

Paul Crowther

The Kantian Aesthetic: From Knowledge to the Avant-Garde.

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Kantian aesthetics has fallen on hard times. Critiques of Kant's formalism include Alexander Nehamas' *Only a Promise of Happiness: The Place of Beauty in a World of Art* (Princeton 2007) and, more recently, Frederick C. Beiser's *Diotima's Children: German Aesthetic Rationalism from Leibniz to Lessing* (Oxford 2009). Nehamas uses Kant as a foil to recover an ancient tradition of manifestly *interested* aesthetic feeling found predominantly in the Platonic dialogues, while Beiser seeks to rehabilitate rationalist aesthetics in the face of Kant's critique of the rationalists and his own assertion that aesthetic feelings are non-cognitive (Beiser, 16).

But this isn't Crowther's fight and so his book doesn't amount to a full-throated defense of Kantian aesthetic theory. Indeed, his book ignores recent criticisms of Kantian aesthetics altogether. It trucks instead with various interpreters of Kantian aesthetics whom the author sees as misguided. Accordingly, one project this book undertakes is that of a novel and controversial reading of Kant's aesthetic theory that does not hesitate to call into question received readings of Kant's aesthetics by such luminaries of Kantian scholarship as Paul Guyer, Béatrice Longuness, and Henry Allison. This is the first aspect of his project. The project's second, more interesting aspect is that it seeks to contextualize Kant's aesthetic theory within the broader context of Kant's epistemology and moral philosophy.

First, the polemical dimension of the book: Crowther begins by questioning what he calls the interminabilist thesis. Debates concerning the meaning of the key concepts in Kant's aesthetics are susceptible to widely varying, even contradictory interpretations in the secondary literature. This problem ultimately derives from the ambiguities within Kant's text, but as a result commentators spend their time trying to reconcile the various senses of Kant's key concepts, and neglect to put Kant's concepts to work (1-2). Crowther's book proposes neither a defense of Kant's work nor an interpretation of it.

In other words, Crowther's interests lie in the possible viability of Kant's aesthetic theory; and it thus functions as an implicit response to those such as Nehamas and Beiser who seek to critique its basic presuppositions. But here we are faced with an apparent problem: his work undertakes a re-interpretation of Kant's aesthetic theory! How, then, does Crowther's interpretation avoid the pitfalls of interminabilism? Crowther answers this by pointing out that he is concerned not with interpreting Kant's aesthetic theory for its own sake, but with assessing the continued viability of Kant's

aesthetics. So, he is most certainly interpreting the basic concepts underlying Kant's aesthetic theory, but only so that he may assess their contemporary viability.

I will evaluate the success of this project in my conclusion, but first I address the book's major arguments and themes. In Chapters 1 and 2 Crowther presents a discussion of the relationship between the imagination and understanding in *The Critique of Pure Reason* in the first two chapters of the text, before turning to thorny conceptual issues in the *Critique of Judgment*. Accordingly, the final five chapters take up such key concepts as beauty, taste, fine art, and the sublime.

Crowther pursues a conceptualist reading of Kant's aesthetics, and this largely justifies his decision to begin his examination of the third *Critique* via the concerns of the first, although it might initially seem a mistake to begin there. After all, aren't the difficulties of the *Critique of Judgment* sufficient without getting bogged down in the conceptual issues dogging Kant's theoretical philosophy? But Crowther has a good justification for taking this as his starting point, and it is one that Kant would likely appreciate: if we wish to understand why Kant placed so much importance on the significance and viability of the aesthetic dimension, then we must take into account epistemological and moral issues as well, just as Kant urged in the third *Critique*. Indeed, this represents one of the virtues of Crowther's exposition: his approach is not, in contrast with that of other contemporary Kant interpreters, excessively narrow.

One of the great puzzles of the *Critique of Judgment* concerns the way judgments of taste function. After all, these judgments are reflective judgments rather than determinative ones. In other words, they begin with the embodied particular, the beautiful being that I find before me. While determinate judgments subsume particulars under concepts, reflective judgments predicate beauty of something. Kant describes them rather vaguely in terms of the free play of the imagination and the understanding, which has led some commentators to deny any role for conceptualization in the formation of aesthetic judgments. Crowther opposes this interpretation, arguing instead that concepts play a profound role in aesthetic judgment. According to this interpretation, there is an inexhaustibility to aesthetic objects, and it is precisely this feature of aesthetic judgments that Crowther highlights. It is an imaginative interplay that yields an aesthetic judgment, though not a chaotic one:

In Kantian terms, the aesthetic unity of a manifold is determined by the interplay between its form and the different possibilities of cognitive exploration which this interplay creates. The implication here is that a dimension of *freedom* in judgment is—in contrast with judgment of objective unity—at least partially constitutive of aesthetic unity... In such judgments, imagination's tracking and projective activity is not as a mere facilitator of recognition but as an equal player. It is stimulated to follow its own basic nature as a productive cognitive capacity (84-5).

Aesthetic judgments are not free of conceptual content; since the imagination is an equal partner with the understanding, the beautiful object ‘involves a felt sense of *cognition in the making*—of the birth and convergence of the possibility of perceptual sense in the manifold’ (85). The free play of the imagination relates back to cognitive development, for Crowther argues that it is in the infant’s free play of the imagination and the understanding that the basic conceptual armature for comprehending the world develops.

While the neonate seems to have at least the rudiments of experience as both spatial and temporal, the imagination plays an essential role in the infant’s consciousness of time and recognition and anticipation of events in a causally and temporally determined series (45-6). It is this essential dimension of the imagination and its role in mediating between concepts and intuitions, i.e. as schematizing, summarized here:

If this approach is correct, then we might characterize the transcendental schemata more specifically, as *pre-reflective procedures which involve a sense of how phenomena have appeared, and anticipate how they might come to appear under specific conditions of temporal succession* (47).

This developmental picture of cognition, grounded as it is in the imagination, becomes important for Crowther’s subsequent discussion of art and aesthetic judgment. A lingering source of dispute in discussions of Kant’s aesthetics concerns precisely how to understand Kant’s claim that aesthetic judgments are prompted by the free play of the faculties of the understanding: does this mean that cognition plays absolutely no role in aesthetics? Crowther denies this is the case, arguing that the free play of the faculties in aesthetic judgment arises because such judgments go beyond the realm of the cognitive. Indeed, he labels his own approach a cognitivist one and explains this approach thus:

This approach emphasizes the importance of the categories and transcendental schemata in mediating the pure aesthetic judgment. Such judgments will be shown to constellate around cognitive exploration based on factors that are key conditions of objective knowledge, and of the unity of the self (4).

Crowther rightly notes that this approach is resisted by most commentators, who see a basic distinction between Kant’s epistemology and his aesthetics. However, if we are to take seriously Kant’s claims to find within aesthetic judgment the resources to bridge the gap between the realms of nature as investigated by theoretical reason and freedom as investigated by practical reason, then it makes sense to consider whether there may be links between the epistemological and the aesthetic realms. Crowther’s analysis is not reductive: he is not reducing the aesthetic to the cognitive; instead, he argues that the cognitive mediates aesthetic judgment (59). If we want to understand the significance of

aesthetics, then we need to begin with *Critique of Pure Reason*, and, in particular, with the account of the categories and the self provided there.

This is an exciting and provocative thesis, and one hopes that Crowther will develop it more fully. One of the drawbacks of this book is its breadth: as the list of topics above indicates, Crowther provides a broad overview of issues and concepts within Kant's aesthetic theory. He reformulates these core concepts to assess their contemporary viability, and this is all to the good. But this interpretive strategy sits uncomfortably at times with the polemical task of the book, which is to call into question the interminabilist thesis in order to urge on readers the contemporary relevance of Kant's ideas. While he discusses ideas such as the avant-garde and the question of style in later chapters, one hopes that he develops these ideas in future works. The problem with the breadth of the work is that there is not enough depth to adequately refute his critics in the interminabilist camp (primarily Henry Allison), but nor is there enough here to constitute a fully developed introduction to Kant's aesthetics for practitioners and critics who might be unfamiliar with (or even indifferent to) the inside baseball of contemporary Kant scholarship. Still, the book is well written, and it gives readers who have some familiarity with Kant's critical project plenty to consider.

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