



The Ideology of the Aesthetic

Author(s): Terry Eagleton

Source: *Poetics Today*, 1988, Vol. 9, No. 2, The Rhetoric of Interpretation and the Interpretation of Rhetoric (1988), pp. 327-338

Published by: Duke University Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1772692>

REFERENCES

Linked references are available on JSTOR for this article:

https://www.jstor.org/stable/1772692?seq=1&cid=pdf-reference#references_tab_contents

You may need to log in to JSTOR to access the linked references.

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



Duke University Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Poetics Today*

JSTOR

The Ideology of the Aesthetic

Terry Eagleton
Wadham College, Oxford

The concept of interpretation, as we know it today, perhaps dates back no further than the nineteenth century. This, in my view, is not going back far enough, in any discussion of the relations of criticism and power. For before “interpretation” in its modern hermeneutical sense was brought to birth, a whole apparatus of power in the field of culture was already firmly in place and had been for about a century. This was not an apparatus which determined the power-effects of particular readings but one which determined the political meaning and function of “culture” as such. Its name was and is aesthetics; and part of my argument in this paper will be that it is effectively synonymous with a shift in the very concept of power, which we can characterize as a transition to the notion of hegemony. “Interpretation” might seem a broader, more generous concept than the aesthetic, traversing as it does the border between “artistic” and other texts; but it will also be part of my argument that the “aesthetic,” at least in its original formulations, has little enough to do with art. It denotes instead a whole program of social, psychical and political reconstruction on the part of the early European bourgeoisie; and it is to an examination of some of the elements of that program I now want to turn.

Aesthetics is born as a discourse of the body. The vital distinction the term signifies for its inventor, Alexander Baumgarten, is not between art and life but between the material and the immaterial: between things and thoughts, sensations and ideas, what is bound up with our creaturely life of perception as opposed to what belongs to the mind.

Poetics Today 9:2 (1988). Copyright © 1988 The Porter Institute for Poetics and Semiotics. CCC 0333-5372/88/\$2.50.

It is as though philosophy suddenly wakes up to the fact that there is a dense, swarming territory beyond its own mental enclave, threatening to fall utterly outside its sway. That territory is nothing less than the whole of our sensate life—the business of affections and aversions, of how the world strikes the body on its sensory surfaces, of what takes root in the guts and the gaze and all that arises from our most banal, biological insertion into the world. The aesthetic is thus the first stirrings of a primitive, incipient materialism, politically quite indispensable: for how can everything that belongs to a society's somatic, sensational life—"experience," in a word—be allowed to fall outside the circuit of its reason? Must the life of the body be given up on, as the sheer unthinkable other of thought or are its mysterious ways somehow mappable by intellection in what would then prove a wholly novel science, that of sensibility itself? Doesn't Enlightenment rationality need some kind of supplement—some concrete logic at its disposal which would chart from the inside the very structures of breathing, sentient life?

For Baumgarten, aesthetic cognition mediates between the generalities of reason and the particulars of sense; the aesthetic partakes in the perfection of reason but in a "confused" mode. Aesthetics is thus the "sister" of logic, a kind of inferior feminine analogue of reason, at the level of material life. As a kind of concrete thought or sensuous analogue of the concept, it partakes at once of the rational and the real, suspended between the two in the manner of the Lévi-Straussian myth. Only by such a concrete logic will the ruling class be able to understand its own history; for history, like the body, is a matter of sensuous particulars, in no sense merely derivable from rational principles.

Dominion over all inferior powers, Baumgarten writes, belongs to reason; but such dominion, he warns, must never degenerate into simple tyranny. The aesthetic, in other words, marks an historic shift from what we might now, in Gramscian terms, call coercion to hegemony, ruling and informing our sensuous life from within while allowing it to thrive in all its relative autonomy. Within the dense welter of that life, with all its alarmingly amorphous flux, certain objects stand out in a kind of ideality akin to rational perfection and this is the beautiful. The major aesthetician of the twentieth century might thus be said to be the later Edmund Husserl, whose phenomenology will seek to disclose the formal, rational structures of the *Lebenswelt* in what he calls a new "universal science of subjectivity." (It was not, however, new in the least.)

Schiller's project in the *Aesthetic Education of Man* is similarly to soften up Kant's imperious tyranny of reason in the direction of social hegemony. For if reason is simply at war with Nature and the flesh, how is

it ever to take root in the body of lived experience? How is theory to become ideology? Reason will only secure its sway in consensual rather than coercive terms: it must collude with the senses it subdues rather than ride roughshod over them. In a movement of deconstruction, the aesthetic breaks the imperious dominion of the sense-drive not by some external dictate but from within, as a fifth columnist working with the grain of what it combats. Humanity, Schiller remarks, must “take the war against Matter into the very territory of Matter itself.” It is easier, in other words, for reason to repress sensuous Nature if it has already been busy eroding and subliming it from the inside and this is the task of the aesthetic. Schiller is shrewd enough to see that Kant’s stark imperatives are by no means the best way of subjugating a recalcitrant material world; his Duty, like some paranoid absolutist monarch, puts too little trust in the masses’ generous instincts for conformity to it. What is needed instead is what Schiller calls the “aesthetic modulation of the psyche,” which is to say a full-blooded project of fundamental ideological reconstruction.

This program consists in the installation of what the eighteenth century calls “manners,” which provides the crucial hinge between ethics and aesthetics, virtue and beauty. Manners means that meticulous disciplining of the body which converts morality to style, aestheticizing virtue and so deconstructing the opposition between the proper and the pleasurable. In these regulated forms of civilized conduct, a pervasive aestheticizing of social practices gets under way: moral-ideological imperatives no longer impose themselves with the leaden weight of some Kantian Ought but infiltrate the very textures of lived experience as tact and know-how, intuitive good sense or inbred decorum. Ethical ideology loses its unpleasantly coercive force and reappears as a principle of spontaneous consensus. The subject itself is accordingly aestheticized: like the work of art, the subject introjects the Law which governs it as the very principle of its free identity and so, in Althusserian phrase, comes to work “all by itself,” without need of political constraint. That “lawfulness without a law” which Kant will identify in the aesthetic is first of all a question of the social *Lebenswelt*, which seems to work with all the rigorous encodement of a rational law but where such law is never quite abstractable from the sensuously particular conduct which instantiates it. The bourgeoisie has won certain historic victories within the political state; but the problem with such conflicts is that, in rendering the Law perceptible as a discourse, they threaten to denaturalize it. Once the Law is objectified by political struggle, it becomes itself the subject of contestation. Legal, political and economic transformations must therefore be translated into new kinds of spontaneous social practice, which in a kind of creative repression or amnesia can afford to forget the very laws they obey.

Structures of power must become structures of feeling and the name for this mediation from property to propriety is the aesthetic. If politics and aesthetics are deeply at one, it is because pleasurable conduct is the true index of successful social hegemony, self-delight the very mark of social submission. What matters in aesthetics is not art but this whole project of reconstructing the human subject from the inside, informing its subtlest affections and bodily responses with this law which is not a law. The moment when moral actions can be classified chiefly as “agreeable” and “disagreeable” marks a certain mature point of evolution in the history of a ruling class. Once the dust and heat of its struggles for power have subsided, moral questions which were then necessarily cast in stridently absolutist terms may now as it were crystallize spontaneously into that political unconscious we call the aesthetic. Once new ethical habits have been installed, the sheer quick feel or impression of an object will be enough for sure judgment, shortcircuiting discursive labor and thus mystifying the laws which regulate it. If the aesthetic is every bit as coercive as the most barbaric law—for there is a right and wrong to taste quite as absolute as the death sentence—this is not, by any means, the way it feels. “It has been the misfortune . . . of this age,” writes Burke in *The French Revolution*, “that everything is to be discussed, as if the constitution of our country was to be always a subject rather of altercation, than enjoyment” (188). The true lawfulness without law is the English Constitution, at once ineluctable and unformalizable. And if one wanted to give a name to the single most important nineteenth-century instrument of the kind of hegemony in question, one which never ceases to grasp universal reason in concretely particular style, uniting within its own depth an economy of abstract form with the effect of spontaneous experience, one might do worse than propose the realist novel.

If beauty is a consensual power, then the sublime—that which crushes us into admiring submission—is coercive. The distinction between the beautiful and the sublime is in part one between woman and man and partly that between what Louis Althusser has called the ideological and repressive state apparatuses. The problem for Burke is how these two are to be reconciled; for the authority we respect we do not love and the one we love we do not respect. Only love—consent, collusion—will win us to the Law and this will erode the Law to nothing. A Law which engages, hegemonically, our intimate affections will have the laxness of the mother; one, on the other hand, which inspires in us filial fear will tend to alienate such affection and spur us to oedipal resentment. Casting around desperately for a reconciling image, Burke feebly offers us the grandfather, authoritative yet feebly feminized by age. Authority lives in a kind of ceaseless self-undoing, as coercion and consent reinforce yet undermine one another in a cat-

and-mouse game. An enervated feminine beauty must be regularly stiffened by a masculine sublime whose terrors must then be instantly defused, in an endless rhythm of erection and detumescence. The Law is male but hegemony is a woman and the aesthetic would be their felicitous marriage. For Burke, the revolutionaries who seek to “strip all the decent drapery of life” from political power, de-aestheticize it, are in danger of exposing the phallus of this transvestite law, which decks itself out as a woman. Power will thus cease to be aestheticized and what will grapple us to it will be less our affections than the gallops. The revolutionaries are protestant extremists who would believe, insanelly, that men and women could look on this terrible law and still live, who would strip from it every decent mediation and consoling illusion, break every representational icon and extirp every pious practice, thus leaving the wretched citizen naked and vulnerable before the full sadistic blast of authority.

The problem with the bourgeoisie, as Charles Taylor has well argued, is that their obsession with freedom is incompatible with feeling at home in the world. Bourgeois ideology thus continually violates one of the central functions of ideology in general, which is to make the subject feel that the world is not an altogether inhospitable place. When bourgeois science contemplates the world, what it knows is an impersonal realm of causes and processes quite independent of the subject and so quite indifferent to value. But the fact that we can know the world at all, however grim the news which this cognition has to deliver, must surely entail some primordial harmony between ourselves and it. For there to be knowledge in the first place, however gloomy, our faculties must be somehow marvellously, unpredictably adjusted to material reality; and for Kant it is the contemplation of this pure form of our cognition, of its very enabling conditions, which is the aesthetic. The aesthetic is simply the state in which common knowledge, in the very act of reaching out to its object, suddenly arrests and rounds upon itself, forgetting its referent for a magical moment and attending instead, in a wondering flash of self-estrangement, to the miraculously convenient way in which its inmost structure seems somehow geared to the comprehension of the real. The aesthetic is simply cognition viewed in a different light, caught in the act, so that, in this little crisis or revelatory breakdown of our cognitive routines, not *what* we know but *that* we know becomes the deepest, most delightful mystery. The aesthetic, as the moment of letting the world go and clinging instead to the formal act of knowing it, promises to re-unite those poles of subject and object, value and fact, reason and nature, which bourgeois social practice has riven apart; and this is to say that for Kant the aesthetic is nothing less than, in a precise Lacanian sense, the Imaginary. The Kantian subject of taste, who misperceives as a quality

of the aesthetic representation what is in fact a delightful coordination of its own powers and who projects onto a blind, mechanical universe a figure of idealized unity, is in effect the infantile narcissist of the Lacanian mirror phase. If human subjects are to feel themselves sufficiently centered and *heimlich* in the Kantian world of pure reason to act as moral agents, there must be somewhere in reality some image of that ethical purposiveness which, in the Kantian realm of practical reason, falls outside of representation altogether and so is not available as a sensuous, which is to say an ideological, force. That image is the aesthetic, in which a mutual mirroring of ego and world is allowed to occur—in which, uniquely, the world is for once given *for* the subject. This, for a bourgeois practice which continually rips humanity from Nature, thus rendering the subject sickeningly contingent at the very acme of its powers, is an essential ideological register. That it should not, for Kant, domesticate and naturalize the subject *too* much, thus fatally slackening its dynamic enterprise, is one of the countervailing functions of the sublime (as are the sublime's *disciplinary* tasks of chastening and humbling this otherwise too inertly complacent subject).

Since the Imaginary of the aesthetic is a matter of universal rather than individual subjectivity, the aesthetic provides a resolution to the tormenting question: where can one locate community in bourgeois society? The problem is that, of the two traditional answers—the state or civil society—neither is adequate. The dilemma of bourgeois civil society is that its very atomizing individualism and competitiveness threatens to destroy the ideological solidarity necessary for its political reproduction. There is, in other words, no longer any obvious way of moving from social practices to culture or, as the philosophers would say, from facts to values. If you derived your values from the marketplace, you would end up with all the worst kinds of values; the *non-derivability* of values from facts in bourgeois society is thus a necessary structural feature of it. Values are indeed related to social practice but precisely by their contradictory dislocation from it; it is materially necessary that ideological values should be related to social facts in such a way as to appear non-derivable from them. At the same time, of course, such a hiatus between practices and values is clearly ideologically disabling. You might thus turn to the state as the locus of ideal unity, as many nineteenth-century thinkers did; but the problem here is that the state is ultimately a coercive power. Solidarity thus needs a third realm and discovers it in the universal subjectivity of the aesthetic. An intimately interpersonal *Gemeinschaft* is mapped onto a brutally egoistic, appetitive *Gesellschaft*. The aesthetic will secure the consensual hegemony which neither the coercive state nor a fragmented civil society can achieve. Paradoxically, it is in the most apparently frail, private and intangible of our feelings that we

blend most harmoniously with one another—at once an astonishingly optimistic and bitterly pessimistic doctrine. On the one hand: “How marvellous that consensual intersubjectivity can be found installed in the very inwardness of the subject!” On the other hand: “How sickeningly precarious human unity must be, if one can finally root it in nothing more resilient than the vagaries of aesthetic judgment!”

Aesthetic propositions for Kant appear to be constative, descriptions of what is the case but conceal beneath this surface grammar their essentially performative nature as emotive utterances. In this sense, one might claim, they are the very paradigm of ideological enunciations. Like the Kantian aesthetic utterance, the ideological proposition conceals an essentially emotive (subject-oriented) content within an apparently referential form, characterizing the “lived relation” of a speaker to the world in appearing to characterize the world. At the same time, however, such judgments, like Kantian taste, are in no sense merely “subjective.” The rhetorical move which here converts an utterance from the emotive to the referential is a sign of the fact that certain attitudes are at once “merely subjective” and somehow ineluctable. In this sense, Kantian aesthetics move us a little way towards a materialist conception of ideology. Given the nature of our faculties, Kant thinks, it is necessary that certain subjective judgments elicit the universal consent of others and this is the aesthetic. Given certain material conditions, it is necessary that certain subjective responses be invested with all the force of universally valid propositions and this is the ideological. In both the aesthetic and the ideological, subjective and universal coalesce: a viewpoint is at once mine and an utterly subjectless truth, at once constitutive of the very depths of the individual subject and yet a universal law, though a law so self-evidently inscribed in the material phenomena themselves as to be quite untheorizable. In ideology and the aesthetic we stay with the thing itself, preserved in all its concrete materiality rather than dissolved into its abstract conditions; yet this very materiality has all the compelling logic of a universal rational law, appearing as it does like a kind of incarnate maxim. The ideologico-aesthetic is that indeterminate region in which abstractions seemed flushed with irreducible specificity and accidental particulars raised to pseudo-cognitive status. Ideology constantly promises to go beyond the particular to some debatable proposition but that proposition continually eludes formalization and disappears back into the things themselves. What is from one viewpoint an absolute rightness is from another viewpoint just something I happen to feel; but that “happen” is *essential*. Aesthetic pleasure cannot be *compelled*; and yet somehow it is, for all that. The ethico-aesthetic subject—the subject of bourgeois hegemony—is the one who, in Kant’s phrase, gives the law to itself and who thus lives its necessity as freedom. The pleasures of

the aesthetic are in this sense masochistic: as with bourgeois ideology, the delight that matters is our free complicity with what subjects us, so that we can “work all by ourselves.”

The problem with such freedom, however, at least for Kant, is that it is entirely noumenal. It cannot be *represented* and is thus at root anti-aesthetic. This is a dilemma which dogs Hegel too. Scornful of aesthetic intuitionism as any kind of metaphysical grounding of bourgeois society, Hegel’s theoretical program signifies an heroic eleventh-hour attempt to redeem that society for theoretical reason. But any such project of rational totalization will be forced into a convoluted discursivity which threatens to limit its *ideological* effectiveness. The Hegelian system, as Kierkegaard complained more than once, simply cannot be *lived*; and Hegel is alarmingly cavalier about the necessities of aesthetic representation, in a protestant iconoclastic manner close to Kant’s own. Hegel gravely underestimates the ideological force of sensuous representation. The bourgeoisie are thus caught in a cleft stick between a theoretical self-grounding too discursive for representation and thus ideologically crippled from the outset and an ideologically seductive aestheticization of reason (Schelling, Fichte) which spurns all rigorous conceptual totalization and leaves the bourgeois social order theoretically disarmed.

Hegel does, however, score some notable advances. For one thing, he spots idealist feebleness of Kant’s aesthetic *Gemeinschaft* and cranks the whole argument down to the institutional level of civil society. Like Gramsci after him, he thus shifts the whole concept of culture away from its aesthetic to its everyday or anthropological sense, rooting his ideal totality in the unpromising institutions of civil society itself and so like Gramsci effecting a vital transition from *ideology* to *hegemony*. Unlike Kant, Hegel does not commit the naive error of seeking to root spiritual community in anything as hollow and slippery as disinterestedness; on the contrary, the particularism of private property, the family, abstract right and so on will become the very basis of social totality, once they have dialectically transcended their partiality into the unity of the state. The problem with this solution, on the other hand, is that it is merely unbelievable: there is no way the bourgeoisie can anchor ideological harmony in civil society, even if Hegel is right that this is what is *needed*. If political unity is to be derived from the divisions of civil society, an intricately dialectical form of rationality will be necessary, a good deal less blankly portentous than Schellingian intuitionism; yet by the same token this rationality will slip through the net of sensuous representation and leave itself ideologically disarmed. Indeed the very form of Hegel’s work, of cognition itself, is in a way anti-representational. It is as though the Kantian text is still struggling to handle in “realist” or representational style that utterly

unrepresentable “thing” which will finally be encircled only by a full-blooded break to philosophical modernism—to the kind of theoretical work which, like the symbolist poem, generates itself entirely out of its own substance, has its tail in its own mouth, projects its referent out of its own formal devices and escapes in its absolute self-groundedness the slightest taint of external determination. In all this, Hegel is at one with Schelling; but unlike Schelling he refuses the supreme concretization of this mode of thought in the work of art itself, which is at least a little more ideologically persuasive than slogans such as “the rational is the real.”

What Hegel does marvellously succeed at, however, is in reconciling the conflict between the bourgeoisie’s drive for freedom and its desire for an expressive unity with the world—for, in a word, the Imaginary. The dilemma of the bourgeois subject is that its freedom and autonomy, of its very essence, put it tragically at odds with Nature and so cut from beneath its feet any ground by which it might be validated in its being. The more full-bloodedly the subject realizes its free essence, the more alienated and contingent it accordingly becomes. Hegel solves this problem at a stroke by projecting subjectivity into the object itself: why fear to unite with a world which is itself free subjectivity? If Hegel assigns the aesthetic a lowly status, it is in part because, in uniting subject and object in this way, he has already secretly aestheticized the whole of reality.

If German rationalism, with Baumgarten, needed an aesthetic supplement to eke itself out, one might claim that British empiricism was all along too aesthetic for its own good. *Its* problem was not how to descend from the heady heights of reason to inform and encompass the sensuous but how to drag itself free of the clammy embrace of the sensuously immediate to rise to something a little more conceptually dignified. How is a thought so thoroughly sensationalized to break the hold of the body over it, disentangle itself from the dense thicket of perception and launch itself out into theoretical reflection? The answer of the British “moral sense” theorists was that there was really no need. The “moral sense” is that spontaneous, well-nigh somatic impulse within us which links us in the very textures of our sensibility to some providential social whole. If that social whole is now frustratingly opaque to totalizing theory, we can find its trace on the body itself and its spontaneous affections and aversions. In one sense, this is a clear confession of ideological defeat: incapable of extrapolating its desired harmony from the anarchy of the marketplace, the bourgeoisie are forced to root it instead in the stubborn self-evidence of the gut. In another sense, it provides a powerful *ideological* riposte to an arid Enlightenment rationality; if a social order *needs* rational justification, then the Fall has already happened. The aesthetic for a

Shaftesbury or Hutcheson is no more than a name for the political unconscious: it is simply the way social harmony registers itself ineluctably on our senses. The beautiful is just political order lived on the body, the way it strikes the eye and stirs the heart. But to assimilate moral judgment to spontaneous feeling in this way is to risk aestheticizing it, thus opening the floodgates to an ethical relativism which is ideologically dangerous. The “moral sense” theorists see shrewdly that the rationalists wantonly elide the whole medium of senses and sentiments—call it the aesthetic—through which abstract ethical imperatives can alone take political flesh in human lives. But virtue, so their rationalist opponents claim, is thereby reduced to a matter of taste and ethical ideology accordingly subverted. The bourgeoisie, once again, is divided between a rationally grounded ethics which proves ideologically ineffectual and an ideologically forceful theory which rests itself on nothing more respectable than the gut. In seeking to anchor one’s political power more deeply in the subject—the project of aesthetics or political hegemony—you risk ending up undermining it.

There is a greater risk still, however. The aesthetic begins as a supplement to reason; but we have learned from Derrida that it is in the manner of such lowly supplements to supplant what they are meant to subserve. What if it were the case that not only morality but cognition itself, were somehow “aesthetic”? That sensation and intuition, far from figuring as reason’s antithesis, were in truth its very basis? The name for this subversive claim in Britain is David Hume, who, not content with reducing morality to a species of sentiment, threatens to collapse knowledge to fictional hypothesis, belief to intensified feeling, the continuity of the subject to a fiction, causality to an imaginative construct and history to a kind of infinite intertextuality. For good measure, he also argues that private property—the very basis of the bourgeois order—rests simply on our imaginative habits and that political order—the state—arises from the *weakness* of our imagination.

We seem, then, to have traced a kind of circle. Reason, having spun off the subaltern discourse of aesthetics, now finds itself threatened with being swallowed up by it. The rational and the sensuous, far from obediently reproducing one another’s inmost structure à la Baumgarten, have ended up in Hume wholly at odds. What, after all, to paraphrase Nietzsche, if experience were a woman? What if it were that slippery, tantalizing, elusive thing which plays fast and loose with the concept, the eternally labile which is gone as soon as grasped? At once intimate and unreliable, precious and precarious, indubitable and indeterminate, the very realm the aesthetic addresses itself to would seem to have all the duplicity of the eternal female. If this is the case, then the only possibility would seem to be to go back to where you

started and think everything through again, this time from the basis of the body. It is exactly this which the two greatest aestheticians, Marx and Freud, will try to do: Marx with the laboring body, Freud with the desiring one. To think everything through again in terms of the body: this, surely, will have to be the logical next stage of the aesthetic and the one which carries its earliest proto-materialist impulses to their logical conclusions.

There is more than this, however, to be rescued from this otherwise somewhat discreditable current of bourgeois thought, which far from being centrally about art is in effect about how best to subdue the people. (It is not for nothing that Kant refers at one point to the senses as the “rabble.”) Aesthetics are not only incipiently materialist; they also provide, at the very heart of the Enlightenment, the most powerful available critique of bourgeois possessive individualism and appetitive egoism. Before we have even begun to reason, there is, for the British “moral sense” theorists, that nameless faculty within us which makes us feel the sufferings of others as keenly as a wound, spurs us to luxuriate in another’s joy with no thought of self-advantage, pricks us to detest cruelty and oppression like a hideous deformity. The body has its reasons, of which the mind knows little or nothing. Speaking from the Gaelic margins, from Scotland and Ireland, these men denounce bourgeois utility and speak up bravely for sympathy and compassion. Disinterestedness, against which modern radicals have learned to react with Pavlovian precision, means indifference in the first place not to the interests of others but to one’s own. To judge aesthetically, for Kant or Hume, means to bracket one’s own sectarian interests and possessive desires in the name of a common general humanity, a radical decentering of the subject. The aesthetic may be the language of political hegemony and an imaginary consolation for a bourgeoisie bereft of a home but it is also, in however idealist a vein, the discourse of utopian critique of the bourgeois social order.

What happens, in the early development of the bourgeoisie, is that its own secularizing material activities bring into increasing question the very metaphysical values it urgently needs to validate its own political order. The birth of the aesthetic is in part a consequence of this contradiction. If value is now increasingly difficult to derive from a metaphysical foundation, from the way the world is or from the way it might feasibly become, then it can only be derived in the end from itself. Value, as with Kant, is what is radically autotelic, bearing its own conditions of possibility, like the Almighty Himself, within itself. Alasdair MacIntyre has well shown in his *Short History of Ethics* how this idealist self-referentiality of moral discourse is a result of that great historical transition in which moral rights and responsibilities, in the growing anomie of bourgeois society, can no longer be derived

from one's actual social role and practice. The only alternatives are then to see value as self-grounded—for which the model is the aesthetic—or to ground them in feelings—for which the model is also the aesthetic. But if this signals a certain ideological crisis from which we have never recovered, it also releases an opportunity. The aesthetic is at once eloquent testimony to the enigmatic origins of morality in a society which everywhere violates it and a generous utopian glimpse of an alternative to this sorry condition. For what the aesthetic imitates in its very glorious futility, in its pointless self-referentiality, in all its full-blooded formalism, is nothing less than human existence itself, which needs no rationale beyond its own self-delight, which is an end in itself and which will stoop to no external determination. For the Marx of the *18th Brumaire*, the true sublime is that infinite, inexhaustible heterogeneity of use-value—of sensuous, non-functional delight in concrete particularity—which will follow from the dismantling of abstract rational exchange. When Marx complained that he wished to be free of the “economic crap” of *Capital* to get down to his big book on literature, he did not realize that an aesthete was what he had been, precisely, all along.

References

- Baumgarten, Alexander
1961 *Aesthetica* (Hildesheim: Georg Olms).
- Burke, Edmund
1969 *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, edited by Conor Cruise O'Brien (Harmondsworth: Penguin).
- Kant, Immanuel
1952 *The Critique of Judgement*, translated by James Creed Meredith (Oxford: Clarendon Press).
- MacIntyre, Alasdair
1966 *A Short History of Ethics* (New York: Macmillan).
- Marx, Karl
1939 *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, translated by Eden and Cedar Paul (London: George Allen & Unwin).
- Schiller, Friedrich von
1965 *On the Aesthetic Education of Man: In a Series of Letters*, translated by Reginald Snell (New York: Frederick Ungar).