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Kiesewetter, Kant, and the Problem of Poetic Beauty

My observations here are meant to address a current lacuna in discussions of Kant's aesthetics, namely the beauty of poetry. There are, I admit, numerous treatments of poetry considered in the light of Kant's aesthetic theory, but what may not be noticed is that in discussions of poetry and Kant's aesthetics, the topic of poetic *beauty* only rarely comes up (a perusal of the relevant literature will quickly confirm this).

This virtual silence on the beauty of poetry is surprising, given that the beautiful (along with the sublime) is obviously one of the two foundational aesthetic categories in Kant's aesthetics. This silence stands out all the more given that Kant himself explicitly mentions that poems can be beautiful and furthermore declares poetry to be the highest form of fine art. Why, then, is the beauty of poetry almost never discussed in relation to Kant's aesthetics? Ultimately, I will be arguing that this silence on the beauty of poetry is a motivated one, albeit an unintentionally motivated one, namely because Kant's conception of free beauty militates against its being applied to poetry (and the same holds, by extension, for literature in general). In other words, this lacuna in discussions of Kant's aesthetics rests on a lacuna in the field of products of fine art to which the Kantian conception of free beauty can be applied. At the same time, my impression is that the fact that free beauty in its Kantian sense is almost impossible to apply to poetry has been overlooked principally because Kant himself overlooks it; in addition, interpreters of Kant may well independently overlook it for the same reasons that Kant apparently did.

1 Kiesewetter's *Critik der Urtheilskraft für Uneingeweihte*

One of the few texts to touch so directly on the question of beauty and poetry from a Kantian perspective is Johann Gottfried Karl Christian Kiesewetter's *Immanuel*

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Kant's Kritik der Urteilskraft für Uneingeweihte of 1804.¹ Manfred Kuehn, in his recent biography of Kant, describes Kiesewetter in the following terms:

Kant was still the most famous philosopher of the Albertina, and some came to study with him. One of his most important students during this period was Johann Gottfried Karl Kiesewetter (1766 – 1819), who was in the fall of 1788 sent to Königsberg by Frederick William II himself so that „he could benefit from Kant's oral instructions.“ [...] Kiesewetter adored Kant, frequently referring to him as his „second father in later times.“ Beginning with his *Grundriss der reinen allgemeinen Logik nach Kantischen Grundsätzen* (1791), he became an ardent popularizer of Kant's philosophy.²

After such a generally glowing description, Kiesewetter's treatment at the hands of Erich Adickes may come as a surprise. Adickes, in his annotated Kant bibliography, has this to say about Kiesewetter:

Kiesewetter is the prototype of those unconditional disciples, who swear by the words of their master. Every school-philosophy, at the time of its *floret*, produces them in scores. They possess no thoughts of their own[.]

As for his writings, Adickes goes on to say:

Kiesewetter's work is one of those which, although useful for the propagation of philosophic thought, – it was even translated into Danish, – are of more disadvantage than advantage to science itself, in that they win a mass of incompetent adherents for a school of philosophy, and this too at the cost of a superficializing of its problems and their solutions, i. e., at the cost of philosophical import. [...] All that these „Uneingeweihte“ could hope to attain to, was the recognition of the Kantian philosophy among the other constituents of a 'general education'; – subjects on which they had read something, and which they could therefore converse about.³

In effect, Adickes's complaint is that Kiesewetter's book on Kant's third *Critique* is nothing other than an early 19th-century equivalent (*avant la lettre*) of *Kant's Third Critique for Dummies* or *The Idiot's Guide to Kant's Critique of Judgment*, a book which could block a newcomer from truly understanding Kant's third *Cri-*

¹ Kiesewetter, J. G. C.: *Immanuel Kant's Kritik der Urteilskraft für Uneingeweihte, auf eine faßliche Art dargestellt*. Berlin 1804.

² Kuehn, Manfred: *Kant: A Biography*. Cambridge 2001, 359 – 340.

³ Adickes, Erich: *Bibliography of Writings by and on Kant Which Have Appeared in Germany up to the End of 1887* (Part III). In: *The Philosophical Review* 2/5 (1893), 557–583, 576 and 578 (entries 462 and 467). This serial bibliography was later printed on its own in 1896; in that edition, these same entries can be found on 82 and 84. Ernst Cassirer makes similar remarks. Cassirer, Ernst. *Kant's Life and Thought*. Transl. James Haden. New Haven/London 1981, 380.

tique in the first place. On the assumption that Adickes is correct about Kiesewetter, it would seem that there could be little reason to return to the pages of Kiesewetter's *Critik der Urtheilskraft für Uneingeweihte* after it had already sunken into obscurity. I would argue, however, that, in its heavy application of poetry to illustrate Kant's theory of beauty, Kiesewetter's third *Critique* book makes the problematic nature of poetic beauty in Kant hard to overlook.

Kiesewetter correctly points out that the representational arts are mainly judged for dependent, rather than free beauty, and that the judgment that a work displays dependent beauty does not necessarily mean that it will also be judged to have free beauty. In a section subtitled, „On the Two Main Types of Beauty, Free and Dependent“ [„Von den beiden Hauptarten der Schönheit, der freien und der anhängenden“], Kiesewetter writes that we must first of all

set out a principal distinction regarding beauty which has an essential influence on the character of the judgment of taste itself; the distinction concerns free (self-subsistent) and dependent (conditioned) beauty (*pulchritudo vaga* and *adhaerens*). [...] In the case of dependent beauty, the question of perfection (correctness) is presupposed, and when precisely the incorrectness does damage to the beauty, then beauty and perfection are to be completely distinguished from each other, and the latter [viz., perfection] is not always accompanied by the former [viz., beauty]. [...] Thus the judgment of dependent beauty intimately ties together two judgments, of which that about perfection or correctness comes first, and that about beauty follows.⁴

So far, so good. As can be seen, here Kiesewetter simply discusses poetry along with the other representational arts. On the next page, however, he makes the striking observation that *poetry and the literary arts cannot be judged according to free beauty*:

only one kind of fine art, spoken art, by its essence makes it impossible to offer free beauties, for words are nothing other than signs of our presentations, and speech is not possible without concepts; thus in the case of the each and every product of speech, the under-

⁴ „einen Hauptunterschied der Schönheit bekannt machen, der auf die Beschaffenheit der Geschmacksurtheile selbst einen wesentlichen Einfluss hat; dieser Unterschied betrifft die freie (für sich bestehende) and anhängende (bedingte) Schönheit (*pulchritudo vaga* und *adhaerens*). [...] Bei der anhängenden Schönheit wird die Frage nach Vollkommenheit (Richtigkeit) vorausgesetzt, und wenn gleich die Unrichtigkeit der Schönheit Abbruch thut, so sind doch Schönheit und Vollkommenheit wohl voneinander zu unterscheiden, und die letztere führt nicht immer die erstere bei sich. [...] Es sind also bei dem Urtheil über anhängende Schönheit zwei Urtheile innig zusammen verbunden, von welchem das über Vollkommenheit oder Richtigkeit vorangeht, und das über Schönheit folgt.“ Kiesewetter, J. G. C.: *Immanuel Kant's Kritik der Urtheilskraft für Uneingeweihte*. Berlin 1804, 51f.

standing makes a demand for correctness, i.e., agreement with that which it is supposed to be.⁵

Kiesewetter argues that the art forms which are dependent upon speech simply cannot be judged according to their free beauty because speech necessarily communicates concepts, and without concepts, it is no longer even speech. In such a case, he seems to suggest, the spoken arts would altogether lose their very medium, namely speech.

What is perhaps even more striking, and – I would argue – instructive, given Kiesewetter's stern warning that it is impossible for the spoken arts to be judged according to free beauty, is that, just pages later, he begins a long chain of examples of the beauty of poetry! Granted, he introduces this chain of poetic examples – meant to illustrate varieties of „mixed“ beauty, where the poet adds an emotion to beauty – with the warning that „Since works of spoken fine art cannot be free beauties, in the judgment about them the judgment about correctness is therefore always mixed,“⁶ but even this formulation, turning as it does on the idea of „mixed“ beauty, seems to suggest that free beauty is there, merely that dependent beauty or charm and emotion is 'mixed' in along with it.

At any rate, he then, after briefly touching on a poem by Schiller which pleases the listener due to its charming sounds, turns to a poem from Matthison which mixes suaveness or loveliness with beauty (55f.). Here one immediately wants to point out to Kiesewetter that, by writing the single word *Schönheit* (in this and other cases), he has left open the question of whether he here means free or dependent beauty. Of course, if he is consistent with the remarks he has just made, then he must mean dependent beauty. This example is then followed by many pieces of poetry illustrating various mixtures that one can make: beauty (free or dependent?) mixed with emotion, the sublime, conviction, religious feeling, moral feeling, etc. (57–76).

Kiesewetter's diagram of Kant's division of the arts (412) makes visible the uniqueness of poetry and the literary arts or arts of speech on Kant's conception: The spoken arts are cut off from the other arts insofar as the other arts express

5 „nur eine Art der schönen Kunst, die redende, macht es ihrem Wesen nach unmöglich, freie Schönheiten aufzustellen, denn Worte sind nichts als Zeichen unserer Vorstellungen, und Rede ist ohne Begriffe nicht möglich; der Verstand macht also bei einem jeden Produkt der Rede die Anforderung der Richtigkeit d. h. der Zusammenstimmung mit dem, was es sein soll.“ Kiesewetter, J. G. C.: *Immanuel Kant's Kritik der Urtheilskraft für Uneingeweihte*. Berlin 1804, 53.

6 „Da die Werke der redenden schönen Künste keine freien Schönheiten sein können, so ist in dem Urtheil über dieselbe das Urtheil über Richtigkeit stets eingemischt.“ Kiesewetter, J. G. C.: *Immanuel Kant's Kritik der Urtheilskraft für Uneingeweihte*. Berlin 1804, 55.

intuitions (*Anschauungen*), or spatio-temporal forms, whereas the spoken arts express thoughts or conceptual content. This is the real problem: poetry does not use spatio-temporal shapes as its medium (or, to put it more mildly: exactly how or to what degree poetry uses or does not use spatio-temporal form has to be clarified).

If we take seriously Kiesewetter's claim that poetry and the spoken arts cannot be judged according to Kantian free beauty, at least one striking consequence follows. Namely, if *Poesie* is used as a general term to refer to all the fine arts (through its indicating the „crafting“ or „making“ of art via *poiêsis/poêma*, 403 f.), and yet the spoken arts do not allow for a free judgment of beauty, then the result appears to be that, of all the arts, poetry cannot aspire to be *Poesie*.

2 Kant and the *Critique of Judgment*

What we have seen so far rests mostly on Kiesewetter. But what of Kant? Even if we assume that some of the difficulties raised by Kiesewetter's work rest on Kiesewetter's inconsistent or unclear formulations (particularly in his treatment of „mixed“ beauty), the question remains, does Kant's aesthetic theory suffer from the threat of a similar lacuna, namely that regarding the free beauty of poetry? I would argue yes. (Given the constraints of space here, my argument will have to be very compressed.)

One might argue against Kiesewetter that one *can* abstract from the meaning of the words in poetry, opening up the possibility for finding free beauty in its Kantian sense in poetry (though I think experience shows that this abstraction is, in fact, all but impossible). Even if this possibility were granted, however, and one attempted to focus merely on the intuitions which poetry offers – the structures of sound over time (at least insofar as it is read aloud) –, I would still argue that we are left with a problem.

Namely, on the assumption that the pattern of phonemes and / or rhythm of syllables in a poem is not appealing to the listener merely due to its charm (always a possibility), then the question remains: can those phonetic and rhythmic patterns provide enough structure, variety, and complexity to occasion a judgment of free beauty, beauty in the specifically Kantian sense?

One might argue that, given the number of phonemes in a particular language (say, the approximately 44 phonemes in English), they could function just as musical notes do; one does not require many pitches of tone to be able to construct a beautiful melody. By analogy, one could argue, 44 phonemes offer more than enough material for a phonetic „melody“ to be constructed. However, the evidence of the arts themselves seems to speak against this possibility.

Namely, the spoken arts are the one art form that has not had a successful career merely as an abstract or „absolute“ art form. Even though figurative painting (admittedly in many cases an occasion principally for dependent beauty) still finds a substantial audience alongside abstract painting, and in some contexts is preferred to abstract painting, abstract painting (or at least, decorative forms) still have a universal appeal. Likewise for music and sculpture. But, even though the attempt was made with sound poetry, mere spoken sounds without either a linguistic meaning or a truly musical melody has never caught on in any lasting way. Even though much or even most poetry is expressly composed with an attention to its acoustic materiality, practically no one enjoys listening to such poetry if they cannot understand the words (and poetry in an unknown language would be an ideal case of having only the sounds at one’s disposal). Therefore it seems that the acoustic form of poetry is not enough to sustain the mental play necessary to occasion a judgment of free beauty. Of course, as with Kieseewetter, in spite of this seeming prohibition, Kant speaks numerous times of poetic beauty or of beauty in the context of the spoken arts. And this seeming contradiction raises questions.

3 Final Caveats and Considerations

What I am *not* doing here is claiming that Kant’s third *Critique* cannot serve as the basis for a rich and insightful engagement with poetry or the issues that poetry involves. I am also *not* claiming that Kant’s specific discussion of poetry lacks any resources to deal with and evaluate poetry. Indeed, if one wished to use Kant’s aesthetic theory, and his discussion of poetry itself, to grapple with poetry, one would find much to work with, such as his concepts of dependent beauty, the sublime, spirit, aesthetic ideas, and artistic creativity, as well as his discussions of poetic tone, rhythm, and mood.

I am furthermore *not* declaring that poetry is basically ineligible for a judgment of free beauty for the specific reason that (as some have it), on Kant’s theory, *no variety of art* could occasion a judgment of free beauty.⁷ My position is that, on Kant’s theory, painting, music, sculpture, etc., can occasion a judgment of free beauty, but poetry and other literary art forms do not.

⁷ For a discussion of some of these concerns, see the section entitled, „Natural Beauty and Fine Art, New Criticism, and Formalism“ in Kemal, Salim: *Kant’s Aesthetic Theory: An Introduction*. New York ²1997, 145 – 151.

Finally, I am also fully aware that it is basic to Kant's theory that beauty cannot be guaranteed or disallowed on the basis of rules. Therefore, when I make the claim that poetry does not occasion a judgment of free beauty, I am not declaring a hard and fast rule, but instead pointing out that, by the very nature of the beast, poetry generally militates against its being an occasion for a judgment of pure beauty.

These are the options we are left with:

- 1.) Kant was fully aware that poetry could only be considered in terms of dependent beauty, but, because this limitation was so obvious, he neglected to mention it, assuming that the reader would always read „beauty“ to mean „dependent beauty“ when used in discussions of poetry.
- 2.) Kant, though his own theory in effect rules it out, mistakenly assumes that the free beauty of poetry can be discussed because he is either *unaware* of the implications of his theory in this particular ramification, or he – temporarily lapsing into the general presupposition that, if any art form is beautiful, then above all *poetry* is beautiful – *forgets* the implications of his theory in this regard.

My whole discussion of Kant on poetry, especially insofar as it utilizes Kiesewetter, admittedly begins on the basis of a surface reading of Kant's *Critique of Judgment*. If the present analysis is correct, then it has to be admitted that, so far as the literal, surface, or technical meaning of Kant's words are concerned, the free beauty of poetry presents a problem. Some possible responses to this problem are the following:

- 1.) One „bites the bullet“ and admits that Kant's theory of free beauty cannot be applied to poetry (and, by extension, to the other literary arts). Granted, if this first option is accepted, then numerous absurd consequences result, chief of which is that poetry, for Kant the highest of the arts, does not admit of being called „beautiful“ in his specific sense of the term.
- 2.) One accepts this surface reading as the correct reading of Kant's theory of free beauty, but then goes on to argue that the material, spatio-temporal form presented by poetry (its pattern of phonemes, or its rhythmic structure, or both) are more complex and 'playful' than they might at first appear (and thereby *could* occasion a judgment of free beauty).
- 3.) Or one turns one's attention to aesthetic ideas as a source for poetic beauty. Now, Kant himself held that poetry is the highest art form, precisely due to its capacity for expressing aesthetic ideas. Having pointed this out, however, does not allow us to declare, „Feierabend!“ For this point leads to the following conclusion: namely, that poetry can, generally speaking, *only be beautiful* due to *aesthetic ideas*, and *not* due to the free beauty of its (spatio-

temporal) *form*. In other words, poetry, on Kant's theory, would not be merely the art form *most capable of expressing* aesthetic ideas, it would indeed be the *only art form* which can be beautiful *by no other means* than aesthetic ideas. And this clarification is one which Kant, so far as I am aware, never spelled out, nor am I sure that he realized it.

Kiesewetter's book provides indirect evidence that this special status of poetry has been overlooked. He does indeed discuss aesthetic ideas, and does specifically use poetic examples to illustrate them, but his discussion of aesthetic ideas only appears much later in the book, long after he has already gone through his 20-page buffet of poetic beauty.

Ultimately, yielding to the temptation to eat of Adickes's forbidden fruit (namely, reading Kiesewetter) has led to a sharpening of the question, if poetry can be beautiful on Kant's theory, how exactly, and in how many ways, can it be beautiful? Along similar lines, it also sharpens another question: if it is aesthetic ideas which allow poetry to have beautiful form, of what, exactly, would the *beautiful form* of an aesthetic idea consist?