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Aesthetics and medieval thought: contours and pieces of a vast mosaic

Abstract

“Aesthetics” and “Middle Ages” denote indefinite fields of research. There is no univocal definition of “aesthetics” and, at the same time, the concept of “Middle Ages” results from a historiographical construct that encompasses authors from different backgrounds, cultures, and historical contexts. Still there are valid reasons to maintain that medieval thought is deeply grounded in an aesthetic view of reality. Despite their diverse cultural backgrounds and geographical origins, authors throughout the extended medieval period have two common elements: they acknowledge the key role of ancient philosophy and inhabit societies where monotheistic faith holds central importance. The study of “beauty” as a core concern of aesthetic studies typifies how these two factors converged and shaped medieval thinking. Although a brief introduction cannot comprehensively justify this assertion, the following pages sketch the contours that delimit the essays collected in the monographic section of the volume.

Keywords

Medieval aesthetics, Beauty, Neoplatonic tradition

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1. Introduction*

Introducing a special issue on “Aesthetic and the Middle Ages” may be an arduous task for at least two reasons.

First, both “aesthetics” and “Middle Ages” denote vast (and perhaps indefinite) fields of research. There is evidently no univocal definition of “aesthetics” and of its proper subject matter. At the same time, the concept of “Middle Ages” results from a historiographical construct that, while commonly accepted today, encompasses authors from different backgrounds, cultures, and historical contexts. “To write a history of medieval philosophy – Alain de Libera argues – the historian who wants to engage with historical reality must start from the existence of plurality: plurality of cultures, religions, languages, centers of study, and modes of knowledge production” (de Libera 1993: XIV. My translation).

Second, it appears to be anachronistic to search for aesthetic theory in the strict sense within medieval philosophy and theology, given that aesthetics is fundamentally a modern discipline. As Umberto Eco pointed out in his well-known study on Thomas Aquinas, if aesthetics is conceived according to Baumgarten’s definition or as a “philosophical discussion of the lyrical intuition of feeling”, then no such discipline existed in the Middle Ages. “But if, instead, aesthetics refers to a whole range issues connected with beauty – its definition, its function, the ways of creating and of enjoying it – then the medievals did have aesthetic theories” (Eco 1988: 2). In a certain sense, this consideration, restated and deepened even in his *Art and beauty in the Middle Ages* (Eco 1989: 1-3), underlies even the most recent monographs, essays, and articles on this topic, though they mostly address it by adopting the viewpoint of a particular author. After all, this approach is fully justifiable given the aforementioned plurality of medieval thought. Augustine, Ps.-Dionysius, Avicenna, Hugh of Saint Victor, Bonaventure, Albert the Great, and Thomas Aquinas represent only a

* I am grateful to my colleagues Andrea Gatti, Gioia Laura Iannilli, and Giovanni Matteucci for inviting me to edit this monographic issue of *Aesthetic Studies*. It has been an interesting opportunity to explore fascinating topics that have perhaps not yet been adequately addressed. My appreciation extends also to the authors for carefully following the reviewers’ suggestions. All essays have been standardized according to the journal’s editorial guidelines. In some cases, exceptions were necessary to accommodate extensive sources or bibliographical references. I am grateful to the editorial board of *Aesthetic Studies* for their flexibility in this regard. The articles by Renato de Filippis and Silvia Negri were invited contributions. All remaining articles were accepted following double-blind peer review.

limited sample of medieval thinkers whose aesthetic thought has been the subject of recent scholarly investigation. In fact, the foundational works of de Bruyne (1947), Tatarkiewicz (1971), and Eco himself remain the closest approximation to a comprehensive handbook of medieval aesthetics.

Still, two recent collective volumes provide the opportunity to focus on medieval debates around one of the cornerstones of aesthetic studies: the problem of “beauty”.

The volume edited by Olivier Boulnois and Isabelle Moulin, *Le beau et la beauté au Moyen Âge* (2018) contains some precious contributions on the subject. For instance, Dominique Poirel dwells on the different ways of understanding the concept of the beautiful in Hugh of Saint Victor’s works, while Henryk Anzulewicz focuses on the *Corpus Areopagiticum* as the main source of Albert the Great’s “aesthetic thought”. Moreover, Andreas Speer’s paper on aesthetics as artistic experience, with particular attention to Abbot Suger’s writings offers another stimulating perspective on the question.

Two years later Alice Ramos published another collection of essays on the same topic, but extending her field of interest to Ancient Philosophy. The scope of the work is to explore the close relationship between “beauty” and “good” (Ramos 2020). Among the contributions, it is worth mentioning the study of Daniel de Haan on Thomas Aquinas’ aesthetic perception and the careful analysis by Martin Tracey on the notions of “happiness” and “pleasure” in Albert the Great’s commentary on the Nicomachean Ethics.

Although more limited and less ambitious, the present issue aims to contribute to the line of research established by these publications. Since the existence of an aesthetic problem in the Middle Ages is well established, it becomes necessary to explore its varied developments. In a sense, this mirrors the process of working on a vast mosaic, whose contours are at least partially known, but whose pieces have not all been placed.

2. *Shaping the contours*

There are valid reasons to maintain that medieval thought is essentially aesthetic or, at least, deeply grounded in an aesthetic view of reality. Despite their diverse cultural backgrounds and geographical origins, authors throughout the extended medieval period have two common elements:

they acknowledge the key role of ancient philosophy and inhabit societies where monotheistic faith – whether Hebrew, Christian, or Islamic – holds central importance (Catapano, 2024: 11-2). The study of beauty as a core concern of aesthetic studies typifies how these two factors converged and shaped medieval thinking. In a few introductory words it is not possible to justify this assertion exhaustively, but simply to sketch the contours that delimit the essays collected in this volume.

An optimal point of departure is Augustine of Hippo (354-430). In the first nine books of his *Confessiones*, he tells about experiences from his adolescence and youth, dwelling particularly on a series of negative episodes. Morbid curiosity, indecency, and ambition represent just some of the problematic inclinations that characterized his behavior during this period. In the 10th book, in the light of his conversion and reflecting on his past, he exclaims:

Late have I loved you, O Beauty (*pulchritudo*) so old and so new: late have I loved you! And look! You were within me, and I was outside myself: and it was there that I searched for you. In my unloveliness (*deformis*) I plunged into the lovely things which you created (*ista formosa quae fecisti*): you were with me, but I was not with you. Those created things kept me far away from you: yet if had not been in you, they would have not been at all. You called (*vocasti*) and shouted (*clamasti*): and broke (*rupisti*) through my deafness (*surditatem*). You flamed (*corucasti*) and shone (*splenduisti*): and banished my blindness (*caecitatem*). You breathed your fragrance (*fragrasti*) on me: and I drew in my breath and I pant for you. I have tasted (*gustavi*) you: and now I hunger (*esurio*) and thirst (*sitio*) for more. You have touched (*tetigisti*) me: and I have burned (*exarsi*) for your peace. (Augustinus 1981: 175. Transl. Augustine 2016: 135)

Augustine depicts his conversion as an aesthetic experience. God, who represents the culmination of his search, is significantly characterized as “beauty” (*pulchritudo*). This beauty, as true and eternal, contrasts with the illusory pleasures, or particular beauties, that he pursued in his earlier life. He had sought earthly satisfaction while neglecting his relationship with Creator. Consequently, all the particular things appeared deformed (*deformis*) to him.

The subsequent detailed description of the experience of Beauty is a fascinating example of aesthetics as *gnoseologia inferior*. In this passage Augustine does not present his encounter with God as an intellectual vision or interior practice, but rather uses a series of verbs that emphasize a physical and sensible relationship. These verbs correspond to the five senses: *voco*, *clamo*, *rumpo* (hearing); *corusco*, *splendesco* (sight); *fragro* (smell); *gusto*, *esurio*, and *sitio* (taste); and *tango*, *exarso* (touch). Despite

taking into account the possible influences of pagan and Christian writings (Courcelle 1968: 464-78), Augustine's poetic description undoubtedly represents an unprecedented approach to understanding the human-divine relationship. His true innovation lies not simply in conceiving God as *pulchritudo* – as analogous insights can be found in other medieval thinkers, as will be explained – but rather in framing human knowledge as a corporeal experience oriented toward finite or infinite beauties.

This instance, here poetically expressed as a consequence of a personal experience, underlies the entire Augustinian reflection on the order and disorder of nature. However, while in the aforementioned passage from the *Confessiones*, the existential aspect is predominant, in his other writings the question is addressed more systematically, under the combined influence of both biblical passages and the Neoplatonic philosophy (Beierwaltes 1975: 140-57).

Such a combination of sources underlies – despite the obvious differences – even other medieval reflections on beauty in the Christian tradition. A paradigmatic example is the treatise *De divinis nominibus*, written in Greek around the middle of the 6th century. The anonymous author, writing under the pseudonym Dionysius the Areopagite, examines the names attributed to God in Sacred Scripture, and among these is Beauty, to which he devotes the fourth chapter:

This good [God] is celebrated by the sacred theologians as beautiful and as beauty, as *agapé* and beloved, and by many other divine names which are suitable to its beauty producing and rich character. Now the beautiful and beauty are not to be distinguished with respect to the cause which gathers the whole into one. For with respect to all beings this whole is divided into participations and participants. What is beautiful is said to be a participant in beauty; beauty is said to be the participating in the beauty producing cause of all that is beautiful. (Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagite 2011: 138)

Beauty stands as one of the divine names because God both bestows it upon all things and serves as the ultimate source of harmony and clarity throughout the universe. However, Dionysius' interpretation is not directly supported by the biblical text in such systematic terms. He draws selectively from scriptural quotations while grounding his theological arguments in two influential traditions of Greek aesthetics: the earlier Pythagorean-Platonic tradition and the later Neoplatonic school (Aertsen 1991: 78-84).

Such an approach significantly fascinated the Latin medieval authors. In particular, thirteenth-century theologians adopt the Latin translations

of *De divinis nominibus*, and more generally the *Corpus Areopagiticum*, as an essential source for their theological formation. In some cases, extensive commentaries are devoted to Dionysius' writings, which effectively become one of the most efficacious vehicles by which the Platonic and Neoplatonic tradition influenced the medieval thought. The case of beauty is paradigmatic in this regard. In fact, some authors hypothesize that this particular divine name could be included among the transcendentals. Thus, a typical Platonic and Neoplatonic theme is introduced into thirteenth-century theological discourse, which seemed to be predominantly shaped by Aristotelian metaphysics.

The influence of aesthetic reflection rooted in the Neoplatonic tradition appears to be a recurring theme throughout medieval thought, extending beyond the Greek-Latin Christian tradition to encompass other cultural contexts. A noteworthy example can be found in Avicenna's *al-Ilāhiyyāt* (Metaphysics), written between 1023 and 1027. In the seventh chapter of the eighth book, he identifies beauty as a fundamental property of necessary being:

There can be neither beauty nor splendor above the quiddity's being purely intellectual, pure goodness, free from each one of the facets of deficiency, one in every aspects. The Necessary Existent thus has pure beauty and splendor, and He is the principle of beauty of all things and the splendor of all things. His splendor consists in His being in accord with what ought to be His. How would the beauty be of Him who is in accord with what ought to be in necessary existence? (Avicenna 2004: 297)

This argument, restates in similar terms even in *Kitāb al-Nağāt* (The book of salvation) and in *the Kitāb al-Mabda' wa-l-ma'ād* (The book of genesis and return) follows a typical Plotinian scheme: Avicenna emphasizes the transcendental dimension of the beauty-perfection couple, insisting on the movements of the procession and conversion. However – and this is a distinctive feature of his aesthetic thought – the notion of beauty can also be understood in Aristotelian terms as fulfillment (entelechy) of natural processes (Abolghassemi 2018: 47-8). In this sense, Avicenna establishes a compelling tension between transcendentalism and immanentism: beauty emerges both as a necessary attribute of the First Principle and as immanent law governing the nature.

Analogous considerations emerge even from Moses Maimonides's *Dalālat al-ḥā'irīn* (Guide to the perplexed). In this original exegetical work, written in the second half of the 12th century and in a historical context completely different from that of the previous cases, the concept of beau-

ty emerges from the harmonious proportion and order that reflect divine wisdom in creation. True beauty is not merely sensory or material but represents the intellectual apprehension of God's perfect unity and design. The most sublime form of beauty is found in the contemplation of divine attributes and the ordered structure of the universe:

You should also know the Sages' saying, "Everything in the Genesis account was created at its full stature, fully formed and fully fair". Everything created, that is, was physically finished, perfectly formed, and with the fairest of features, taking 'fair' as in fair as any land. You need to understand this too, since it is a major principle, sound and clear. (Moses Maimonides 2024: 276)

Beauty (or "fair" according to this English translation of *le-swyonam*) thus becomes a manifestation of divine perfection, accessible through rational inquiry and philosophical contemplation.

Albeit partial and circumscribed, this overview provides an unified and coherent framework. From Augustine to Maimonides, passing through the *Corpus Dionysiacum* and Avicenna, the problem of beauty as metaphysical instance emerges as a common thread of different medieval cultures. This principle, declined from various perspectives, underlies several philosophical and theological reflections of the Middle Ages.

3. *Pieces of mosaic*

The contributions that enrich this special issue of *Aesthetic Studies*, devoted to the relationship between "aesthetics" and "medieval thought", represent some of the pieces of the mosaic whose contours we have briefly outlined.

The first article, *Bellezza, retorica e linguaggio: attorno al principio dell'aptum nell'alto Medioevo*, moves from Augustine's reflection on beauty to lead the reader to an interesting analysis of text aesthetics. The author, Renato de Filippis, argues that principles such as *decor* and *aptum* are fundamental to understanding the aesthetics of the medieval written page as distinct from that of *pulchrum*. Indeed, these two elements represent different but complementary concepts of beauty, one quantitative and the other qualitative. De Filippis supports his position through examples drawn from Augustine himself, Raterius of Verona (c. 887-974) and Peter Damian (1007-1072).

Marina Messeri's study focuses on the figure of Hugh of St. Victor (c. 1096-1141). In his *De tribus diebus* the medieval theologian provides one of the earliest medieval attempts to establish a "theology of beauty". The image functions not as a deceptive imitation but as a medium for divine revelation; created beauty becomes a trace of the Creator, leading the soul toward contemplation and union with God. Countering radically dualistic views that dismissed the physical world and its beauty entirely, Hugh affirms its philosophico-theological significance through a Christocentric framework in which the visible reality participates in divine Wisdom.

Silvia Negri's contribution, *Visible humility in the middle of the 13th century: William Peraldus' signa humilitatis* shifts our focus to a different historical context, offering another perspective on our topic. She examines a list of *signa humilitatis* compiled by the Dominican friar William Peraldus (c. 1200-c. 1271) in his *Summa de virtutibus*, investigating both its epistemic value and logical foundation. Negri particularly emphasizes Peraldus's "aesthetics of humility", which she analyzes as a gender-sensitive "aesthetics of concealment". Peraldus' treatment of humility's signs, alongside pride's indicators in the *Summa de vitiis*, addresses both concerns about the aesthetics of morally ambiguous traits like humility and broader questions regarding the moral negotiation of aesthetics.

In her essay, *Minor ways to affective harmony*, Amalia Salvestrini explores how Franciscan thinkers of the 13th and 14th centuries developed ideas of "harmony", focusing especially on its affective significance. Moving from Roger Bacon and Bartholomeus Anglicus through Matteo d'Acquasparta's sermons to the *altissima paupertas* controversy in Angelo Clareno and Franciscus de Marchia, Salvestrini emphasizes the dual auditory dimensions linking harmony-affectations nexus: the power of both musical sounds and rhetorical words to move and uplift the spirit.

Gonçalo Costa's article, *Beauty and transcendentals in St. Thomas Aquinas*, addresses a particularly challenging problem. Since Thomas Aquinas never produced a dedicated treatise on beauty, his aesthetic thought remains somewhat elusive. Costa engages with the ongoing scholarly debate over whether Aquinas considers beauty a transcendental. He distinguishes between primary and secondary transcendentals, arguing that beauty does not qualify as a primary transcendental. To support this claim, Costa proposes a necessary condition for primary transcendentality and examines Aquinas's division of the primary transcendentals.

The final contribution provides a fresh perspective on the relationship between "aesthetics" and "medieval thought". In *Uncanny aesthetics in*

medieval thought: the case of the Dies irae, Serena Allegra examines how the uncanny – typically associated with modernity – operated effectively within medieval Christian aesthetics through the *Dies irae* sequence. Allegra analyzes liturgical music, particularly Gregorian chant, as a performative technology of emotional regulation that elicited visceral aesthetic experiences, suggesting that medieval aesthetics functioned not only to represent the divine but to shape the subject itself. Within this framework, the Church appears simultaneously as the source of disturbing affective ambiguity and the sole mediator of divine reconciliation, deploying aesthetic practices as instruments of spiritual formation and ecclesiastical authority.

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