

The Philosophy of Beauty

From Plato to Modernity – and Back?

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The philosophy of beauty is a tradition founded by Greek philosophers, but we find the first accounts of the experience of beauty in the epics of Homer and Hesiod. Later, the phenomenon becomes subject to philosophical inquiry, especially by Plato, the first in European culture to ask: “What is beauty by itself?”, the subject of conversation in *Greater Hippias*. For more than 2 millennia, philosophers and theologians have struggled to solve this basic problem: basic, because the answer will imply fundamental views of life and the very nature of the world. What are the hidden features, laws, or meaning – if any – behind forms. What does form reveal, and what is the connection between form and content? Such questions are ultimately metaphysical, becoming touchstones of philosophical inquiry. However, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, the tradition breaks free, for various reason, from the embrace of metaphysics and theology, with the result that it declines almost overnight. Thus, to our surprise, we realize that the twentieth century was a century with no theories on beauty. The philosophy of beauty has become a theoretical taboo, even to the extent that theory no longer refers to it as a crisis. By outlining a few *topoi* from this story of the rise and decline of Platonic tradition, I hope to throw some light on this paradoxical situation of present day aesthetics. The mapping of history is, of course, a purposeful affair. We have become used to thinking of beauty as a cliché or a kind of trivia, but are impoverished by doing so. I shall address this point in my closing remarks.

Mythology

From the very beginning of Greek culture we find a special awareness of visual beauty. As we

learn from the famous funeral speech by Pericles the Athenians, in fact, call themselves “beauty lovers”. Beauty is a crucial issue in all aspects of life, from personal matters, the rules of decent conduct and the routines of everyday life, to social and collective events such as festivals and funerals, where the public in the case just mentioned are facing the loss of young Athenians killed in The Peloponnesian War. The dimension of beauty is emphasized in celebration, and in moments of grief, too. Beauty is ascribed to reality as well as to the realm of unseen things. So Homer and Hesiod elaborate on appearances of the gods, their residence, and the Heavens, all of which are claimed to be of exquisite beauty. According to Friedrich Hegel, the Greeks had only one religion, and that was beauty. Many scholars, among them Julius Stenzel, Werner Jaeger, Max Pohlenz, and Hans-Georg Gadamer have contributed to this view.¹

The admiring, pious attitude towards visual beauty fuels the impulse to describe in detail the phenomena and objects to be celebrated. This behaviour has led scholars to describe Hellas as “Auge der Welt”, an expression coined by Erich Auerbach and other scholars. If we have lost our ability to see and sense the world, to take pleasure in experiencing the abundance of phenomena, we might recuperate by listening to Homer tell his stories in a kind of laid back, relaxed style, which allows for describing everything in succession and always with some conspicuous detail. So Auerbach has described Homeric style as the marching or the passing of phenomena. The intention behind Homeric style, according to Auerbach, is to visualize experience, which also accounts for the Homeric fondness for epithets and digressions.² Later,