Uncontrollable Beauty

Toward a New Aesthetics

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I have already stated that this reading of Freud, and of what he could have had to say about beauty, will be oriented and framed by his implicit reference to Kant’s third Critique, more specifically to the analytic of the beautiful that opens its “Critique of Aesthetic Judgment.” There is nothing in Freud’s text that calls for this reference or explicitly justifies it. In an attempt like this one to assess historically the passages in which Freud evokes the problem of beauty, other names also have some claim to consideration, beginning with that of the “divine Plato.” Kant was certainly not the first to bring what Lacan called the “pleasure index” to bear on aesthetic matters, but his formulation of the question of the judgment of taste is echoed in Freud’s text; these echoes are decidedly problematic, but I will undertake to amplify them, to set them reverberating, in hopes of revealing something that otherwise would have remained obscure.

First, the thesis consistently advanced by Freud that the object of the drive is, at least initially, of no importance, its only point of interest being its capacity to provide satisfaction (at least initially: the problem consisting in part of determining at what moment, under what conditions, in what context, as a result of what evolution, and in virtue of what displacement the object ceases being, as Lacan would have it, a matter of total indifference). Would we be justified in comparing
Freud's uncoupling of the question of beauty, insofar as it is derivative of the drive, from its object with the "Copernican revolution" operated by Kant with regard to the faculty of judging "beauty"? The analytic of the beautiful posits that the judgment of taste is not logical but aesthetic, with the latter term designating "that of which the determining principle can only be subjective": To decide whether something is beautiful or not, we do not relate the representation to the object by means of the understanding; rather, we relate it by means of the imagination to the subject and its feeling (Gefühl) of pleasure (Lust) or unpleasure (Unlust). It is a question of affect: While Diderot already maintained that beauty is relational, what counts for Kant is no longer the objective relation of representations among themselves but the subjective relation of representations to the feelings of pleasure or unpleasure accompanying them, feelings that designate nothing in the object itself but rather the positive or negative affect produced by its representation within the subject.

The parallel would make sense if the analytic of the beautiful did not explicitly exclude from satisfaction, from that Wohlgefallen crucial to the judgment of taste, all connotations of drive or libido as well as all links with the realm of desire. The paradox and enigma of what Kant terms "pure" pleasure begins here. Speaking of feelings of pleasure and unpleasure might be another way for Freud to designate the subject's "feeling of life," the Lebensgefühl that grounds the faculties of discrimination (Unterscheidungsvermögen) and judgment (Beurteilungsvermögen). If there is any such thing as this life feeling, it is and must be—so far as it has anything to do with taste—indeed of the faculty of desire (Regenungsvermögen). In determining whether or not something is beautiful, the judging individual asks himself whether its representation gives him satisfaction, his "indifference" (die Gleichgültigkeit) being determined less by the object than by the subject itself, for whom it is not so much the object (or rather the latter's representation within him) that is a matter of indifference but its reality, the fact of its existing or not existing. As Kant himself said, in terms we would do well to remember, a judgment concerning beauty in which the slightest bias or interest (das mindeste Interesse) plays a role is decided by partial (sehr partiell) and cannot be considered a judgment of "pure" taste; to play the role of judge in matters of taste, one must first silence oneself all desire, and not be the least bit (im mindesten) interested with regard to the object's existence but rather totally indifferent to it.

So it is difficult to see, at first glance, what might be the meaning within a Freudian context of a "satisfaction" such as that posited by Kant as the basis of the judgment of taste: one that is "pure and disinterested"—disinterested to an extent inconsistent with the nature of the drive. For there to be a judgment of "pure" taste, the subject must pay no attention to the object and what he might think of it, heeding only the feeling of pleasure or unpleasure awakened in him by its inner representation. A work of art might well be, as Walter Benjamin maintained, a document of barbarism as much as of culture, and, to use Kant's example, a palace might bear simultaneous witness to the vanity of the great and to the exploitation of the working class; but Kant maintains that "such is not the subject at hand" (nur davon ist jetzt nicht die Rede): "The important thing in declaring an object beautiful and demonstrating that I have taste is not my relation to the existence of the object, but what I do with this representation within myself" (was ich aus dieser Vorstellung in mir selbst mache). The representation is related not to the object but to the subject. But what the latter "does" with it does not adhere to the register of knowledge, not even that through which the subject knows himself (auch nicht zu demjenigen, wodurch sich das Subjekt selbst erkennt); judgments of taste convey nothing about the object in question, and they likewise tell us nothing about the pronouncing subject, except that the latter has—or does not have—taste, which is to say that he is capable of declaring an object "beautiful" on the sole basis of affect, of the satisfaction he derives from it.

In Kant's view, where there is Interesse, whether positive or negative, there can be no "pure" judgments of taste, anymore than there can be free judgments of taste, freedom being paired here with purity and vice versa. Interest of any kind either presupposes or produces a need (ein Bedürfnis), and this precludes the pronouncement of judgments that are truly "free." The same holds for satisfaction deriving from the "lovely, delightful, enjoyable," etc., and generally for "everything pleasing to the senses in sensation." Whereas feeling (das Gefühl) must remain subjective and manifest itself in simple approval, in pure assent (Beifall), sensation, by contrast, corresponds to an objective representation that determines an inclination, a penchant (eine Neigung)—the sole criterion of the value of things being pleasure, in the sense of the enjoyment (das Vergnügen) they procure, or that they promise (welches sie versprechen). "Of that which is agreeable, we don't say 'I like it' (as gefällt) but 'it gratifies me' (as vergnügt). Annäherlichkeit ist Genuss: 'The agreeable is pleasure'; and pleasure (louissance) goes beyond assent, implying use
or consumption. Gratification of this kind is so impure, so interested, that it will always induce a desire (eine Regende) for objects of the same kind that are capable of providing analogous gratification. Beyond a certain point, when the enjoyment becomes most intimate, when it attains a certain level of creaturely pleasure (des Genusses... das ist das Wort, womit man das Bild der Versorgung bezeichnet), judgment of taste is no longer in question; those in search of such gratification willingly dispense with judgment.6

Roland Barthes has demonstrated that psychoanalysis provides us with a criterion for distinguishing pleasure from jouissance. Pleasure is verbally communicable while jouissance is not (Barthes cites Lacan on this point: "What one must bear in mind is that jouissance is forbidden to the speaker, or cannot be spoken except between the lines"). But we must go further, at least as regards pleasure—above all, that pure pleasure free of any taint of gratification, the one supposedly at the root of the judgment of taste. Jacques Derrida has grasped that the enigma posed by this pleasure must be assessed in light of what’s in question, namely, the discourse on the beautiful—not only a discourse about the beautiful, but the discursiveness inherent in the very structure of the beautiful.8 Properly speaking, there is no “beauty” that isn’t spoken, declared to be such in and by means of a discursive act, a judgment. I can have no pure pleasure insofar as I exist, only insofar as I can speak. Pure pleasure is inseparable from utterance: it is what makes me speak (judge), because the first condition (the a priori principle) of the judgment of taste stipulates that in this discursive act the pleasure must be posited as pure, which is to say (a phrase to be understood literally in this case, as the index of an enunciatory task) as a pleasure that’s not a function of experience, but rather of pure affect—so pure that it can only be measured by its discursive effects (the affect is “to be spoken,” and spoken in its function as a feeling of pleasure—“pure” pleasure).

The paradox here is that the affect seems to bracket the subject as much as the object—both the subject as empirical being and as desiring subject, man in both his reasoning and animal aspects. The enigma doesn’t lie so much in its being a “pure” pleasure as in its link to feeling, to affect. How can we have a “feeling of life” so utterly unconnected to desire that the subject can properly pay no attention to the existence of an object whose representation is a source of pleasure for it? How can we have a pleasure in which gratification plays no part, when gratification designates pleasure’s most intimate component? How can we have a satisfaction in which—to use Kant’s term—there is nothing “pathological,” which is to say, nothing passive, a satisfaction that’s not induced by a stimulus? How can we have an affect stripped of all accompanying emotion which, while pure, belongs to the register of activity (the free play of the faculties)? A pleasure, a satisfaction, an affect whose “purity” is commensurate with that of the judgment of taste, in discursive terms? If these questions have a bearing on the discursive element in the structure of the beautiful, they also concern the relation of pleasure, satisfaction, and affect to the very discursivity that produces them in all of their “purity,” insofar as this latter is a condition of the judgment of taste.

Formulated in this way, these questions prompt a reconsideration of one of the most difficult passages in the analytic of the beautiful, section nine, where Kant investigates whether the feeling of pleasure precedes judgment (die Beurteilung) of the object or derives from it, the solution to this problem constituting for him the key to the critique of taste (der Schlüssel zur Kritik des Geschmacks). If pleasure comes first, it is reduced to a simple sensory gratification and is immediately dependent on the representation in which the object is given. To sensory taste (Sinnesgeschmack), which has a purely individual value, is opposed considered taste (Reflektionsgeschmack), which issues judgments with pretensions to universality: The very foundation of the judgment of taste, the condition of its subjective condition, is unanimity with regard to satisfaction (die allgemeine Stimme, in Anschauung des Wohlfalls), the universal communicability of this “mental state” (die allgemeine Mitteilungsfähigkeit des Genüßesstandes), each individual considering that the satisfaction he experiences is rooted in something he can take for granted as being shared by everyone, and so can speak of beauty as if it were a property (Eigenschaft) or a structure (Beschaffenheit) of the object, something determined by a concept. Insofar as it is universally communicable, the “mental state” or Genüßszustand is a thing of words. So a purely subjective (aesthetic) act of judgment logically precedes the pleasure induced by the object and provides the basis for the pleasure proceeding from the harmony of the powers or faculties of knowledge and their free play (free because not limited by a concept) in a representation. But the pleasure experienced in communicating, the interest (Interesse) inherent in sharing the state of mind that is its point of departure, is not sufficient to account for the judgment of taste in its most intimate manifestation, which is not intersubjective. However dependent on verbal expression it is and must be, beauty, like pleasure, even when
shared, is not a matter of consensus. In itself, independent of its relation to the feelings of the subject, it is nothing. It is principally in this respect that the analytic of the beautiful might seem to overlap with Freudian analysis, which tends to depict the subject as split, divided, separated from itself. What relation can possibly obtain between the attribution of beauty to the unconscious and the repression thanks to which the conscious subject is separated from a portion of its representations? The essential thing here is that, for Freud as for Kant, beauty is a matter of judgment, and "the beautiful" essentially has the value of a predicate. Kant does not investigate beauty in and for itself, but rather taste, defined as the power or faculty of discerning (Unterscheidung) whether something is beautiful or not; the analytic of the judgment of taste should establish what is necessary to declare an object "beautiful" and clarify its source, its root, in the speaking subject. Likewise with Freud: Psychoanalysis, he sings to avow, does not have much to say about beauty. But this is immediately to displace the question toward that of the attribution of beauty: The concept of "the beautiful" originally designated what was sexually stimulating, even though the genitals, however exciting to the eye, are rarely judged (beurteilt) to be beautiful. This prompts a question that might be formulated as follows: Is it "taste" that prohibits us from judging them to be "beautiful" and discourages their representation, which is declared to be "pornographic"? To reframe the question in Freudian terms: What is the relation between "taste" and repression—and between "the beautiful" and the repressed?

The displacement preliminary to the attribution of beauty is inextricable from the function here performed by negation (the genitals are not judged to be beautiful). This might well make us prick up our ears once we know that, for Freud, the capacity to make an impartial judgment (die unpersönliche Urteilsfahigkeit) as to whether a property does or doesn't belong to a thing depends on the creation of the symbol of negation, under whose cover thought acquires a semblance of independence with regard to the repression and achieves a kind of intellectual acceptance of the repressed. Judgment goes in tandem with the repression for which it is a substitute: For judgments of taste to be possible, first of all the "organic repression" bearing on the genitals must be replaced by a judgment of denial or condemnation thanks to which a representation of the excitement they stimulate nonetheless rises to consciousness. Positive, approving judgments are predicated upon a double displacement, that of the genital organs onto so-called secondary sexual characteristics, and that of the stimulus (Reiz) prompted by seeing them onto the "interest" awakened by these "charms" (Reize), which—it is worth repeating—are so-called because of "the particular quality of excitation whose cause, when it occurs in a sexual object, we designate as 'beauty'"—the discrepancy between the two meanings of the word Reiz being indicative of an evolution, perhaps even a history, belonging not only to the sexual object but also to the subject here constituting itself, discursively, by uttering an aesthetic judgment.

Thus Freud's text renews, within a perspective that is not critical but rather genetic, the question of the role of "discursivity" in the structure of the "beautiful." Judgment as such is a matter of the "ego"—which, under the cover of negation, sets itself apart from the unconscious even as it frees itself from the constraints of the pleasure principle. The judgment of taste in the Freudian sense is so paradoxical as to presuppose, in its capacity as judgment, the passage, by the ways and means of discourse, from a strictly subjective position in which the subject adheres to its internal representations—that of the pleasure-ego, the Lust-Ich—to an objective position—that of the Real-Ich, the reality-ego—from which a question arises as to the reality of these representations, of their correspondence to the external world. The paradox, which we have seen also finds its echo in visual art, resides in the fact that judgment of taste cannot be perfectly disinterested, even though it corresponds to a sublimation of the drive through withdrawal of its libidinal components. The very act of judging implies the reality principle's dominance over the pleasure principle, if only, as Freud says, as a way of serving it, of ensuring its continued supremacy over the long term.

It would be absurd to maintain that the solution to the enigma of the judgment of taste is to be found in psychoanalysis. And yet this enigma is present and operating whenever the question of beauty arises in Freud's work—an enigma that, once again, must be understood in discursive terms. Kant's project was not genealogical but critical: He set out to build a bridge between understanding and reason by introducing judgment as a third term, a Mittelglied. Freud's project, by contrast, was psychoanalytic, and thus genetic. He set out to determine whence the very concept of "beauty" proceeded, or from what it derived. The paradox consists in the fact that this process or derivation is at the origin of, or, at any rate, contemporary with, the passage from nature to culture inherent in the acquisition of an
erect posture: The judgment of taste is predicated upon an initial displacement, a transfer of "interest" from sexual excitation to the realm of desire. And the origin of desire and emotion, and perhaps even of aesthetic judgment, is to be sought in the schism between the eye and the gaze. There can be no aesthetic emotion unless it declares itself as such in the form of a judgment; but this judgment, in turn, presupposes that, through the operations of desire, the "charms" of the object of amorous interest have overwhelmed or obscured the primary source of excitation, the possibility now presenting itself of a fixation on strictly scopic pleasure and, through this same means, of a diverting of the libido toward goals declared to be—as soon as they're designated "artistic"—"more elevated."

Though the moment of passage from the one to the other is clearly marked in Freud's text, the opposition between nature and culture has no operative value. If we think, as psychoanalysis would have us do, in terms of derivation, or better yet of sublation (to use a Hegelian one), we soon realize the impossibility of precisely situating, if not the point of departure of the evolution in question, at least the threshold beyond which the passage from sexual excitation to judgment of taste becomes thinkable, as soon as it's allowed that something of the initial state must survive in even the most elaborately "sublated" structures. Freud insists on this point from the very beginning of Civilization and Its Discontents: In the realm of psychology, primitive elements frequently survive alongside more advanced ones deriving from them, just as in animal evolution primitive characteristics tend to persist in subsequent stages of development.

The problem here doesn't concern the potential pathways to sublimation, to "idealization" of the drive, though it is perhaps worth stressing once more the necessarily discursive character of the process. The important question is the following: Can sublimation or "idealization," however diverted, lead to an aesthetic emotion of sufficient purity to satisfy Kant's criteria for the judgment of taste? Doubts begin to arise when we observe how fearlessly Freud associates in a single derivation the two terms Kant took such care to distinguish from one another: beauty and charm. Kant writes: "Taste needing a mixture of charms (Reize) and emotions to attain satisfaction will always be barbaric, all the more so if it makes these the standard of its approval." If, as the third Critique would have it, beauty concerns form exclusively, then it would be a misunderstanding (eine Missverständnis) to value, above beauty a charm or attraction that enlivens a representation and makes it more vivid (color, for instance), in other words, to make it pass as itself beauty when it is not integral to the representation but rather a mere addition, ornament, external trapping—or, to employ a Greek term used by Kant and recently given renewed currency by Derrida, a parton.

It remains that, as Kant himself admitted, such misunderstandings often have "some basis in truth" (etwas Wahres zum Grund). Here again we must operate on the level of discourse: If indeed there is a misunderstanding, the only way to avoid it would be through rigorous conceptual definition, in which case the only judgments to qualify as pure judgments of taste would be those in which charm and emotion play no part and whose sole determining principle is form. But Freud's thesis is, precisely, that it is impossible to anticipate the derivation of concepts. And isn't the "basis in truth" of which Kant speaks linked to the fact that if the beautiful, if "that which pleases," is meaningful only for man because he is endowed with reason, this same man is also an animal being and thus just as subject to the pull toward "gratification" as animals not endowed with reason? In Freud, it is beauty itself that is presented, at least initially, as a supplement ultimately intended to reinforce sexual excitation, to support and reinvigorate it despite the ever-present risk of deviation. The problem, again, is to discern whether sublimation can have as its aim beauty in itself, abstracted from any possible link with the sexual realm—a matter, as Kant would have said, of "conceptual rigor." For if, in the wake of the transition to an erect posture, the coprophilic component of the sexual drive is revealed to be incompatible with what we might call the "aesthetic exigencies" of our civilization, these developments concern only the superior forms of beauty, while the basic processes leading to amorous excitation remain essentially unchanged. "The excremental is all too intimately and inseparably bound up with the sexual; the position of the genitals—inter arimin et fossae—remains the decisive and unchangeable factor. One might say here, modifying a well-known saying of the great Napoleon, 'Anatomy is destiny' (Die Anatomie ist das Schicksal). The genitals themselves, have not taken part in the development of the human body in the direction of beauty: They have remained animal, and thus love, too, has remained in essence (im Grund) just as animal as it ever was."
versa. We have seen how, for Freud, the institution of the family facilitates a transition from sexual behavior that is reflexive, and thus intermittent, to a desire capable of sustaining itself continuously to the extent that it manages to remain independent of the pleasure principle—at least partially, as in the case of the drive. This question encompasses the aesthetic realm: Art’s participation in a psychic economy that is ultimately subject to the pleasure principle does not preclude the possibility of change in the regimes of pleasure, or in those of beauty.

What holds in the aesthetic realm also holds in that of ethics. In Freud’s theoretical construct, the genesis of the ethical dimension is rooted precisely in desire itself, a thing’s value being commensurate with its desirability. The same could be said of the aesthetic dimension, with the following caveat: Here something analogous to a censor detaches itself from the energy of desire, such that the beautiful presents itself as an “ideal” opposed to the obscure root of beauty. This transformation of the energy of desire makes possible a conceptualization of the genesis of its repression: The ideal of beauty maintains a relation with that of human love that might seem paradoxical to the extent that the genitalization of desire stands in opposition to attraction to the secondary sexual characteristics, which are declared to be “beautiful.” But the paradox is only apparent: beauty can sustain a relation with that which gives “body” to sexual desire only on condition of the partial drive’s first being detoured away from the sexual “parts”—just as, it’s tempting to add, “taste” itself detaches from its gustatory component to assume another, strictly discursive form of orality. Such are the detours of metonymy echoed by beauty even in the more perverse guises of the genitalization of desire, detours which, without the relationship necessarily being one of cause and effect, tend to discourage judgments that the genital organs are beautiful, however exciting the sight of them, and furthermore (as if the relation obtaining here between subjective and objective were identical to that between cause and effect) haven’t become beautiful: if beauty is a matter of form, the genitalia belong—by a kind of necessity in which anatomy, figuring as destiny, also has a part to play, if not its word to say—to the realm of the uniformed, the bizarre. But the relation of the uniformed to the formed is not one of simple substitution, nor is it one of unambiguous advance: The very mechanism of “sublimation” presupposes that the reign of the uniformed will persist, as an undercurrent, in Grande, throughout that of form.