

# *On Beauty: Tradition, Negation, Change*

## *Sobre la belleza: tradición, negación, cambio*

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### ABSTRACT

This text focuses on the changing role played by Beauty in the long course of Western aesthetic thought, and on the heavy consequences of this mutation on the European aesthetic taste from post-Renaissance time onwards. Shakespeare's prediction voiced in the opening scene of *Macbeth* by the enigmatic litany of the three witches: «Fair is foul, and foul is fair» was bound to take concrete shape as soon as «Le laid c'est le beau» in Hugo's *Préface à Cromwell* (1827) became almost a watchword announcing the irreversible colligation of the principle of beauty. Karl Rosenkranz's *Aesthetics of the Ugly* (1853) was the gospel of a coming era when, according to Flaubert, «art will eventually be scientific and science will become artistic». The future Flaubert presaged is now this fleeting present where «change» in art and society is the sovereign ruler, and «tradition» has turned an empty word.

KEYWORDS: BEAUTY, TRADITION, NEGATION, CHANGE

### RESUMEN

Este texto aborda el rol cambiante de la Belleza en el largo trayecto del pensamiento estético occidental y las profundas consecuencias de esta transformación del cambio estético europeo desde el post-Renacimiento en adelante. La predicción de Shakespeare, enunciada en la escena inicial de *Macbeth* por la enigmática letanía de las tres brujas: "Fair is foul, and foul is fair" estaba destinada a tomar una expresión concreta tan pronto como "Le laid c'est le Beau" en el *Préface à Cromwell* (1827) de Hugo se convirtió en una guía que anunciaba la irreversible

licuación del principio de la belleza. La *Estética de lo feo* (1853) de Karl Rosenkranz era el evangelio de una nueva era cuando, según Flaubert, “el arte se volverá científico y la ciencia se volverá arte”. El futuro presagiado por Flaubert es ahora este presente fugitivo donde el “cambio” en el arte y en la sociedad es el gobernador soberano y la “tradicón” se ha convertido en una palabra vacía.

PALABRAS CLAVES: BELLEZA, TRADICIÓN, NEGACIÓN, CAMBIO

THE THREE WORDS APPEARING IN THE TITLE IN CONNECTION WITH BEAUTY offer a synthetic description of the major phases in the hazardous, non-linear development of a theory of Beauty in Western aesthetic thought. My hypothesis indeed is that views on beauty, since the beginning of a written literary tradition – the Vedic corpus in India or Homeric epic in Greece – where beauty appears in many guises, though not conceptually elaborated<sup>1</sup>, could be plausibly visualized as a spiral. The spiral is in fact the only simple geometric form capable of incorporating the phases of growth of an organism from its first embryonal clustering to its full development and thence to its decline, with the enduring possibility of further windings and unwindings. The comma-shaped jewel *magatama*, which is one of the three Shinto imperial regalia, the Chinese diagram of the *yin-yang* with its two matching halves, the logarithmic spiral in mathematics, not to mention spiralic structures in living organisms – all of these endorse my choice of the spiral for my present purpose.

In the year of Plato’s birth in Athens (427 BC), a legation of citizens from the town of Lentini in Sicily arrived asking the Athenian government for aid in their war against the Syracusans. This legation was headed by one «whose speech to the assembly had a stunning effect»<sup>2</sup>. This master of eloquence was Gorgias, one of the major representatives of the first phase of the Sophistic school. Apart from numerous speeches, he was the acclaimed author of a work on the art of oratory, *Techne*, where he explains how, when necessary, to make the weaker argument triumph in discussions, and among other lost writings, one entitled *On Non-Being and on Nature*. Here he upholds : 1) that nothing is; 2) that even if there were something, it would be unknowable; 3) that even if it were knowable, it would be incommunicable. These arguments, allowing for differences in language and thought, might not be incompatible with certain lines of Hinayana nihilism (the first argument) and of Laotzian Taoism (the second and third). Putting aside this exciting comparative question, I come

1 For an accurate account of the Vedic beauty (the Muse and the concept) cf. RAY, P.R., *Theory of Oriental Beauty (With special reference to Rg Veda)*. Sambalpur : Goswami, 1974.

2 PLATO, *Hippias maior*, 282B.

straight to the point, which is to identify, in the age that saw the flowering in Greece of all sorts of arts (not distinct, as such, from the techniques from which they take their name), the powerful speculative impulse that set in motion the philosophical spiral of beauty throughout Western thought. Gorgias and Plato, though on opposite theoretical fronts, are among the major artificers of this new departure.

Plato deals with the theme of the Beautiful on various occasions in his Dialogues. The most famous passages are to be found in the *Phaedrus*, the *Phaedo*, and the *Symposium*, where Socrates illustrates the arcane link between Eros and beauty, declaring that this esoteric doctrine has been imparted to him by Diotima, the woman of Mantinea famous for her wisdom and her occult powers. From her very first remarks, it is clear that the tones of Diotima's discourse are vibrant with a mystic revelation based on the myth of the birth of Eros from parents who incarnate opposing principles: *Pòros*, his father, is wealth; *Penia*, his mother, is poverty. Hence the dual nature of Eros: in him are fused and confused the insatiable desire to conceive and generate, and the pleasure of loving to the utmost. Eros, then, is a special god, a most powerful daemon who magnetizes human beings and who, according to their inclinations, makes them pregnant in body and soul. There are, then, those who crave beauty in the bodies of others and to love and possess a beautiful body are prepared to make any sacrifice; and there are those who crave incorporeal beauty. It is to this latter category of people that Diotima's discourse is mainly addressed. Socrates illustrates this to the participants at the banquet in honour of the dramatist Agathon in a crescendo resembling the increasingly steep stages of a metaphorical mountain ascent. The attachment to beauty bestowed by Eros starts from the body; from the single beautiful body it extends to all bodies that partake of beauty; then turns to beautiful utterances, and thence to beautiful institutions and beautiful laws; from there it will veer toward the beautiful sciences, and this will engender in the one who loves an unlimited desire for knowledge until: «...he arrives at the notion of absolute Beauty, and at last knows what the essence of Beauty is»<sup>3</sup>.

Magnetized by Eros, corporeal beauty spreads its wings and soars up into the rarefied sphere of ideas, where it begins to orbit like a satellite around the sun of being. Nothing similar Gorgias has in view when he deals with beauty associated to Helen, the most celebrated woman of early antiquity in Greece. In his *Encomium to Helen*, Gorgias demonstrates that Helen's responsibility, on the ground that it was her beauty that unleashed the Trojan war, is untenable.

3 PLATO, *Symposium*, 211.

Obviously, the Greek legacy to modern aesthetic thought cannot be simplistically reduced to the clash between Platonic idealism and sophistic relativism in whose sphere the rhetoric of the sublime was to develop in the late-ancient age. Contemporary historians of aesthetics – and I particularly have in mind Wladyslaw Tatarkiewicz<sup>4</sup> – concur, however, in seeing the so-called Great Theory of beauty, which was essentially to hold hegemonic sway up to the threshold of the eighteenth century, as descending from Platonic idealism quite as much as from Aristotle's metaphysics and poetics. And in seeing the ideological premises of the eclipse of the Great Theory in modern aesthetics as descending to some extent from the relativistic approach of the sophistic schools.

The Great Theory, writes Tatarkiewicz<sup>5</sup>, was enunciated in conjunction with a number of propositions, basic amongst them are: 1) the metaphysical basis of beauty; 2) its rational nature; 3) its objectivity and its high value.

The Platonic idea of beauty was part indeed of an ideology widely shared in the Christian West. Its powerful influence is recognized in the vertical thrust of the Gothic cathedrals, veritable hymns in stone to divine beauty, in the altar-pieces of Sieneese paintings with their gold backgrounds, in Provençal and Florentine poetry, where the beloved woman is called 'madonna' and the idealization of the object of desire – Dante's Beatrice, Petrarch's Laura – triggers the subtle chemistry of Platonic love. That influence however was bound to lose its power in post-Renaissance time. As the debate on the arts and their principles progressed through the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the propositions of the Great Theory were not invalidated, but lost strength and bite as soon as other claims related to aesthetic pleasure emerged. The result of this was that the principle of Beauty became diversified and relativized. Three moments can, I think, be identified in this process of diversification. The first coincides with the beginning in England of the debate on the aesthetics of the sublime, which, as we know, had one of its most influential theorists in Edmund Burke (1729-1797)<sup>6</sup>. Compared to the beautiful and in contrast with it, the sublime

4 TATARKIEWICZ, W., *A History of Six Ideas. An Essay in Aesthetics*. The Hague : Martinus Nijhoff, 1980.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 129.

6 Even if the first English translation of the treatise *Peri Ypsous* of the Pseudo-Longinus, signed by John Hall, dates from 1652, its fortune in England is subsequent to Boileau's version, published in 1674 and translated by John Pulteney in 1680. Other translations, from Boileau's French to the original Greek, saw the light of day in the following years, until that of William Smith, which, appearing in 1739 and furnished with notes commenting on Longinus's text with passages from the major English poets, remained the classic for the whole century. Before Hall's version, the *Peri Ypsous* had only appeared in G. dalla Pietra's Latin translation (1612), a reissue of which Gerard Langbaine had edited with addition of notes (Oxford 1636). As for Longinus's critical fortune in the English seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, one of the most respected,

catalyzes the disharmonious, the disproportionate, the dissonant, the conflictual, the immense. It arouses a ‘negative’ pleasure – as Kant was to claim, a kind of pleasure that the beautiful is not able to bestow. In the dialectic between the beautiful and the sublime, it is, then, the latter that scores a winning point. But not only this. From the moment that a negative sphere was identified in aesthetic pleasure, the positive sphere lost its aura, becoming no more than an interface. And likewise, the toughest of the old beliefs was called into question: the belief which took it for granted that «what pleases is beautiful» and «what is beautiful pleases». The seething, new uncertainty about what exactly beauty was in art (and particularly in *les beaux arts*) triggered learned disquisitions on the so-called «je ne sais quoi», an originally Latin formula<sup>7</sup> whose resistance to translation into English was noted, with some satisfaction, by Shaftesbury.

This did not, however, prevent the «je ne sais quoi» from being rapidly promoted to the rank of a new aesthetic category, as soon as Father Dominique Bouhours, in the fifth of his *Entretiens d’Ariste et d’Eugène* (1671)<sup>8</sup> stripped the «je ne sais quoi» of its old rhetorical connotations, making it mean the indefinable, charming side of beauty. Among other things, this was to prompt Count Kuki Shūzō, in the 1930s, to warmly praise the «je ne sais quoi» for its capacity to express in an acceptable way the elusive overtones of *iki*<sup>9</sup>.

The prophecy that the skies of beauty would be darkened in all directions, presaging the collapse in Europe of not only an aesthetic but a social and political order, was, I would suggest, voiced in the opening scene of *Macbeth* by the enigmatic litany of the three witches: «Fair is foul, and foul is fair».

What in Shakespeare’s time, thanks to his formidable intuition, had been a prediction took concrete shape in the context of aesthetics<sup>10</sup> in the third

and fairly recent studies is T.E.B. Wood’s, *The Word «Sublime» and Its Context, 1650-1760*, The Hague-Paris 1972. E. Burke published *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, London, R. and J. Dodley, in 1759 (after a first edition issued anonymously on April 21<sup>st</sup> 1757). Numerous other editions followed, at an average rate of one every three years for thirty years.

7 It is a sentence from Cicero : *nescio quid praeclarum et singulare* , where the Roman orator was expressing the undefinable, special quality (‘that certain something’, as it were) of perfect poetic expression.

8 On the diachronic developments of the formula, see E. Kohler, the entry entitled ‘Je ne sais quoi’ in *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie* , hrsg. V.J.Ritter, vol. IV, coll. 640-644 (with a large bibliography). In Italian : *Il «non so che». Storia di un’idea estetica* , P.D’Angelo and S.Velotti eds., Palermo: Aesthetica Edizioni, 1997.

9 SHŪZŌ, Kuki, *‘Iki’ no Kozo*, Tokyo: Iwanami Bunko, 1979. The first translation in English, *An Essay on Japanese Text: The Structure of ‘Iki’* , by John Clark, Sakuko Matsui and John Clark eds., was published in Sydney: Power Publications, 1998.

10 Aesthetics as a branch of philosophy was established by the German thinker A.G.

decisive moment of the collocation of the principle of beauty. In the same years in which Hegel was giving his lessons on Aesthetics in Berlin, Victor Hugo, in the *Préface à Cromwell* (1827), completely turned the beautiful on its head, making it coincide with the ugly. And from that moment on «le laid c'est le beau» became almost a watchword. Historians differ over the official date of the debut of the ugly in European aesthetic theory. There are those who discern its first signs in the *Laokoon* (1766), the most widely commented work of Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, where the ugly ceases to be an insult to the beautiful and becomes, instead, a fully-fledged aesthetic category, albeit initially limited to poetry. According to other scholars, it was Friedrich Schlegel who outlined the first deliberate theoretical project on the aesthetic category of ugliness in his work *On the Study of Greek Poetry* (1795, revised in 1823). After lamenting the fact that «not a single essay worthy of the name has ever appeared on the theory of the ugly», Schlegel proposes to draw up a «complete criminal code» (*ein vollständiger Kriminalkodex*) regarding the ugly. In this context the ugly as a negation of the beautiful becomes a specific element of modern art. The beautiful thus comes to depend conceptually on the ugly, to be its *alter ego*. The way paved by Schlegel was pursued by Hegel with his theory of romantic (or Christian) art as opposed to symbolic and classical art, laying the foundations for that complex reworking of the idea of the ugly which would be performed by his disciples and followers: Christian Hermann Weisse, Friedrich Theodor Vischer, Arnold Ruge, Kuno Fischer and finally Karl Rosenkranz (1805-1879), author of *Aesthetics of the Ugly* (*Aesthetik des Hässlichen*, Königsberg : Borntager, 1853). A letter written by Rosenkranz to Kuno Fischer on July 13<sup>th</sup> 1850 gives us a glimpse of this ambitious theoretical programme which was written in just seven months. Rosenkranz tells Fischer that he intends to place the concept of the ugly between the beautiful in itself and the comic, and thence subdivide it into the vulgar, the repugnant and caricature. The ugly thus acquires two frontiers: it is «the initial limit of the beautiful and the final limit of the comic. The beautiful as such excludes the ugly; the comic, by contrast, fraternizes with the ugly, but in the same breath strips it of its repugnant aspect, displaying its relativity and nullity before the beautiful»<sup>11</sup>. Looking beyond the formulae, it becomes clear that Rosenkranz

Baumgarten (1714-1762), a disciple of Wolff. In his major, though unfinished, work *Aesthetica* Baumgarten profiles aesthetics as an organic philosophy of art and beauty, aimed at investigating the sphere of sensible cognition taken as inferior to intellectual cognition. Curiously enough, in current dictionaries of philosophy Baumgarten's definition of aesthetics has remained unchanged.

11 For a historical perspective on the problem of the origins and development of the aesthetic category of the ugly, cf. the entry entitled 'Das Hässlich' in RITTER, J. (ed.), *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*. Darmstadt : Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1974, vol. III, pp.1003-1007 ; the article 'Ugliness' in *Encyclopedia Philosophica*, vol. VIII, New York,

intends to wrench from the beautiful, the simply harmonic, its primacy in the field of art. And as for the ugly, it possesses an existence of its own. It is a «second-born son» of the beautiful, something relative, a threatening danger. The aim of Rosenkranz's aesthetics declares its colours: to leave ample space to the forces of the ugly, as a stimulus for the progress of art and society. The spectral, *das Gespenstische*, is one of the aspects of the ugly which, from an artistic point of view, proves to be among the most fecund. We need only think of the great canvasses of Henri Fuseli (the two versions of *The Nightmare*: 1790-91 and 1811), psychoanalytically explored by Jean Starobinski<sup>12</sup>.

The spiral of beauty in the European nineteenth century thus seems to touch its low point, even if, by way of refutation, one could cite the famous utterance made by a character in Dostoevsky's *The Idiot*: «beauty is a force... with this force one can overturn the world». But once the dialectic of opposites had been conceived, the waters of the beautiful and the ugly could mingle and the scent of the one run into the stench of the other. In the magnificent lines of his «Hymne à la Beauté», Baudelaire evoked the ambivalent, nocturnal side of beauty: «Viens-tu du ciel profond ou sors-tu de l'abîme, / O Beauté? Ton regard, infernal et divin, / Verse confusément le bienfait et le crime».

And Flaubert, in a letter to Louise Colet (September 4th 1852) asked himself: «But what will the poetry of the future be? I can't descry it. Who knows Beauty, perhaps, will become a useless sentiment to humanity and art will be something that will stand in the space midway between algebra and music»<sup>13</sup>. In another letter to his friend, Flaubert reflected :

«Beauty has had its day. Mankind, waiting to return to it, does not know what to do now. But as time goes by, art will eventually be scientific and science will become artistic. Both will meet at the summit, after having separated at the base. No human thought can now foresee to what solar explosions of the psyche the works of the future will lead us...»<sup>14</sup>.

London: 1967, and the section 'On the categories of the ugly, the beautiful and the technical' in T.W.Adorno's *Aesthetische Theorie*. On the life and work of K.Rosenkranz, see the entry entitled 'Rosenkranz' in *Allgemeine Deutsche Biographie*. Leipzig : 1889, and ZIEGENFUSS, W. and JUNG, G. (eds.), *Philosophen-Lexikon*. Berlin: 1950, vol. II. On Rosenkranz's position within the school of Hegel, I particularly recommend METZKE, E., «Karl Rosenkranz und Hegel. Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte des sogenannten Hegelianismus» in *Jahrhundert 19* (1929), Leipzig.

12 STAROBINSKI, J., 'La vision de la dormeuse' in *Trois fureurs*. Paris: Gallimard, 1974.

13 FLAUBERT, G., *Correspondence*, in *Oeuvres complètes*, «L'Intégrale». Paris: Seuil, 1966.

14 *Ibid.*, Letter of April 24<sup>th</sup> 1852.

The future Flaubert presaged, which is now this fleeting present prompts us to focus on the third aspect related to beauty in our enquiry, after the ones of tradition and negation: the category of change.

Once the conventional notions of beauty and ugliness have been uprooted from the ontological plane on which ancient Greek thought placed them, and freed from the conflictual dialectics to which modern mind confined them, they become values that are negotiable according to a criterion of truth established, as it were, along the way and reversible at any moment. No sooner, however, do traditional aesthetic categories such as representation, imitation, taste, style and so on lose their objective pregnancy, than the theories that had conceptualized them have to adjust their sights and re-program themselves. And here we encounter the crucial issue of the impact of new technologies on the perception of beauty in art and everyday life. We must admit that computer technologies, access to virtual reality, the breaking of what seemed the physically insurmountable bounds of a three-dimensional world, are greatly altering the map of reality which we inhabit, and that artistic languages and techniques are being consequently influenced by this. The computer gives the artist an almost demiurgic power over sounds and images, his synaesthesia is exalted, and he learns to explore an astonishingly vast range of symbiotic combinations of matter and energy. However, to my way of thinking, all this constitutes a phenomenon which is only partly exceptional – we are not altogether justified in believing that only in today's advanced technological societies, for the first time in the history of his evolution on earth, has man taken an irreversible qualitative leap in the opportunities available to him for experience, enjoyment and knowledge.

Let us re-read the texts of metaphysical Taoism – passages like those of Chuang-tzu and Lao-tzu which open our eyes onto the chaotic backdrop of the world as it was imagined at the beginning, onto the inextricable intertwinings of energy and matter. The landscape paintings of the T'ang epoch in China with their nebulous and empty surfaces, their emphasis on the dynamics of natural events where human presence is marginal, gives the beholder an access to imaginal worlds which are multi-dimensional. Indeed, so many delightful Taoist stories recount how the painter, once his work is completed, suddenly vanishes into those worlds. Pan-Buddhist literature on emptiness, impermanence, the incessant transformation of things, which preaches the insubstantial and selfless nature of the physical and human world, is clearly on the same wavelength.

Then again, if we question ourselves about the phenomenology of altered states of consciousness, about peak experiences lived by ecstasies and shamans belonging to societies lacking in technological resources and for this reason considered to be 'absent' from history, to use Lévy-Strauss's dated definition,

here too we realize that the frontiers between the mythic and the historic, the virtual and the real, the unlimited and the limited have been, in certain cases, crossed independently and possibly by virtue of the very absence of sophisticated technologies.

According to a current issue, new technologies are neutral with respect to the biological, ethnic, sexual and social identity of the individual, and neutral too with respect to ethic and aesthetic values. No one however, I think, would question the fact that new technologies are a kind of power, still more subtle and compelling than those consolidated over millennia: sexual, religious, political, financial, esoteric power. And like all power, the power of technology can hardly claim to be «neutral», even if it differs from the traditional forms of power in simply furnishing instruments and facilities which, in theory at any rate, may be used freely and advantageously by anybody.

More than the «neutrality» of the new technologies, I would rather speak in terms of their ambiguity: the ambiguous way in which technological power tests our capacity to reshape our imagination and to enlarge the horizons of aesthetic experience beyond the dialectics of beauty and ugliness. Yes, in the technological era beauty seems to acquire an ambiguous value, under the sign of Mercury rather than Venus. To some extent, this ambiguous beauty calls to mind the figure of Dante's screen lady described in *La Vita nuova* in the lines quoted here below: like a mirror it turns us back incessingly to other objects of desire, and its ever-changing appearances conceal a sphinx's face:

«One day it happened that this most gracious lady was sitting in a place where words about the Queen of glory were heard, and I was in a position from which I could behold my joy; and between us in direct line with my vision, there sat another lady of very pleasing appearance who looked at me repeatedly, astonished by my gaze, which seemed directed at her. A number of people observed this and soon began to draw conclusions, so much so that as I was leaving I heard someone behind me say: 'Look how he pines for love of her, and at the mention of her name I knew that he was referring to the lady who had sat in the direct line between the most gracious Beatrice and my gaze'.

Then I was greatly reassured, feeling confident that my gaze had not revealed my secret to anyone that day. It was then I hit on the idea of making this lady a screen to hide the truth; and I pretended so well that in a short time most of those who talked about me believed they knew my secret. This lady was my screen for several years and months...»<sup>15</sup>

15 DANTE, *La vita nuova*, tr. and intr. by B. Reynolds. London: Penguin Classics, 1969, 5<sup>th</sup> paragraph.

