Amphibolie – Ambiguität – Ambivalenz

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which opens an undecipherable field of possibilities and aporiai between which sense occurs. All three rows of difference obey so to say a fundamental withdrawal; the threefold withdrawal in turn marks the place of sense. The interplay between the rows of differences creates a space making communication possible while at the same time making it seem precarious. The three-fold withdrawal precedes the question of reference, of structure or the method of speech as well as the context and its occasional scenes thereby marking the boundaries of both comprehension and communication.

In short, sense is the occurrence of a transitional space which is crossed at least three times. This transitional space posits itself anew time and time again in the enacting of language, since: it is never determined where we are speaking from or what we are answering when we answer, nor is it determined what the said means or if it means anything at all i.e., if it does not in fact rather ›say‹. Partly for this reason Heidegger deciphered »die Sage« (the saying) as »die Zeige« (the showing),43 because it can never be absorbed by or assimilated into what it pretends to make understood in speaking. Instead it contains the source of a perpetual excess, which can never be domesticated by cultural discipline. A ›not‹, a fissure or otherness always pushes or holds itself ›in between‹. The contingencies of the lines that cross and miss each other in speech are therefore immeasurable, which is why no dialogue or interpretation, no matter how serious or careful, can ever claim to have comprehended, just as it cannot claim to have not comprehended. At the same time, it seems just as inappropriate to speak of the consensus or dissent of a discussion, or play their alternatives off against each other because they adhere to the same figures of success or failure, identity and error. It is therefore impossible not to perceive expression and communication as occurrences that do not conform to the oppositions of success and failure, but instead are like a gift in the sense of a given moment, which can only be accepted, inverted and passed on.44

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In the Twilight Zone

Ambiguity and Aesthetics in Baumgarten

ABSTRACT

The conflict between reason and its media has not only formed the basis of modern aesthetics, but also – as is generally accepted 250 years after the publication of Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten’s writings – of cultural studies. In this paper, I would like to provide a brief outline of the founding preconditions of this aesthetic theory by, firstly, elucidating the ambiguity of aesthetics (I); secondly by showing how Baumgarten roots this aesthetic ambiguity in an ambiguity of rhetoric (II); thirdly and finally by retracing the processes by which he, on the premise of such rhetorical ambiguity, eventually arrives at a metaphysics of ambiguity (III).

I Ambiguity of aesthetics

Marriage stabilizes – in the medium term at least – competing centrifugal and centripetal forces and is thus an institution capable of economically managing and controlling formidable tensions. Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten, therefore, does not rely on the power of love, but rather on a marital alliance based on friendship (amicissimium conubium) when, in his 1735 Meditationes philosophicae de nomulli ad poema pertinentibus, he joins a truly odd couple: reason and its media,1 or, to put it somewhat differently, pure thought and its material presentation.2 The crucial reason for this misalliance, however, are due to Baumgarten’s discovery of the non-discursive in literature (poema), which, for better or worse, leads him to a new epistemology. But as expected, marital bliss is not to last for long. Following fifteen years of acrimonious bickering, and in an attempt to avert the threat of an outright divorce, Baumgarten is forced to considerably revise the marriage contract between reason and its media – between thought

44 This essay was translated by James Kennaway (Stanford) and Rett Rossi (Berlin).

2 The term ‘representation’ could be (and is often) used instead of ‘presentation’. This misses, however, the target, for Baumgarten always uses representation (repraesentatio/cognatio) in a non-material sense.
ten refers epistemology to the theory of presentation. And he answers the essentially psychological question as to the sensuous cognition in terms of rhetoric by listing six categories of style: *ubertas, magnitudo, veritas, lux, certitudo, and vita cognitionis*.

This ambiguity of aesthetics, which had already been criticized by Johann Gottfried Herder, is, of course, not an expression of any lack of awareness of the problem at hand – on the contrary: it is the very duality of our talk about thought and its presentation that reveals a problem which contemporary philosophy lacked both the systems and the terminology to solve. Hence, Baumgarten bravely goes in search of a systematic that could be applied to *scientia cognitionis sensitivae* and scours the theory of liberal arts, the *lower epistemology*, the *art of the fine (beautiful) thought*, and the *art of thought analogous to reason* for a solution: *AESTHETICA (theoria liberalium artium, gnoscolegia infereir, ars pulvere cognitandi, ars analogi rationis)* est scientia cognitionis sensitivae* (AE § 1)*. In this new systematic, theoretical logic, empirical psychology, technical rhetoric, and speculative metaphysics all fuse to feed into the new super-discipline of aesthetics. What Baumgarten did not foresee, however, was the considerable resistance that eventually proved built into his new systematic.

Apparently, Baumgarten was ultimately unable to arbitrate between the warring disciplines concerned with thought on the one hand and with its presentation on the other. The clearest indication of their agonistic relationship can be found in the parenthetical comments inserted into the first paragraph of the *Aesthetica*, where Baumgarten attempts to regulate the relationship between epistemology and the theory of presentation in terms of economy. The parentheses bracket the asyndeton of the four disciplines: rhetoric, psychology, metaphysics, and logic. Penned up in such a confined space, these disciplines are now condemned to eke out an unfree existence as mere appositions to the new super-discipline. The result is a monovalent and rather rapidary definition: *AESTHETICA [...] est scientia cognitionis sensitivae* (AE § 1)*. The rest – particularly the theory of the liberal arts, i.e. rhetoric and poetics – is simply factored out of the equation. With this rather rigid measure, Baumgarten counters the ambiguity that, in his earlier writings on aesthetics, seemed not yet to have both *


eried him unduly. As he maintained without any apparent qualms in all editions of the Metaphysica he undertook between 1739 and 1757: "Scientia sensitive cognoscenti & proponendi est AESTHETICA, (Logica facultatis cognoscitivae inferioris, Philosophia gratiarum & musarum, gnoseologia inferior, ars pulcre cogitandi, ars analogi rationis)" (MET § 533).10

But what does Baumgarten gain by revising his definition? It allows him to obscure the rhetorical origins of his laws of perceptual data processing. The revision introduces a hierarchy among the individual disciplines feeding into the one super-discipline of aesthetics, a hierarchy in which, crucially, presentation is subordinated to thought. Such a disambiguation of the super-discipline is a vital prerequisite for convincing the scholarly world of the philosophical value of aesthetics. For the new discipline will only be worthy of philosophical attention if it is capable of formulating a priori, i.e. pre-empirical laws: "Hinc opus est perspicientia veritatis regularum graviorum a priori, quam dein confirmet ac illustret experientia, sicut illius inveniendae forte primum fuit subsidium" (AE § 73).

Thus, if Baumgarten had continued to countenance the ambiguity of aesthetics and maintained aesthetics’ duality as a science of thought and its presentation, his project would have been doomed to failure. Philosophically speaking, a presentation is not capable of being true, since every presentation implies its own history, individuality, and tradition, as well as its physical, perspectival, and communicatory conditions—in short: its inescapable mediacy.

Following the revision, rhetoric can bring its full terminological and conceptual armament to the task without having any claim beyond rendering this particular service: rhetorical concepts communicate the principles of sensuous cognition, because the medium exemplifies the laws governing thought. Hence, Baumgarten has no problem with paying more attention to presentation than to thought: "[H]inc aestheticae pars de proponendo proxior esset, quam logicae" (MED § 117).11 He declared as early as the Meditationes. Here, Baumgarten applied himself—one might say in almost a dream-like state of attention—to the analysis of literary texts; for literature in general, and poetry in particular is, to him, in its non-discursive aspects the prototype of presentation. As Thomas Abbt explains this rather unusual move on the part of the philosopher, Baumgarten saw, even back then and in a kind of twilight-state of cerebration, that the rules according to which poets work are based on general principles of sensuous cognition.12 Baumgarten thus acknowledges literature's epistemological achieve-

ments, and even if the principles he discerns in literature differ from those of logic, they are, at least, principles of sorts. To summarize: to talk about thought, to analyze text, to strive for truth—these are the conflicting activities that mark out the field in which Baumgarten's aesthetic theory unfolds.

II Ambiguity of rhetoric

The center of the stage on which the conflict between thought and its presentation is played out is occupied by a particular term: "REPRESENTATIO non distincta SENSITIVA vocatur. Ergo vis animae meae representat per facultatem inferiorem perceptiones sensitivas", Baumgarten writes in his Metaphysica (MET § 521). Crucially, the term sensitivas provides rhetoric with an entry-point into the realm of psychology. And Christian Wolff points out in his Psychologia empirica: "Appetitus sensitivus dicitur qui oritur ex idea boni confusa."13 Baumgarten confirms this:

Quoniam appetitus quam diu ex confusa boni representatione manet, sensitivus appellatur: confusa autem cum obscura representatione comparatur per facultatis cognoscitivae inferiorem partem, poterit idem nominis ad ipsas etiam representationes applicari, ut distinguatur ita ab intellectualibus distinctis per omnes gradus possibles. (MED § 3, note)14

In the rhetorical context of his Halle master's thesis, Baumgarten had fine-tuned the term when he employed sensitivas as an attribute of speech: "ORATIO representationium sensitivarum sit SENSITIVA" (MED § 4),15 he writes in the Meditationes. Over the following paragraphs, Baumgarten traces the 'sensitiveness' of speech in great detail; interestingly, the analysis of presentation is always one step ahead of the analysis of thought in these deliberations. In fact, by turning to conceptions only in a second step, Baumgarten merely translates the statements about presentation into statements about thought. Contrary to what scholars have hitherto assumed, however, this translation does not simply substitute presentation for thought, but rather sustains the duality constitutive of aesthetics. Baumgarten neither treats presentation in order to draw inferences re-

11 "Hence that part of aesthetics which treats of such presentation is more extensive than the corresponding part of logic" (MED § 117).
12 "Er sah nämlic, damals schon wie bey einer Dämmerung: daß die Regeln, nach welchen die Dichter arbeiten, aus Grundsätzen herstießen müssen, die vielleicht allgemeiner wären, als man sich es jetzt noch vorstellte, und daß sie eines schwächeren Beweises fähig seyn dürften, als man bisher davon gegeben." Thomas Abbt, Leben und Charakter Alexander Gott-
14 "Since desire, so far as it derives from a confused representation of the good, is called sensitive, and since, on the other hand, a confused representation, along with an obscure one, is received through the lower part of the cognitive faculty, we can apply the same name to confused representations, in order that they may be distinguished from concepts distinct at all possible levels" (MED § 3 note).
15 "By sensitive discourse we mean discourse involving sensate representations" (MED § 4).
Bergadning thought, nor does he look at presentation only. Rather, almost in the manner of a reversal image, his epistemological arguments turn out to be rhetorical ones, his rhetorical arguments epistemological ones, and neither seem to offer a way out of this fundamental ambiguity. The process of translating from one discipline to the other not only makes this ambiguity apparent, but also creates it afresh at every turn.

Baumgarten himself is rather irritated by the effects of his experimental deployment of rhetoric. These irritations occur because, in his declension of *sensitive* speech, he encounters not only language, but also language as medium—or, to put it another way, the media of language. Here, rhetorical terms and concepts function as search keys for the mediality of literature. Such mediality of language, which becomes apparent with the rhetorical turn in philosophy, is somewhat discordant with the premises of rationalist semiotics, a discipline not concerned with the material aspects of the sign. As Wellbery explains such a semiotic turn of rhetoric: *Semiotics makes possible the comparative study of different types of aesthetic representation, the description of their intrinsic limits and possibilities, the measurement of their relative efficacy. 17* In his *Mediationes*, where he had linked the two media of language—the voice and writing—to the term *sensitivus*, Baumgarten had already encountered this mediacy: *Orationes sensitivae varia sunt: 1) repraesentationes sensitivae, 2) nexus earum, 3) voces sive soni articulati litteris constantes earum signas.* [(MEd 4, 1)*] 18 The philosopher can only recoil in horror from the consequences of such a definition; Baumgarten thus quickly seeks to reassure us: *[S]ed haec ipsa cum imperfecta sensitiva oratione communia facile transimus, pro fine ne nimium simus. Nihil ergo de qualitate poematis, qua series sonorum articulatorum* [(MEd 5)*]. 19 And yet, Baumgarten, even if only ex negativo, introduces important systematic default settings for the mediality of language, namely language’s phonetic nature on the one hand and its textual nature on the other. 20

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16 Whereas Aschenbrenner/Holtzer choose the translation *sensate*, I prefer the translation *sensitive*, which is closer to the Latin term.

17 Wellbery, Lessing’s Laacoan, p. 48.

18 *The various parts of sensitive discourse are: (1) sensitive representations, (2) their interrelationships, (3) the words, or the articulate sounds which are represented by the letters and which symbolize the words* [(MEd 6)*].

19 *But these things the poem has in common with imperfect sensitive discourse. We may, then, easily pass them over so as not to wander too far from our purpose. There will, therefore, be nothing here about the character of a poem as a series of articulate sounds, § 4, § 1* [(MEd 7)*].


Baumgarten, however, is not interested in a mere sound event here, but rather in a conceptualised voice—the voice of writing. It is precisely in and through poetry that he becomes aware of the problematic relationship between the two presentational media of voice on the one hand and writing on the other. In the few paragraphs of the *Meditationes* devoted to metrics, Baumgarten discovers a significant friction loss that occurs in the transition from the acoustic medium of the voice to the visual medium of writing: *QUANTITAS SYLLABÆ est, quia quid in ea non potest cognoscio sine comprescripta alterius syllabae. Ergo ex moris elementorum non potest cognoscis quantas.* [(MEd 9)*]. The reference to the grammarians (see: MEd 100) note—both classical ones such as Quintilian and Cicero and Renaissance-humanist ones such as Scaliger and Vossius (see: MEd 9)—gives a good indication of which way the wind is blowing for Baumgarten here 21—and namely in the direction of the so-called *vox*. As the proper voice of writing, *vox* produces ideal sounds, the distinguishing feature of which—*vis-à-vis* real sound events—is their repeatability. Baumgarten’s construction of this *vox* allows us some unique insights into his thought processes here; interestingly, and in a curiously finicky fashion, he wrests this voice of writing from a rationalist semiotics. For the time being, there can thus be no doubt that Baumgarten does indeed distinguish between the medial and conceptual aspects of written as well as spoken language. His rationalistic model of signs presupposes both the concept of sound and the concept of the graphic symbol that represents this sound. In order for the symbol or letter to be able to represent the sound, it must be capable of reminding us of the concept of sound, that is, of the concept of its medial Other. And it is on this basis that Peirce contends that a sign is meaningful only if its *interpretant* always-already contains the translation of a sign into another system of signs. It follows that *[t]he meaning of a sign is the sign it has to be translated into*. 22
Baumgarten, however, not only distinguishes between psychological concepts and the media of their realisation, but also assumes that the medial characteristics as such are stored in memory, and are thus recallable from memory. He thus now conceives of the relationship between concept and event as a cyclical one in which the sequence of sounds of an articulated word is perceived, while the perception, in its turn, presupposes the concept of a sequence of sounds: "Voices, qua soni articulati, pertinent ad audibilium, hinc idea sensus producitur" (MED § 91).25 This model enables Baumgarten to define all features of a presentational medium, including, for example, the visual characteristics of a particular typeface that a reader (lector) perceives (see: MED § 113), as sensitive concepts in themselves – concepts that transform the sensitive sign into a complex sign that, on the basis of writing (littera), integrates a voice (vocem) which, in turn and rather paradoxically, is characterised by its conceptualised performativity.

In order to expand the theory of the non-discursive inextricably related to the concept of this mediatisation, Baumgarten broadens his terminological arsenal, taking us from rhetoric to poetics in the process. By means of the notorious and oft-repeated analogy 'sensitivus ergo poeticus', he recasts 'sensitive' speech as text: «Oratio sensitiva perfecta est poema» (MED § 9),26 as he writes in the Meditationes. A text is thus defined by its completeness vis-à-vis 'sensitive' speech. This premise leads Baumgarten to differentiate between three non-discursive aspects of a text: firstly, a text's concatenation; secondly, its non-concreteness; and, thirdly, its motion. All three of these aspects will come to prominence again in the theories of presentation developed around 1800. Concatenation is at the center of the second part of the Aesthetica, where Baumgarten takes an extremely tedious stroll through the world of rhetorical figures (amplificationes).27 Here, he encounters the so-called equivalence-figures, i.e. figures that link their elements according to the principle of like with like to form complex sequences – such as: homoioteleuton, anaphe, epiphon, symphoeke, repetitio, episexis, epanalepsis, anadiplosis, pleoike, pleonasmos or polyptoton. But why is Baumgarten interested in figures to such an interminable extent? – Because figures allow him to observe the non-discursive aspects he is laboring over at the time. Significantly, a figure as such is characterized, precisely, by the material excess that bursts the boundaries of rationalist premises. Equally significantly, the figures Baumgarten catalogues all express a single object by means of at least two words28 – and they do so in a way that makes the concatenation of the words command most of our attention while the object of expression recedes into the background: «Nexus representationem poeticae emeret facere ad cognitionem sensitivam, § 7. 9. ergo debet esse poeticus, § 11.» (MED § 65; vgl. § 68).29 The figure thus stands for the duality or doubleseness that lies at the heart of our current deliberations. One divides into two: this is what Baumgarten sees as the poetic imperative.

At the center of this new scheme, Baumgarten positions none other than comparison in the broader sense of the term (comparatio latius dicta), which, as 'figura princeps illustrantium', encompasses all special cases of similarity-induced complexity listed so far (AE § 742; see: § 735). In a comparison, words that stand in a relationship of similarity or kinship to one another are interchanged or joined together:

Hinc substituto illus pro hac pulcre cogitanda, vel conjunctio illius cum hac, non sine vividitate, dabit argumentum illustrans a comparatio, quod aliqui dicunt A meditatio, § 730, nos dicamus figuram, § 26, comparationem et collationem latius, quae complectitur assimilatio,

nem, sed in multa etiam alia argumentorum genera diffunditur, quam quae

petentur a simili. (AE § 734)

Comparison in the broader sense also, however, includes those comparisons in which the relationship between object and detail is governed by other, again topos-derived, relationships. These include: comparisons based on the relations between part and whole (comparatio maioris et minoris/comparatio ascendens et descendens), oppositions (antithesis), and comparison in the strict sense of the term (comparatio strictius dicta). By meticulously differentiating between all these possible modes of comparative concatenation that close the gap between figure and text, Baumgarten re-evaluates, perhaps even elevates, the particular operation of the figure to the status of a general macro-structural principle of concatenation.

The principle of duality has far-reaching consequences when it comes to the second non-discursive aspect of a text: its non-concreteness. While an entire century is busy revering the image, and the moving image generated by language in particular, Baumgarten does not seem to set any great store on the presentational value of the text. This is because, to him, the imaging capacities of the tropes are, again, dependent on the duality of the figure (hypotyposis). This move is based on a decision that would seem nothing if not bold. Baumgarten recasts the trope, which, after all, represents only one element of the text rather than a concatenation of two, as a figure. By shifting duality from the horizontal to the vertical, he is able to declare: «Omnis tropus, quem definivi, est figura, sed


25 «Words, in the respect that they are articulate sounds, belong among audible things; hence they elicit sense perceptions» (MED § 91).
26 «By poem we mean a perfect sensate discourse» (MED § 9).
29 «The interconnection of poetic representations must contribute to sensate cognition, § 7, § 9. Therefore, it must be poetic, § 11.» (MED § 65).
CRYPTICA, cuius genuina forma non statim apparat, quoniam est figura contracta per substitutionem» (AE § 784).

With the term «crypticus», Baumgarten imports a concept borrowed from Petrus Ramus into his aesthetics (see KOLL § 1), which he then refashions to suit his own purposes:

Logici scholasticorum docent PROPOSITIONEM EXPOBILIBUS, ex affirmanti et negante cryptice compositam, quales exclusivae, exclusivae, restrictivae, c.c. Nisi veerer latini incomedmod esse auribus, tropos figuras dicerem exponibiles. (AE § 785)

Kretzmann comments on this term from Ramean philosophy by pointing out that, if one wishes to integrate the logical concept of aesthetics, such propositions or figures require further exposition: «An exponible proposition is a proposition that has an obscure sense requiring exposition in virtue of some syn-categoremata occurring either explicitly or included within some word».) Thus, the trope becomes the nodal point for two texts joined in a figure. In a web of concatenation with no discernable beginning or end, verbal images do, however, lose their critical value and are in danger of becoming nothing more than opaque chimeras.

In this context, Baumgarten’s examples show how figularity time and again blurs the boundary between perception and knowledge, which, in turn, allows him to justify such famous examples of digressive sequences as the Homeric Catalogue of Ships:


The most significant of Baumgarten’s examples of such digression is, however, contained in the First Ode of Horace, where a mythological-narrative intertext identifies the figural structure as an encyclopedic one:

Car in ea atque pro maioribus, pulvin olympicus pro vulvere ludorum, palma pro praenio, Lybicae areae pro terra frugiferis, Attalicae conditiones pro magnis, tralib Cyprus pro mercatoria, mare myrtorum pro perilusco, lucantis Icaris fluctibus Africus pro vento, vetus Masicum pro vino puerus, Mar- sus [apex] pro fulmine &c. nisi virtutis esset substituire conceptibus iatios- ribus angustiores. (MED § 20 note) 

This dense opacity of the text however provides a neat fit for the third non-discursive aspect of a text. Baumgarten implants the function of an energetic impulse into the text, an impulse that stirs the space of the text into motion: «VIVIDUM dicimus, in quo planta varia, seu simultanea fuerint, seu successiva, ap- perciperibile dato» (MED § 112). For within this space, textual elements are not only so closely concatenated with one another that the text becomes opaque, but each element is also constantly striving to enter into an alliance with other elements so that the text is, so to speak, continuously striving for its own completion.

Wherever Baumgarten thus defines the poetic, that is, the figural structure in his Meditationes, it is either speech itself or its constituent parts and elements to which the grammar of his sentences assigns the role of agent — the agent, that is, «esse varia tuntund ad cognitionem representationum sensiblorum» (MED § 7, see § 5). By emphasising the aspect of activity, the aspect of tendency or striving (tendere) inherent in sensitive speech, Baumgarten is able to give the catenation of elements in space both a direction and a goal — the goal of completion: «Aesthetices finis est perfectionis cognitivae, qua talis» (AE § 14). In the context of this particular argument, Baumgarten also shifts his attention from the processes of rhetorical presentation (enargeia) to those of rhetorical actualisation (enargeia). The subject matter of his deliberations, meanwhile, remains the same, although his discourse is now informed by a very specific concern, namely a concern with tropes as figures. In the Rhetoric, Aristotle defined the operations of enargeia that Baumgarten has in mind here in the following terms: «By ·making them see things· [pro omnino poene, F.B.] I mean using expressions that represent things as in a state of activity». As far as tropes are concerned, it is above all metonymy and metaphor that win the day, leading Atri-
stotle to comment on Homer and the latter’s evident fondness for and trust in the power of precisely these two tropes: «Here he represents everything as moving and living; and activity is movement».34

With regard to duality, however, this means that Baumgarten needs to furnish the two elements, which, within the figure, occupy fixed and separate points in textual space, with a mutual desire that leads them to move towards each other. To summarize: at the point at which Baumgarten’s epistemology comes up against language as a medium, or rather, against the media of language, ambiguity becomes theoretically relevant. Its matrix is the rhetorical figure caught in a persistent state of tension between difference and identity.

III Metaphysics of ambiguity

Aesthetics would not qualify as a super-discipline if Baumgarten did not ultimately intend it as his vehicle to reach for the stars. At the Frankfurt College on Aesthetics, he succinctly describes the ultimate aim of his project: «[S]o könnte man die Ästhetik nach einiger Ähnlichkeit auch die Metaphysik des Schönens nennen» (KOLN § 1) – thus you could claim that aesthetics is a metaphysics of beauty. Within the dense thicket of paragraphs, however, there lurk a number of surprises that render a proper literary critique of such metaphysics a difficult feat to accomplish. In paragraph 14 of the Aesthetica, Baumgarten paves the way towards metaphysics by committing the duality of our talk about thought and its presentation to the goal of its own perfection: «Aesthetica finis est perfectio cognitionis sensitivae, qua talis [...]. Haec autem est pulcritudo» (AE § 14). In the context of metaphysics, Baumgarten encounters the old conflict once again, albeit this time in a somewhat different form: do aesthetics provide us with a theory of aesthetic experience or with an ontology of beauty? Both options are inherently ambivalent, and it is this duality of the site of beauty that makes Baumgarten a transitional figure in the history of aesthetics. In his scheme of things, beauty is both objective (within the context of traditional ontology) and subjective (in the context of the functions of sensuous cognition). And while Kant came to reject, as we know, the idea of a «perfection of any object» and accepted «nothing [...] but the subjective purposiveness in the mind of the beholder»,37 subject and object are, in Baumgarten, still two sides of one and the same coin.

This ambivalence, as Franke, applying psychoanalytic categories, describes this seesaw, not only pertains to the conflict between subject and object, how-

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34 Aristotle, Rhetoric, 1412a, p. 2253.

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35 Rather, it is doubled yet again on the side of the subject when Baumgarten differentiates between logical and aesthetic subjective truths: «Posset metaphysica veritas objectiva, objectiva verorum representatio in data anima SUBJECTIVA dici VERITAS» (AE § 424). He coins the term aesthetico-logica to describe this type of duality in an attempt to reconcile the competing intellectual and sensuous elements of truth. As soon as Baumgarten starts emphasizing the first part of the compound of aesthetico-logica truth, however, mediality once again sneaks into his argument through the backdoor (fig. 1).

Given this double ambiguity – the ambiguity governing the relationship between subject and object and the ambiguity governing the relationship between logic and aesthetics –, the truth of beauty cannot but be a knotty issue of the first order. In his attempt to account for aesthetic truth, Baumgarten becomes ensnared in a web of metaphoric imagery that catapults him straight out of the rigid 18th century, and he ends up doing nothing less than advocating a metaphysics of ambiguity. As Baumgarten ploughs through his metaphors one by one, the conflict that had hitherto been largely of a symptomatic nature seems to gain an awareness of its own potential, as it were. However, the conflictual self-awareness that becomes apparent through metaphor differs markedly from Baumgarten’s own awareness of this conflict.

Aesthetic truth resembles a dense fog (nebula), Baumgarten writes in the Aesthetica (see: AE § 451). Properly speaking, this truth even emerges only in the twilight hours, as Baumgarten explains to the College:

Our opponents say that confusion is the mother of all error; let us continue this metaphor; a mother may not continuously bear children, and so confusion may not give rise to error all of the time. In nature, the darkness

36 See: Franke, Kunst als Erkenntnis, p. 89; Brigitte Scheer, Einführung in die philosophische Ästhetik, Darmstadt 1997, p. 70.
not from a body that is radiant in itself, but rather from a body that reflects a light cast upon it:

Omnis itaque lux aesthetica, quam in rebus intendas directo, perspicuius rerum erit sensitiva, claritatis per multitudinem notarum extensio, § 617. etiam absoluta, comparativa vero vividiora cogitationum et materiae nitor ac splendor. (AE § 618)

Beauty thus lies hidden in a twilight zone that, unlike dawn or dusk, does not merely mark the passage from one realm to the other. It thus also does not conform to the idea of an evenly distributed indirect light, but rather leads Baumgarten to conceive of it as a sort of play of light reflexes — a light show, as it were, that does not play itself out somewhere between light and darkness, but is rather generated by a quick and constant alternation of the two. Beauty is not revealed at either the brightest or the darkest point of this spectrum. With a sideward glance at the visual arts, Baumgarten notes that paintings, after all, also become true only once there is a constructive interplay of brightness and shadow. If, as Baumgarten envisages, such a painting is, as it were, set in motion, it is neither the whole scene that is illuminated at once nor do some elements shine all the time while others remain in permanent darkness; instead, the image as a whole is in a state of iridescence owing to the continuous back and forth of shadow and light. It is in this movement that Baumgartens encounters a simulacrum — the will o’ the wisp or ignis fatuus of beauty, whose flicker of brightness are constantly flitting hither and thither:

Verum in omni venustate generatis, sic ut in pictura, modo sint omnia luce, quam absolutam diximus, conspicua, non omnia, sed quaedam tantum, comparative lucida

Ore floridulo nitent,
Alta parthenice velut,
Latesume papaver. [Catull 61, v. 186 sq.; F.B.]

quaeadem sunt verbis, sunt belle perspicua, quanquam, cum nitidis illis et admodum collustratis ubi comparantur, apparent opaca. (AE § 624)

Whether or not Baumgarten is aware of it, his imagery allows us to glean a surprising result: while the philosopher employs his most important strategic weapons in the battle against the ambiguity of aesthetics that arises from the conflict between thought and its presentation, ambiguity, in the context of metaphysics, reveals itself as a positive value. Here, ambiguity does not mark a transitional phase between light and darkness in the manner of rhetoric conceiving of ambiguities as an intermediary stage between perspicuitas and obscuritas. Rather, duality in metaphysics is uncircumventable. Baumgarten thus discovers the absolute

39 »Unsere Gegenen sagen, die Verwirrung ist die Mutter des Irrtums; lasset uns die Metapher forstern; eine Mutter darf nicht immer georen, so darf auch die Verwirrung nicht immer Irrtumer hervorbringen. In der Natur ist nicht jetzt Nacht, und dann folgt gleich heller Mittertag, sondern es ist eine Dämmerung dazwischen. So haben wir nicht gleich hellen Mittag der Kenntnis, sondern die Verwirrung als die Dämmerung ist dazwischen« (KOLI § 7; transl. by Alexa Aller).

ambiguity of aesthetics: this is the simple upshot that concludes a whole succession of involved and digressive paragraphs that mushroom around a problem the solution of which ultimately escapes Baumgarten as he not only lacks the terms and concepts to tackle it, but, in the final analysis, also fails to develop a proper awareness of the issues at hand. Thus, the metaphors he labors over inscribe a metaphysics of mediality, and they do so precisely once Baumgarten has, in the context of rhetoric, discovered the self-referentiality of the medial structure — a self-referentiality that would only come to the fore of aesthetic theory much later, namely during the Modern period.  

The token or mnemonic of this metaphysics of mediality is the figure two, which Baumgarten had first encountered in his deliberations on the rhetorical figure. Two expresses the fact that Baumgarten does not conceive of beauty as a unified entity — as consensus, harmonia, or whatever other terms may have been applied to such concepts in the past; rather, he essentially sees beauty as a differential structure — as duality. In his attempt to define this metaphysical duality, Baumgarten even goes one step further and emphasizes, under the heading of aesthetic wealth, the eccentricity of the medial structure — its centrifugality; under the heading of aesthetic brevity, meanwhile, he stresses its complementary concentricity — its centripetality. The structure is eccentric because the first element always desires a second, the second a third, and so forth, all without the ultimate desire for completeness and perfection ever being fulfilled. The structure is concentric in so far as the elements encounter themselves in their duality as the figure refracts and diverts the vector of desire from its goal and drives it back to the immediately preceding element. This, however, ultimately twists ambiguity, as Baumgarten conceives of it, in a paradoxical direction; ambiguity itself becomes a paradox of infinite finiteness or finite infinity that holds thought and its presentation in a permanent state of inextricable tension between openness and closure.

In conclusion, I would contend that Baumgarten did not us leave a mere fragment in 1758. In terms of ambiguity, his writings on aesthetics are, for all intents and purposes, complete: they root the new super-discipline of aesthetics in the conflict between reason and its media, they recognize the matrix of the nondiscursive in the duality of the rhetorical figure, and they project, through the twilight quality of beauty, a medio-metaphysics. In 1758, and over the course of the few remaining years of his life, Baumgarten did not fail to complete his project; he merely failed to recognize or accept that ambiguity represented the master key to his aesthetic theory.  

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42 This essay was translated by Alexa Alfer (London).

HEINZ J. DRÜGH

Die Ambivalenz des Klassischen

Zu Schillers Die Braut von Messina

ABSTRACT

With an eye to the origins of Schiller’s classical period, and with strong lights trained on Winckelmann as prototypical classicist and on the most fragmented of classical writers, Karl Philipp Moritz, this essay begins by illuminating ambivalence in classicism itself. Then a reading of Schiller’s late drama, Die Braut von Messina, with which the dramatist attempts to revive Greek tragedy for the modern world, will serve as a test case for classicism’s only very tentative compromise between reason and sensuality.

I


Am Kunstgegenstand entsprechen einem solchen auf den Ausgleich von Spannungen und der Nivellierung von Ambivalenzen bedachten Unternehmen