

The Pleasures of Comparative Aesthetics

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Before taking a closer look at the two publications that occasioned this article, it may be useful to say a few words about aesthetics in general.¹ As we are reminded in the compact but serviceable Preface to the *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics*, the term *aesthetics* "is derived from the ancient Greek word *aisthesis* (also spelled *aisthesis*), which means perception or sensation" (ix). Although metacritical interest in the arts certainly dates at least from Hellenic philosophy, aesthetics and the philosophy of art (the two are, in many ways, distinct) did not really come into their own until the publication of Emmanuel Kant's *Critique of Judgement* (1790). Some would even argue that the field did not become a professional research discipline until half a century ago, roughly coextensive with the founding of the American Society for Aesthetics and the *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*. Be that as it may, aesthetics then and today may be best understood as a philosophical investigation of the beliefs, concepts and theories implicit in our contacts with the arts and other phenomena that may involve aesthetic experience and aesthetic value.

Broad as this definition is, it still invites a rather obvious question: Given the intimate association of art and aesthetic experience, why the need to distinguish aesthetics from the philosophy of art? The reasons are twofold. On the one hand, not all aesthetic judgements involve art – for many people, in an almost paradigmatic manner, a beautiful natuescape can be a rich source of aesthetic experience. On the other, not all judgements about art are aesthetic in character – moral and cognitive considerations play a crucial role in our contacts with artworks on a regular basis. In fact, many would question today whether there even exists a distinct set of judgments that could be marked off as aesthetic, in contrast to the cognitive/scientific or moral/ethical. Clearly aesthetics is a heterogeneous (not to say interdisciplinary) field dealing not only with philosophy of art, but aesthetic behaviour, experience and values, both from the critical and a theoretical (meta-critical) perspective.

If modern aesthetics is only two hundred years old, analytic philosophy is younger still by a century, evolving from the work of Gottlob Frege, Bertrand Russell, Ludwig Wittgenstein, and the logical positivists of the Vienna Circle in the 1920s and 1930s. And yet in its short history the analytic orientation has proven so fruitful that in the lead article for the *Blackwell Companion to Philosophy* (1996) John Searle gives it an enthusiastic two thumbs up. Nothing in the history of philosophy, he maintains, has equalled the analytic tradition in "rigour, clarity, intelligence and, above all, its intellectual content" (23). The principal mode of doing contemporary philosophy in North America, Great Britain, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Germany Scandinavia, and increasingly in other parts of Europe and South America, is analytic – so much so that scholars in the non-analytic tradition "feel if necessary to define their position in relation to analytic philosophy" (1).

If analytic philosophy deals primarily with the analysis of meaning, *analytical aesthetics* deals primarily with the meaning of art and aesthetic experience. Meaning in this context is an inclusive term, stretching from inquiry into the ontology of art, the nature of fiction, the problems of representation and understanding, the mechanisms of emotional response to art, the nature of the aesthetic and its relation to the artistic, cognitive, or moral, and other comparably focused inquiries. That this inventory is a far cry from the common perception of aesthetics as the study of the nature of beauty, is no accident. Philosophically effective work in contemporary aesthetics is often limited to a specific art form and to a set of narrowly defined problems. In this way, it is felt, much like in the entire enterprise of analytic philosophy, scholars in aesthetics can sustain ongoing, cumulative research, "as opposed to work done in their local departments of literature" (Williams, *Blackwell Companion to Philosophy* 26).

This last statement is worth pausing over. When C.P. Snow wrote about the Two Cultures in the 1950s, he certainly did not envision a situation in which two neighbourly disciplines, such as analytical aesthetics and literary studies, could be estranged from each other. And yet, while philosophers today routinely prospect problems that lie within the bailiwick of critical theory, not many literary scholars, even those who pride themselves on their interdisciplinary acumen, contribute to the research pursued in analytical aesthetics. It is a safe guess that few are even aware of, for example, David Lewis's Reality and Mutual Belief principles, of their seminal role in defining the agenda for the analysis of truth in fiction – i.e. for the interpretation of implicit story content, indispensable to our understanding of literature – and of the ensuing critiques and refinements of Lewis's theses. The fact is that, despite protestations about the value and, indeed, necessity of "going interdisciplinary," many literary scholars tend to overlook the ongoing

1 This article discusses Michael Kelly, ed. *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998; 4 Vols, xiii + 2184 pp) and Jerrold Levinson, *The Pleasures of Aesthetics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996; xiv + 312 pp).

research programs in philosophical aesthetics.²

I think this situation is widespread enough to warrant a brief digression before taking a closer look at the *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics*. The lack of rapport between literary theory and philosophical aesthetics may be representative of a general tendency within the humanities towards disciplinary atrophy.³ The rise of new science disciplines such as molecular genetics, neuro-psychology, socio-biology, psycho-physics or bio-mechanics, to name only a few, attests to a trend towards fusing scientific research over and across traditional areas of inquiry. Given the commonality of subject matter (the arts, culture), research methods (linguistic and counterfactual analysis) and interests (a robust theory of interpretation), it is difficult to explain why, as the editors of *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics* observe, "many people concerned with art and culture today seem to want to distance themselves from aesthetics" (xi).

Just like a Serengeti waterhole which will nourish reptiles, mammals, fish and fowl alike, aesthetics has the potential to sustain researchers from departments other than just philosophy. Among them, scholars in comparative literature may be uniquely positioned to blaze the trail into the thicket of analytical and perhaps even empirical aesthetics by virtue of their training and interdisciplinary methodology. This is because, in many ways, aesthetics is a paradigmatically interdisciplinary and comparative domain. For one, it lies on the cusp of a great many academic disciplines, being at once informed by and relevant to research in literary studies (in all of its subdomains, such as epistemology, narratology, poetics, genre theory, etc.), art history, philosophy of language, linguistics, pragmatics, philosophy of mind, metaphysics, cognitive science, semiotics, translation theory, sociology, psychology, law and ethics, to name a few.

Secondly, aesthetics is an essentially comparative field owing to its exploration of so many diverse modes and means of artistic and aesthetic expression. Literature itself, with its multiple and ceaselessly evolving kinds, genres and subgenres is a good synecdoche for such a comparative environment, but the same could be said of music or the continually expanding range of visual and performance arts, all of which invite comparative and interdisciplinary study. In fact, one of the most venerable topics in aesthetics is the question of analytical extension of ontological, structural, stylistic, semiotic, expressive, generic, institutional and other regularities from one type of art into others. Lastly, aesthetics cuts right across most of the

conventional ways of classifying artworks for interpretive purposes, seeking comparison across historical periods, national frontiers, cultural barriers, modes of narration or expression, or types of artistic creation in order to bring out the features essential to a fuller appreciation/interpretation of art.

Against this background, the new 1998 *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics* must be seen in its proper light, i.e. as a bridge over the gulf which divides disciplinary knowledge of art, and thus as a milestone on the road to a better interdisciplinary exchange and understanding. One way in which the editors pursued this goal was to take advantage of aesthetics' cross-disciplinary appeal and recruit not only philosophers but also "art historians, literary theorists, psychologists, feminist theorists, legal theorists, sociologists, anthropologists, and others who reflect critically on art, culture, and nature" (xii) among its contributors. In the end, although for historical and methodological reasons philosophy continues to occupy a central position in the encyclopedia, the majority of its entries were in fact written by nonphilosophers.

Altogether the four volumes, which run into more than two thousand pages, contain over six hundred essays on some four hundred theorists, concepts, periods, theories, issues and movements in the history of aesthetics. The array of scholars who served as editorial advisers to this major scholarly and educational undertaking is both impressive and variegated, representing different continents, cultures and schools. Regrettably, despite this abundance of material or the fact that the ordering of entries is not strictly alphabetical – some articles are grouped under a common heading which does not always reflect its contents (e.g. "Speech-Act Theory" is to be found *not* under "S" but under "I," for "Intention") – there is no handy, cross-referenced table of contents. In fact, the only aid in navigating around the encyclopedia, and thus the only systematic way to find out, for example, if it contains an entry on a given topic, is the index printed at the back of volume four only, and in a wearisomely small font to boot.

Enhancing the project's interdisciplinary and comparative appeal, the focus in most essays is both historical and theoretical, so that specialists from assorted departments will find both something familiar to relate to as well as something methodologically new to expand their perspective on art and interpretation. In a similar vein, even though the contributors rely in general on the Western aesthetic history and art periodization, they make repeated efforts to situate them side by side with non-Western art forms and parallel aesthetic traditions. All in all, advertize the editors, "the encyclopedia, which is the first English-language reference work on this scale devoted to aesthetics offers a combination of historical reference material and critical discussions of contemporary aesthetics intended for general readers and experts alike" (ix).

Given such claims to general accessibility, it seems hardly amiss to

2 See Levin for a trenchant appraisal of the "new interdisciplinarity" in literary studies.

3 Readers interested in the relation between literary and social scientific types of inquiry can look at Livingston's *Literary Knowledge* and "Literature and Knowledge."

evaluate the merits of the encyclopedia from the point of view of scholars and students of literature, many of whom may not have much specialist training in aesthetics, analytical philosophy or art history. After all, if this implicit invitation to aesthetics is to be taken seriously, the entries should stand out not only in terms of content but also in terms of accessibility. This is especially important in view of a fundamental difference between the *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics* and reference works in other, more established academic fields. The project's editors and contributors make no bones about the fact that many, perhaps even most of the concepts and theories under discussion are a matter of ongoing research. The fact that a great many problems in aesthetics – some of them clearly identified in the four volumes – call for resolution or at least further refinement should be of great interest to young scholars looking for a ripe field of research to which they can make a contribution.

The discussion below is organized on the comparative and complementary principle: it begins with critical remarks and follows with a list of the strengths of the encyclopedia. Here are several aspects in which the reader may feel that its four volumes leave something to be desired.

(1) There is no separate entry on, and little discussion of, evolution theory which, in view of its implication in so many spheres of cognitive activity (including literature), is quite deplorable. There are many well established links between cognition and literary aesthetics, including persuasive arguments by some philosophers (e.g., Robert Stecker) that properly *literary* values used to define *belles lettres* must include a distinctive sort of cognitive value. Given that most, if not all cognitive theories rely ultimately on some sort of evolutionary account, this is a startling omission. Not even the entry on Empirical Aesthetics – an actively pursued and growing body of research which exemplifies the bridge-building goals of the encyclopedia by virtue of an interdisciplinary blend of philosophical analysis, literary and cultural theory as well as empirical experiment – includes any mention of the evolution theory.⁴

(2) There is no discussion of several topics of interest to literary scholars, a fact made even more salient by the presence of articles on related subjects in other arts/media. The reader will find, for example, no treatment of minimalist fiction, even though there is a lengthy review of "Minimalism" in visual arts. Similarly, one would look in vain for an entry on popular fiction, even though there is one on popular rock music and on popular culture in general. Nor is

there any mention of the problem of truth in fiction, a distinct and much debated topic in literary and analytical aesthetics, even though the encyclopedia boasts a big entry on fiction.⁵

(3) The level of analysis and the readability of entries are markedly uneven. Although this is, perhaps, partly attributable to the variety of styles and skills among the contributors, better editorial filters could have been employed to keep the lid down on garbled and uninformative prose. My twin examples are culled from the four articles (by Stephen Melville, Gayatri Spivak, Peggy Kamuf and D.N. Rodowick) that form a composite entry on Derrida which contain, among many others, the following crypto-statements:

–But, as Derrida notes, it matters to hear the implicit claim of the title within the context of the phenomenological orientation towards rigor and exact science, an implicit description of the ideality of its objects that precludes any ideality of literature, so that an argument for such ideality amounts to a reconstruing of ideality altogether (2, v. II);

Derrida's analysis of iterability overturns metaphysical priorities, for it amounts to thinking an originary repetition the operation of which is not guaranteed by any prior ideal self-presence of meaning; on the contrary, ideality would itself be an effect of iterability, a construction after the fact, rather than the realm of pure identity of meaning to itself from which signifying practices, in all their impurity and exteriority, derive in a secondary moment (11, v. II)

The four entries are not only riddled with turgid prose but are one-sided in their treatment, failing to even mention (far less refute) the frequent critiques of Derrida from the analytic and aesthetic community, of which John Searle's challenge in "Literary Studies and its Discontents" may be the bluntest. To be fair, tortuous and murky writing is not the exclusive property of literary deconstruction as the entry on "Historical Ontology," written by Joseph Margolis, one of the better known philosophers in analytical aesthetics, demonstrates.

(4) There are rather striking inconsistencies in terminology. In an encyclopedic work that stakes out a claim to being *the* reference source in aesthetics – and which, notabene, includes an indexed reference to the distinction between work and text – many contributors persist in what can only be described as a profound confusion between the two concepts. It seems

4 For recent examples of research in empirical aesthetics, see Cupchik or Martindale. Another interdisciplinary exploration of issues in empirical psychology and narrative aesthetics is research in psychonarratology pursued at the University of Alberta; see Dixon, et al.

5 The subjects of popular literature and truth in fiction are usefully discussed by Swirski in, respectively, "Popular and Highbrow Literature" and *Between Literature and Science*.

that the editors ought to have standardized the usage as well as provided a full entry on the categorical distinction between the functionalist linguistic entity such as *text* and an intention-historical and author-indexed construct such as *work*.⁶

(5) The encyclopedia tries hard to find approval in the eyes of social constructivists and cultural relativists, so much so that one wonders at times why it has not been released under the title of *Postmodern Encyclopedia of Aesthetics*. It is not merely a question of postmodern (theories of) aesthetics being assigned a disproportionate amount of space, or of correctly non-Western and thus presumably inoffensive pluralistic terminology. More important, one senses a deliberate design on the part of the authors *not* to channel a debate according to the best available evidence, but to compile a list of mutually critiquing choruses instead. Since, as the editors preemptively argue in the Preface, the very publication of the encyclopedia may seem to violate postmodern injunctions against philosophical systems and grand historical narratives, their "response to this skepticism was to incorporate the contemporary doubts about the encyclopedia into its very structure" (xii). The results are sometimes incongruous. In one example among many, the analysis of Artificial Intelligence is now developed entirely as a poststructuralist response to Kant's vocabulary of aesthetics, even as the author of the article states: "No argument is offered to support the opinion that some sort of 'equivalence' exists between AI and Kant's critical project" (125, v. I). In their drive to be topical and inclusive, where inclusive means a mere representation of competing ideas, often with no attempt to appraise and critique them, the editors seem to forget that postmodernism is only one branch on the tree of knowledge. Given that this branch shows many signs of intellectual exhaustion, it may result in a rapid obsolescence of the encyclopedia.

(6) For the same reason as above, some articles overemphasize challenges to a given theory or approach without articulating a positive alternative even when it is widely available. A good example may be the entry on "Literature and Cognition." Although the treatment is sympathetic, not a word is said about the appreciable role of literature in furthering/aiding diverse strands of philosophical and social-scientific research (eloquently articulated by, among others, Livingston, Bell, Nussbaum or Girard). Likewise there is no mention of the hypothetical (thought-experimental and/or theory-forming) role of literary fictions, nothing on the specific literary genres which position themselves on the borderline between literature and philosophy (the *conte*) or literature and science (science fiction), nothing on

⁶ A good analysis of the distinction between works and texts can be found in Livingston, "Texts, Works, and Literature."

Stanislaw Lem and his own brand of narrative philosophy, etc.⁷ The bibliography, in this instance, is correspondingly weak.

(7) Many articles are limp and jargon-free in an obvious bow towards a lay reader, yet some are still laden with multiple and often technical references to thinkers, terms or concepts in philosophy which will baffle the average nonspecialist, such as a graduate student or scholar of literature. A typical reference, here culled from the article on Artificial Intelligence, may read: "Given Husserl's deep intellectual debts to Kant, it is understandable that Lyotard would compare Minsky's proposal to Kant's idea of reflective judgement." Or, from the same source, "In many ways, computational phenomenology is a self-contradictory... effort to 'enframe'... Heidegger's critique of Husserl in a set of technologies" (both on 128, v. I). It is a safe guess that such articles will remain largely impenetrable to those without a specialist training in the philosophy of Kant, Heidegger, Husserl, Hegel and Wittgenstein.

There are many respects, however, in which the *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics* must be commended. Appearing at the close of the century which saw the burgeoning of aesthetics as a viable research field, the project maps the continuities between the historical views on art and aesthetics and the current efforts to theorize them. The following is a shortlist of its most attractive features.

(1) In a genuinely comparative fashion the encyclopedia places consistent emphasis on philosophical as well as on cultural aesthetics, the latter of which may be more familiar to students and scholars of literature and thus serve as a conceptual ramp via which they can climb to the former.

(2) A point implicit in the remark above: there are many examples of a genuinely interdisciplinary and comparative approach to the issues discussed, aimed at general reader and expert alike. The entry on "Empirical Aesthetics," for instance, gives an at-a-glance and absorbing introduction to the history, methodology and achievements of the field in a paradigm of cross-disciplinary intelligibility. Once again, within the scope of this compact (one is almost tempted to say "zipped") essay the author manages to sketch some of the challenges facing psychological research in aesthetics, identifying aspects of our contacts with works of art in need of further inquiry and implicitly extending an invitation to potential contributors from neighbouring disciplines.

(3) The encyclopedia provides references and illustrations from contemporary and/or popular artists and not just the perennial highbrow classics, once again reinforcing a feeling of comparative openness and a search for common intellectual and aesthetic ground. The flow of analytical prose is

⁷ A detailed source on the cognitive value of Lem's works is Swirski, *A Stanislaw Lem Reader*.

relieved by pictures (all in black and white) whose number, although modest in comparison with art reference works, is actually quite ambitious if compared with reference works in philosophy which typically feature few or no images at all.

(4) In some ways the informativeness of the project is a tribute to its organization. All key or contentious entries are composites of two or more individual essays, each written by a different contributor and tackling a different angle of the issue. The articles on Intention ("An Overview," "The Intentional Fallacy" and "Speech-Act Theory and the Interpretation of Images") are a good case in question. As accomplished individually as they are together, they could easily become the basis for a good part of a graduate course in many departments of the humanities. All three are engaging, instructive and non-doctrinaire and, while leaving the central aspects of the debate open to inquiry, are conceived to guide the reader in promising directions of research.

(5) The bibliographies appended to each article are, for the most part, constructive and nonpartisan. In a praiseworthy gesture, they usually refer to the latest and presumably widely available editions of the listed works. Unlike many other types of reference works, they are also frequently quite comprehensive, comprising the classic publications in the field as well as the latest contributions.

(6) Many articles, for example Catherine Wilson's "Epistemology of Fiction," are beautifully and informatively written and are sure to help promote the kind of interdisciplinary understanding that is the goal of the encyclopedia. More generally, among entries that might be of special interest to literary scholars, those on Artifact, Emotions and Literature, Empirical Aesthetics, Fiction, Intentions, Literary Aesthetics, Relativism, Reception Aesthetics, or Truth are invariably lucid, precise and informative. In many of them, beginning notably with the blurb on the history of aesthetics in the Preface, the reader will find a valuable historical introduction to the set of issues under discussion.

This is the *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics* in a nutshell. It seems fair to summarize it as an ambitious project that aims to introduce readers, students and scholars of literature to an interdisciplinary body of knowledge which extends to many of the topics with which they are normally concerned. In this goal it parallels a number of pivotal books in aesthetics published in the 1990s, of which Jerrold Levinson's *The Pleasures of Aesthetics* (1996) is likely one of the most important. Although it is presumably in the interest of every press to beef up the contents of its pre-publication publicity, in this case the publisher's blurb naming the author "one of the most influential writers in contemporary aesthetics" is not at odds with the truth. Author of another leading book on analytical aesthetics (*Music, Art and Metaphysics*; Cornell,

1990), Levinson is one of the ablest and subtlest thinkers among the many who devote their time and energies to disentangling the web of aesthetic and socio-cultural practices known as Art.

The Pleasures of Aesthetics is a meta-critical study of sundry issues related to the nature and status of works of art, such as their ontology, their relation to their creators (e.g., writers), the specificity of art interpretation, the role of writers' intentions in interpreting their works, and so on. It refrains from the fare of some literary or cultural studies, such as swift and sweeping generalizations, often arrived at by means of methodological fiat, on the nature of (postmodern) society, culture, language or literature. Instead, in the typical analytical tradition, the author takes on a number of specific problems that have vexed philosophers and literary scholars alike, and proceeds to dissect them with caution and regard for both the latest work in aesthetics and the current critical practice.

The book is divided into five parts, the first of which tackles the general problem of the relation between art and (aesthetic) pleasure. Part Two is devoted to the aesthetics of music, the subject which Levinson also tackled in his contribution to Routledge's *Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (1998). The third part of *The Pleasures of Aesthetics* is in many ways an extended response to Gregory Currie, a recent author of some of the most challenging theses on the ontology of art, the nature of fiction and the problem of the validity of interpretation (*An Ontology of Art*, 1989; *The Nature of Fiction*, 1990). Scrupulously weighing the pros and cons of Currie's proposals, Levinson offers powerful arguments in support of his own account of the nature and identity of artworks from *Music, Art and Metaphysics*.⁸

Part Four, which opens with the longest and in many ways pivotal chapter, "Intention and Interpretation in Literature", ought to be of great interest to students and professors of literature. The author's goal is to dispel lingering doubts about his own brand of intention-driven approach to literary interpretation which he calls "hypothetical intentionalism" (175); his arguments, however, are equally useful in dispelling lingering doubts about intention-driven approaches to interpretation *period*. The two problems are logically independent of each other, and critics (myself included) who are sympathetic to some version of moderate intentionalism may feel that Levinson's theses do not fully succeed in removing all doubts about hypothetical intentionalism. On the other hand, his powerful and inventive series of arguments leaves no doubt that – however odious the notion may be to literary scholars who have pledged allegiance to Barth or Derrida – some version of moderate intentionalism is an inalienable part of our proper contacts with works of (literary) art.

The last part of *The Pleasures of Aesthetics* concerns itself with two related subjects: the literary and cinematic genre of horror, studied by Noël Carroll in *The Philosophy of Horror* (Routledge, 1990), and the nature and interpretation of the representational arts – literature and drama, cinema, painting and sculpture – as developed by Kendall Walton in *Mimesis as Make-Believe* (Harvard, 1990). Once again, Levinson turns to the methods and tools of analytical philosophy, prominent among them counterfactual analysis, trying to cast a new light on problems long prospected by literary and cultural theorists. Aided by his “intentional-historical characterization of art-making” (151) which mirrors the “pragmatist, neohistoricist, and autobiographical tendencies in literary studies as well as a concomitant counterreaction to the excesses of deconstructionist theory” (175), he approaches some of the central problems in analytical aesthetics with a methodologically sound theory of art, literature and interpretation.

A question may loom at this point: Why spend time discussing what, on one view at least, could be regarded as just another addition to the already crowded market in literary theory? One, as an academic critic-skeptic might add, that doesn't even properly “belong” in literary studies, as the subtitle of *The Pleasures of Aesthetics: Philosophical Essays* would seem to suggest? Couched perhaps in less openly parochial terms, this contemporary variant on *ignoramus and ignorabimus* may be common enough to merit a brief reflection. Here is an acclaimed scholar who writes a comprehensive, lucid and painstakingly researched collection of essays on a range of topics of immediate concern to any literary critic. The book offers precise and carefully argued theses on the long-standing theoretical problems of identifying, individualizing and interpreting literary works, and does so with stylistic clarity and analytical rigour to match the best in contemporary critical theory. Moreover, in a welcome break from often bone-dry and abstracted books of philosophy, the author keeps a close eye on the practical consequences of adopting his proposals in critical and classroom practice.

Yet one would look in vain for a response from the literary-critical community to this explicit contribution – and implicit challenge – to its own ways of talking about literature. In the philosophical circles Levinson's work is giving impetus to new avenues of research, while his proposals on the entrenched problems in art-interpretation are the subject of ongoing scrutiny and refinement. Not just the quality, but the quantity of reviews, critiques, commentaries and article-length responses substantiates Cornell's portrait of the author as one of the influential writers in contemporary Anglo-American aesthetics.

Preoccupied as it is with critical and meta-critical theory and the complexities of textual and contextual interpretation, literary scholarship needs to keep abreast of research in related disciplines – especially one that, as

demonstrated by Levinson, Currie, Walton and Carroll, bears directly on its domain. In the end, it is difficult to accept the by-now knee-jerk defense that the sheer quantity of professional publications effectively stands in the way of a genuine cross-disciplinary *rapprochement*.⁹ By virtue of common subject matter as well as increasingly bold appropriation of areas of inquiry which have traditionally been the province of critical theory, (literary) aesthetics is very much a part of our profession. One hopes that books like *The Encyclopedia of Aesthetics* and *The Pleasures of Aesthetics* will compel us all to take a closer look at literature through the prism of knowledge in which all disciplinary colours blend into one.

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Book Reviews

*FRANCIS SPARSHOTT. *The Future of Aesthetics*. Toronto Buffalo London: The University of Toronto Press, 1998. Toronto Studies in Philosophy. xii + 173. CDN\$ 35.00.

In the not so distant past, when the philosophy department in which I teach was undergoing an external review, the consensus of the review-committee was that in the area of aesthetics it was arguably the strongest department in Canada, having then a full third of its faculty writing and teaching on aesthetic issues – the strongest, that is, save for any department, as one of the committee averred, "in which Francis Sparshott might happen to teach." Since at the time Sparshott was teaching in a philosophy department at a rival university, it was a measure of his reputation that not one of my colleagues bridled at this rider. That their collective expertise in aesthetics might nearly equal that of Sparshott alone was a judgement my colleagues seemed almost flattered to accept.

The theme of authority is one that Sparshott himself explicitly raises. This book derives from lectures, and lectures "implicitly claim a higher ground" than "the stance of simply one person talking to other people" (92-93). Moreover, it consists of not just any lectures but an annotated version of Sparshott's "Ryle Lectures," delivered at Trent University in 1996. It thus has the imprimatur of a named lecture series, and in its published form, the added distinction of the "Toronto Studies in Philosophy." Since aesthetics survives today for the most part as a marginalised sub-discipline within professional philosophy, its future is in doubt. In this regard, however, the agis of Ryle's name is ironic. For Ryle himself (who was – to add to the irony – Sparshott's supervisor for the B.Phil. degree at Oxford) "objected to aesthetics" on the grounds "that the study was spurious from the beginning," and to emphasise the point, affected a posture of philistinism (101). Although tempered of late, this sort of dismissive attitude still prevails in the mainstream of Anglo-American philosophy. From that perspective, only the effete and fuzzy-minded are expected to get seriously exercised over aesthetics and its future. That Sparshott does, belies such reproach, and serves as a caution to those who would dismiss aesthetics out of hand.

The question of authority arises too because of this book's scope. Sparshott's thesis is that "the future of aesthetics depends on the future of