

Paul Guyer. *A History of Modern Aesthetics*. 3 Vols. Cambridge University Press 2014. 1752 pp. \$355.00 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9781107643222).

Aesthetics has sometimes seemed a poor relation in the family of philosophical specialties. This has been the attitude, perhaps predictably, of non-aestheticians philosophers. The history of aesthetics has seemed an even poorer thing, and I suspect that many aestheticians might join the party, at least to judge from the number of attempts made to set out that history. In English, we have Katharine Everett Gilbert's and Helmut Kuhn's *A History of Esthetics* (1939), and, earlier, Bernard Bosanquet's more obviously monumental *A History of Aesthetic* (1892), but not much else, apart from specialized articles and anthologies of historical texts that go proxy, as it were, for histories. It is against this background that we can begin to appreciate Paul Guyer's achievement in this three-volume survey of modern aesthetic theory—one volume each on the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth (and early twenty-first) centuries. Guyer's history outshines Bosanquet's, in clarity of style and in wealth of concrete detail, if not in scope, inasmuch as Guyer confines himself, as his title indicates, to modern times (though he does get the historical ball rolling with a stimulating treatment of Plato's concerns and challenges, to which he returns, sympathetically, in his remarks on Alexander Nehamas in the Epilogue to Volume Three). Undoubtedly, Guyer's book will be the standard reference on its subject for the remainder of this, our still relatively new, century.

Yet more importantly, it makes a compelling argument for philosophical aesthetics itself. For it shows how it is possible for aesthetics to have a history, in the meaningful sense of having earned a right to survive in the present, if only by showing that the present does not have an undisputed right. Too often the historical elements in aesthetic theorizing are prone to be regarded as a tissue of once fashionable but now dated prejudices about the arts, gussied up as philosophical abstractions, which might not have been intrinsically very fashionable themselves but which are certainly more dated. For anyone tempted to view the history of aesthetics as an eccentric chronicle, Guyer's work is an excellent corrective; for anyone disposed to doubt the centrality of aesthetics to philosophical inquiry generally, it is indispensable.

Before we consider how Guyer has organized his material, it is worth stressing just how much, and how varied, the material is. Although his work has multiple virtues, it has great value for this reason alone. Nobody else has brought together such a staggering assortment of post-Enlightenment writers who addressed topics in aesthetics, and he offers helpful synopses of, and commentaries on, these retrievable figures, many of whom, by being unread, have effectively been forgotten.

The eighteenth-century account, in Volume 1, begins with Lord Shaftesbury (in England) and Christian Wolff (in Germany), and then explores at length the tradition of British (and often Scottish) theorizing about the type of experience people were having as a result of contemplating natural and artistic beauty (and at least natural sublimity). This tradition includes artists—William Hogarth and Joshua Reynolds—as well as philosophers. Guyer then takes up French writers such as Diderot, and concludes with the Germans who preceded Kant, and then Kant and the pre-Romantic figures who Kant influenced (including Goethe and Schiller). The period covered by this volume is the textbook-ish 'century of taste', and when people think of the high-water mark of aesthetic theory it is this period that characteristically comes to mind. Guyer does a thorough job of surveying it, and his relaxed approach to national boundaries is appealingly cosmopolitan.

Volume 2 (on the nineteenth century) confronts a less tidy, by our usual lights, intellectual scene. The first part surveys German Romanticism, broadly interpreted: Hegel and Schopenhauer are there, but so are Hölderlin, Jean Paul, the English philosophizing poets (Coleridge, Wordsworth, Shelley), Mill (unexpectedly), and Emerson. The second part focuses on developments in England, with generous attention given to Ruskin, Turner, Pater, and Wilde, and culminates in Bosanquet and Tolstoy (the latter, though a Russian, published his major work *What is Art?* first in English translation, as Guyer reminds us). The final part considers Schopenhauer's sphere of influence (mainly Nietzsche), neo-Kantianism at the end of the century, and the nascent impact of empirical psychology.

With the efflorescence of a professionalized academy in the twentieth century, Volume 3 gives us more professors and fewer artists, art critics and historians, and literati. We start with the Heidegger-to-Gadamer tradition, as it were, in Germany. We then have two sections on Anglophone writers—one on the Bloomsbury circle and the Croce-to-Collingwood line, and the other on Santayana, the American reception of European expression theory, and pragmatists. The fourth part charts the ambiguous legacy of Wittgenstein, his ideas initially acting as a deterrent to constructive theoretical impulses, subsequently as a spur. In this part Guyer also situates a quartet of writers (Frank Sibley, Richard Wollheim, Roger Scruton, and Stanley Cavell) who have attained a canonical stature of sorts in the profession, and—in a final feint at contextualization—presents a miscellany of reflections on some of the livelier areas of controversy in contemporary aesthetics (the place of emotion in fictional settings, the connections between morality and art, and the aesthetics of natural environments) in the light of the preceding history. This last part of the book increasingly blurs the boundaries between history and contemporary controversy.

Blurring those boundaries incurs a certain risk for the historian, since the history of the present cannot really be written in the present. Consequently, the last third of Volume 3 may be the part of Guyer's project that will become dated the soonest. This is not a criticism; merely an acknowledgment of ineluctable hazard. There is much here, however, for the reader who is not primarily interested in history, or even in placing bets on future historical verdicts. Guyer's treatment of Cavell, for instance, is an inviting masterpiece of lucidity: anybody who suspects that no philosopher who regards a private language as a fantasy has come closer than Cavell to actually speaking one will find profit in Guyer, no less than delight. And there are many worthwhile things in the treatments of recent writers, though what Guyer says is more compressed than it should be if we were expecting him to enter the lists as a full-dress partisan. Thus, he insightfully identifies some weak points in Kendall Walton's theory of representation as involving games of make-believe, but acquiesces uncritically in the common view that horror-movie audiences do not experience genuine emotions for Walton. (I once heard someone describe herbal tea as 'quasi-tea.' But if quasi-tea is a real beverage, in contrast to a mere quasi-beverage, then quasi-fear can be a real emotion too, just not real fear.)

To concentrate on these late pages, however, is to get ahead of Guyer's own game. We are offered a narrative that spans three centuries, and a narrative that is most emphatically not a disguised chronicle. Three large ideas provide the framework—or (better) the grid—for Guyer's treatments of particular authors. These ideas roughly concern the object of aesthetic experience, or what it is that people enjoy, or expect to enjoy, as a result of looking at portraits or mountains, listening to music, and so forth: in other words, the answers that could be given to the question, "Why art?" (or "Why

beauty?” if art is not the fundamental concept). According to Guyer, there are different, and ostensibly competing, answers that the historical record yields.

The first of the three ideas is truth, whose inaugural paladin among the moderns is the neo-Platonist Shaftesbury, who saw in the experience of beauty the marks of a divine mind. Such a view has an evident religious flavor, and because of the declining intellectual influence of religious orthodoxy in the modern period, one might suppose that the aesthetics of truth (to use Guyer’s shorthand) does not have especially auspicious prospects at the beginning of the tale. In a sense, that supposition is correct, but truth reappears, refreshed and invigorated, with expression theorists at the end of the nineteenth century who began to link aesthetic experience to truth about our emotions.

Emotional impact and the play of the imagination (which Guyer, under the aegis of Kant, commonly calls ‘free play’) are the second and third ideas in the narrative grid. They are not sharply distinguished in the eighteenth century, their motifs being commingled in writers such as Addison, Du Bos, and Crousaz. Other stakeholders in the story juggle more explicitly the demands of doing justice to these two ideas, as well as doing justice to the first, and much of Guyer’s history is an account of the different ways that very various writers have of accommodating, or failing to accommodate, them. After perusing this history, the reader might surmise that something akin to a Hegelian dialectic is the animating spirit of modern aesthetics, though in this case the dialectic does not securely reach a synthesis. For this reason, the relationship between truth, emotional impact, and free play might be more accurately mirrored by the relationship between the Apollonian and Dionysian art-impulses, on Nietzsche’s early view (‘perpetual strife with only periodically intervening reconciliations’).

Why thinkers repeatedly try to accommodate all three possible objects of aesthetic experience, and so seldom get the balance right, is not explained by Guyer. But it is clear that his sympathies lie with those (such as Lord Kames) who attempt a synthesis, who try to integrate all three in their theories; those who do not try, or try hard enough, are represented as having a falsely ‘reductive’ view of aesthetic experience. Guyer’s sympathies also lie against those (such as Schopenhauer and Clive Bell) who picture aesthetic experience in isolation from the affairs of life. These predilections are not the same thing: to seek the integration of emotion, truth, and free play with one another (in aesthetic experience) is not to seek the integration of aesthetic experience with life. A clear recognition of the difference, however, may make it more difficult to dispatch the isolationist aestheticians (who are arguably the closest heirs of Shaftesbury) as briskly as Guyer sometimes intends.

Not all potential readers will be pleased by the way aesthetic experience takes center stage in the first place. To post-structuralists (and their heirs) who look on paintings, poems, and the like as ‘texts’ (which is not the same as looking at them as paintings, poems, and the like), Guyer’s approach will seem antiquated, and they may have covert allies among cognitive neuroscientists. For these readers, the very idea of such experience, taken at face value, can seem musty and quaint. Guyer does explain (in the Introduction to Volume 3) why he passes over ‘much recent French thought’ (3.3) in the twentieth century, and, to my mind at any rate, his choice is thoroughly justified, given his aims. Readers who disagree, though, should nevertheless read him, for they may be startled to learn just how un-musty the notion of aesthetic experience turns out to be. Guyer’s approach deemphasizes the abstract ‘judgment of taste’ and avoids preoccupation with universality of

judgment, and in that space puts everything that makes ordinary people care about making judgments and having tastes.

Relatedly, Guyer helps to loosen the spell of what we might call the ‘Kristeller’ version of the history of aesthetics (after an influential pair of articles by Paul Oskar Kristeller), according to which, once upon a time, the arts divided into the mechanical and the fine, the latter being conceived as gathering together items that were useless but, in virtue of their beauty, intensely satisfying to contemplate. That conception left the intensely satisfying items without much of a point, and, as Nelson Goodman’s sarcastic quip about the ‘Tingle-Immersion theory’ of aesthetic response made unfortunately plain, left the spectator’s perceptual encounters without much of a focus. Guyer’s complicates received thinking with a plausible counter-narrative, and one that moreover allows him to continue the story well beyond the axial eighteenth century.

Guyer’s trio of ideas sometimes veer into being more of a filter than a grid, almost becoming a criterion of what makes an aspect of a writer’s thought worthy of the historian’s notice. (One will not find Edward Bullough’s views, or Frank Sibley’s, on the so-called lower senses here, taste and smell—sensory capacities often thought to be problematically related to aesthetic interest. But whether these senses are included or excluded is an important fact about our conception of aesthetic limits.) Similarly, the history of some distinctions and relationships, such as the relative priority, in aesthetic theory, of art or beauty (and other aesthetic qualities not necessarily attached to works of art) are obscured by Guyer’s grid. And extra-theoretic impacts on the shape of theorizing (e.g., the invention of photographic technology, the rise of avant-garde and popular art forms) tend to be muted. But such cavils are small beer indeed. The breadth and depth of analysis that Guyer achieves by means of his trio is undeniably impressive.

Of the three ideas, the greatest of these for Guyer appears to be free play. Although Kant admirably comes to grips with the theme of play, Guyer faults him for failing to deal with emotion adequately, and so synthesis with him fails. Later on, however, it is often free play that aestheticians are said to have trouble with, either by misrepresenting it (Herbert Spencer and his critics) or by ignoring it (Bell). If I were to voice one reservation about the narrative, it would be that a concept that has such a starring role merits a more self-conscious explication, and that more attention could have been given to the sources of its recalcitrance to adequate reflection. One reason may be the old platitude that imagination differs from madness only in degree, and so to associate aesthetic enjoyment with imagination is to flirt with an unruly psychological ingredient in need of taming. Another reason may be that play can easily merge with *idle* play, mere amusement; and philosophers—Collingwood, to take a prime example—have wanted to clarify the art-amusement distinction for the greater glory of art. These two observations suggest a third: that free play may not be a unitary notion and that our term for it could be a portmanteau expression. On this proposal, freedom could well be a freedom that liberates people from their workaday perceptual habits and orientations, whereas play, now a distinct concept, could be regarded as generally guided in some way. With possible complications of this kind, we might hesitate to lament that in Bullough ‘there is no suggestion that the free play of the imagination or its free play together with our other faculties is the object of our enjoyment’ (3.157), for there need be no such object. (And there might have been good reason to include discussion of Freud’s ‘Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming’, which, in arguing that art evolves from child’s play, exhibits play as the child’s work in wanting to be grown up, and hence not obviously ‘free’ at all.)

Readers with specialized interests in their favorite author will doubtless find fault with details of Guyer's exposition, and also with, depending on one's perspective, omissions or missed opportunities. But complaints at this level are, in the end, again rather beside the point. Duke Ellington's highest praise for a musician was to say that he was 'beyond category', and since nothing compares to Guyer's magisterial three volumes, Ellington's accolade applies to him. Although Guyer is understandably best known for his several decades of Kant scholarship, *A History of Modern Aesthetics* is his crowning achievement. By embedding aesthetic theory in the history of aesthetics, he has shown the difficulty, but also the essential dignity, of each.

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