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Selected Writings on Aesthetics

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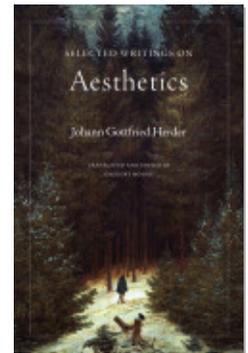
Published by Princeton University Press

Herder, Gottfried & Moore, Gregory.

Selected Writings on Aesthetics.

Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009.

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On Image, Poetry, and Fable

MAN IS SUCH A COMPLEX, artificial being that despite every effort he can never achieve a wholly simple state. At the very moment that he sees, he also hears and unconsciously enjoys, through all the organs of his manifold machine, external influences that remain largely obscure sensations but nevertheless secretly cooperate on the sum of his whole condition at all times. He floats in a sea of impressions of objects, in which one wave laps against him softly, another more perceptibly, but where sundry changes in the outside world excite his inner being. In this respect also he is a *microcosm*, just as Protagoras, in another context, called him the *measure of all things*.

Of his senses, *sight* and *hearing* are the ones that most intimately and clearly bring before his soul objects drawn from the ocean of obscure sensations; and since he possesses the art of retaining and denominating these objects by means of words, a world of human perceptions and ideas, especially those drawn from sight and hearing, has taken shape in his language, a world that reveals traces of its origin even in the most distant derivation. For this reason, even the most refined operations of the soul have been given names native to sight and hearing, as is shown by the terms *intuitions* and *ideas*, *fancies* and *images*, *representations* and *objects*, and a hundred others besides. After the eye, it is the ear and then the sense of touch, especially the feeling hand, that have furnished the soul with the most ideas; taste and smell have contributed fewer, especially in the northern regions of the world.

For all the objections raised against the name *aesthetics* as the *philosophy of the beautiful*, we must not allow it to perish now, for already a host of the most excellent observations is associated with this term, especially from the philosophers of our nation. Nor is it an inappropriate appellation, if we take it to mean a *philosophy of sensuous feelings*, of which the *philosophy of the agreeable*, of *the sensuously perfect and beautiful*, is indeed a part but certainly not the basest part. Every sensation, like every object of the same, possesses, its own rules of perfection, which the philosopher must seek out in order to find the point of its utmost efficacy and from it derive the rules of art. To this end, he must of necessity compare the sensations belonging to more than one sense, observe what is original and derivative in each, and above all be alert to how one sense supports, corrects, and enlightens the others. Is there a better name for

this beautiful branch of philosophy than *aesthetics*? For this name perfectly describes both the scope of its objects and the subject of their effect. A philosophy of *taste*, of the *beautiful*, and so on, that started from but a single sense would necessarily deliver only incomplete fragments to a philosophy concerned with the totality of sensations.

So if sight is the richest, finest, and clearest sense to furnish the soul with a world of sensations and to designate them, then it is above all with vision that the philosophy of sensuous objects must practice before turning to the study of the other senses. In mathematics, optics has not only developed into an independent discipline but was able to become the basis of almost every other science, precisely because Nature presented us, in the structure of the eye and the laws of light, with the most beautiful model of fine exactitude. For the philosophy of sensations a *theory of light and of the image* is of equally manifold utility as soon as we strive to look for that theory in the appearances of various works of art and raise it to the most general rules.

I. On Image

1. I call *image* every representation of an object that is associated with some degree of consciousness of the perception. If it lies before my eye, then it is a bodily, visible image. If it is represented to my imagination, then it is a *fancy* (φαντασμα), which nevertheless borrows its laws from visible objects. In the first instance I am awake, in the second I am dreaming; and we see that man's fancy continues to dream without interruption even while he is in a wakeful state.

All the objects of our senses become ours only to the extent that we *become aware* of them; that is, we designate them, in a more or less clear and vivid fashion, with the stamp of *our consciousness*. In the forest of sensible objects that surrounds me, I find my way to becoming master of the chaos of the sensations assailing me only by separating objects from others, by giving them outline, dimensions, and form; in short, by creating unity in diversity and vividly and confidently designating these objects with the stamp of my *inner sense*, as if this were a seal of truth. Our whole life, then, is to a certain extent *poetics*: we do not see images but rather create them. The Divinity has sketched them for us on a great panel of light, from which we trace their outlines and paint the images in the soul using a finer brush than that of the rays of light. For the image that is projected on the retina of your eye is not the idea that you derive from its object; it is merely a product of your inner sense, a work of art created by your soul's faculty of perception.

2. Hence it follows *that our soul, like our language, allegorizes constantly*. When the soul sees objects as images, or rather when it transforms them into mental images, according to rules that are imprinted on it, what is it doing but translating, *metaschematizing*? And if the soul now strives to illuminate these mental images—which are its work alone—through words, through signs for the sense of hearing, and thereby to express them to others, what is it doing once again but translating, *alloisizing*? The object has so little in common with the image, the image with the thought, the thought with the expression, the visual perception with the name, that they, as it were, touch one another only by virtue of the sensibility of our complex organization, which perceives *several things* through several senses *at the same time*. Only the *communicability* among our several senses and the *harmony prevailing between them*, whereupon this communication rests—only this constitutes the inner form or the so-called perfectibility of man. If we had but one sense and were connected with Creation only by a single aspect of the world, as it were, there would be no possibility of converting objects into images and images into words or other signs. Then we should have to bid farewell to human reason! If a being's power of intuition were multiplied tenfold but remained merely one-sided and unsupported by any other senses, he would be a far more imperfect creature than he is now, when he can convert his meager wealth so frequently and in doing so must always make the effort to adapt it anew, to give it fresh form. This wealth passes through the gates of a different sense and is given a different stamp, in keeping with the different customs prevalent there and the different use to which it is put.

3. Notwithstanding the various names we use to denote the faculties of cognition that deal with images and their expression, all these faculties are subject to *the same laws governing the perfection of an image*: namely, *truth, vividness, and clarity*. Though every sense and every faculty of cognition has its own character and possesses the aforementioned qualities to a different degree; though one sense can and must limit the others, and the particular purposes to which the presentation of each image is put must also each time alter its point of view, and hence its entire design also, the internal rules of its perfection always remain the same. If our organization and the harmonious attunement of the faculties of the soul made it possible for truth, vividness, and clarity to combine in a single object to the same degree, why should they not be permitted to combine in the same way with one another? In God the highest truth, vividness, and clarity co-exist without one of these qualities weakening the others, without Him needing to feel ashamed of any one of them. It is therefore only beggar's pride when the so-called *higher* faculties of the soul are embarrassed by their sisters, whom they contemptuously call *lower*, thinking them not their true siblings but rather their serving girls. Human cognition starts

from the senses and from experience, and everything comes back to them; without limbs and organs, without fancy and memory, the understanding has nothing with which it can occupy itself, reason has nothing whereupon it can reflect, the power of symbolic thought has nothing that it might express through signs. The very truth and vividness of the images therefore contribute to their clarity and distinctness, so that without them all abstraction would be mere illusion. The supreme law of perfection in all arts and sciences must hence be: that in conformity with the purpose of the representation, one quality cannot impair another; for example, clarity impair vividness, vividness impair truth; but rather, each must come to the other's aid and encourage it to realize its goal.

4. Hence we see that the modeler here is really only man's inner sense, which, through the eye and every other organ, creates forms according to internal rules and, as far as it is able, communicates the findings of one particular sense to the others. We also see that this *inner* sense—that is, *the rule of the understanding and consciousness—can be the only yardstick* by which to measure how, in every work in every system of art or of discourse, *an image may be positioned, adjusted, and finished; in brief, what degree of truth, vividness, and clarity may be attained by every feature.* General mechanical laws are of no help here, for, as I have said, what we see in external objects does not lie merely in the things themselves but is primarily dependent on the organ that perceives them and the inner sense that becomes conscious of them. The fly sees a different world from that seen by the snail; the fish a different world from that seen by man; and yet they all see one and the same Creation according to the same rules of truth, vividness, and clarity. Discrepancies of this kind are caused by every change in point of view and intensity of light and from time to time by every alteration in the disposition of our body and soul. Nevertheless, the rules governing the representation and the sensation remain the same; indeed, every such instance of change confirms their inner truth. It is therefore foolish to prescribe to the soul how it should make use of some image of Nature; following the internal rules of the understanding and consciousness, the soul must learn to use an image in the manner demanded by this particular work of art, for this particular purpose, at this particular time, in this particular place, according to this particular type of feeling characteristic of the artist and the connoisseur.

~~Let us take, for example, one and the same allegory, one and the same simile, and apply it in a book treating mathematics and philosophy, in a speech, in a didactic poem, in a song, in an ode, in an epic poem, in a tragedy or a comedy, or whatnot. Does not our inner sense tell us that the image cannot be realized in the same way in these different contexts? An allegory in a drinking song or in one of Plato's philosophical dialogues, in~~