to the creation of artworks, such as the gap between artists' *savoir-faire* and the critical thinking developed by liberal arts, or the fact that medieval works that disclose how beauty was perceived are extremely rare. Some serious complications arise then in distinguishing (and defining) from a medieval perspective, for example, the roman from the gothic style; this may lead to a stretch in interpreting the few documents we possess, such as the works of the abbot of St. Denis, Suger (1081 – 1151), about the Basilica. Both Andreas Speer and Dominique Alibert focus on these texts: Speer aims at highlighting the central role of the abbot's considerations in understanding medieval beauty, while avoiding rash or monolithic judgements on their contents. Far from being a theoretical manifesto of the metaphysics of light, the construction of the church followed liturgical motives and directives to find the right balance between light and

darkness; a more nuanced evaluation of Suger's texts may help formulating new hypothesis, such as the one endorsed by Alibert, which considers the Basilica as an anticipation of the Celestial Jerusalem.

Nevertheless, architecture is not the only topic of this section: François Cassingena-Trévedy approaches the theme of liturgical chants, where music is seen as a bright decoration of words, just like light illuminates images. As the *Verbum* brings light to Christians, these chants have both a salvific function and a fundamental role at introducing to the vision of the words pronounced, helping believers reflecting upon the Scripture's teachings. Among the figurative arts, a special place is reserved for the stained-glass windows of Chartres and for icons in the Byzantine tradition. The symbolic language of *vitraux*, which is examined by Félicité Schuler-Lagier, is expressed by a variety of elements, such as the choice of colours, the gestures and the dispositions of figures in symmetries, oppositions and parallelisms; the figurative representations can present, just like the Sacred Texts, a historical, an allegorical, and a moral interpretation. A very peculiar case is that of Byzantine icons, which have a diametrically opposed relationship with beauty compared to western standards: as Philippe Sers points out in his essay, they do not try to replicate visible beauty or be agreeable to the eye, but rather their aim is to portray a sacred truth, as the Scripture does. Their criterion is not aesthetic, but rather religious; examining this different structure, Grégoire Aslanoff focus on the depiction of the Dead Christ in the Byzantine art and the tension between life and death which is represented.

In conclusion, this collection is not an attempt to give a full account of how beauty was considered and represented in the Middle Ages, but it succeeds in selecting the principal benchmarks in such a long period and delving into the most intriguing and problematic questions that arise from the consideration of medieval theorising on beauty.

O. Boulnois – I. Moulin (édité par), *Le beau et la beauté au Moyen Âge*, Paris, Vrin, 2018, pp. 354.