# REVIEWS

**Carole Maigné, ed. *Formalisme esthétique: Prague et Vienne au XIXe siècle*. Paris: Vrin, 2013. 288 pp. ISBN 978-2-7116-2481-2**

In France, there has recently been a growing interest in the work of Johann Friedrich Herbart (1776–1841) and Herbart's so-called formalist school. Besides Carole Maigné's *J. F. Herbart* (2007), providing an introduction to the main principles of the doctrine, one would refer to Maigné and Céline Trautmann-Waller's edited volume *Formalismes esthétiques et héritage herbartien* (2009), Maigné's recent translation of Herbart's *Hauptpunkte der Metaphysik* as *Les points principaux de la métaphysique* (2005), and Jean Tilmant's new edition of Herbart's pedagogical writings *Tact, autorité, expérience et sympathie en pédagogie* (2007).

The anthology *Formalisme esthétique: Prague et Vienne au XIXe siècle* (Aesthetic formalism: Prague and Vienna in the nineteenth century) clearly continues in this line of research. It includes commented translations of eight works embedded – as the editor puts it – in the 'Bolzano-Herbartian tradition of aesthetics' or – to put it differently – in the tradition of Austrian formalism (p. 9). Moving from the beginnings to the later development the volume contains Bernard Bolzano's *Über den Begriff des Schönen* (On the concept of beauty, 1843), §§ 37–40, Johann Friedrich Herbart's *Lehrbuch zur Einleitung in die Philosophie* (Introductory philosophy textbook, 1813–37), §§ 81–88, 97–104, 108–15, Robert Zimmermann's 'Zur Reform der Aesthetik als exakter Wissenschaft' (Towards the reform of aesthetics as an exact science, 1862), Josef Durdík's *Všeobecná aesthetika* (General aesthetics, 1875), §§ 38–40, Eduard Hanslick's 'Über den subjektiven Eindruck der Musik und seine Stellung in der Aesthetik' (On the subjective impression of music and its place in aesthetics, 1853), Otakar Hostinský's *Das Musikalisch-Schöne und das Gesamtkunstwerk vom Standpunkte der formalen Aesthetik* (Musical beauty and the total work of art from the standpoint of formal aesthetics, 1877), Otakar Zich's 'Hodnocení esthetické a umělecké' (Aesthetic and artistic evaluation, 1917),[1] and Emil Utitz's 'Bernard Bolzanos Ästhetik' (Bolzano's aesthetics, 1908).

On the one hand, such a selection properly mirrors the supranational character of the tradition – the book contains both Austrian and Czech authors connected to formalism. On the other hand, the selected texts reflect the development of the school to the extent that representatives of all three 'formalist generations'

[1] For an English translation, see Otakar Zich, 'Aesthetic and Artistic Evaluation, Part 1', trans. Derek and Marzia Paton, *Estetika* 56 (2009): 179–201; 'Aesthetic and Artistic Evaluation, Parts 2, 3', trans. Derek and Marzia Paton, *Estetika* 57 (2010): 71–95.

come to the fore: (1) Bolzano and Herbart – as the key figures – set the basic principles, (2) Zimmermann, Hanslick, Durdík, and Hostinský made formalist aesthetics a coherent doctrine, and (3) Zich and Utitz opened formalism to new, strictly speaking, non-formalist influences, for example, phenomenology (p. 11).

Those who consider formalists only as predecessors of the structuralist school will, presumably, consider the anthology a matter of merely historical research. Nevertheless, as one goes through particular chapters, it becomes clear that such an interpretation is far from adequate. The book does not merely chart out a period in the history of aesthetics; rather, it focuses on an important source of modern aesthetics, which can still inspire.

Carole Maigné's insightful introduction deals with theoretical, historical, and institutional aspects of Austrian formalism. I shall now outline her key points. Maigné provides a number of criteria which tie the particular authors together: she talks of anti-psychologism, anti-idealism, realism, the significance of logic, anti-Kantianism, anti-Hegelianism, or Leibnizianism (see esp. p. 9). Such a list clearly outlines the key questions of the school. Nevertheless, as Maigné also points out, the authors presented in the anthology do not always share all these features. For example, an utterly anti-Hegelian approach can be detected only in the writings of Zimmermann and Durdík.

The other point concerns the formalists' attempt to give aesthetics a scientific turn and to take a stand against the metaphysical approach to beauty. According to Maigné, 'Herbartian formalism endeavours to tear beauty away from metaphysics and, with the same move, to create a science of beauty' (p. 47). In this regard, the development of the natural sciences was a great inspiration for the formalists. Regarding scientific research in other domains, they required a strict definition of the object of aesthetics and developed methods suitable for its description. Nevertheless, as I will later elaborate, the relationship of the formalists to the natural sciences was ambiguous: aware of the specificity of the domain, they never perceived aesthetics as a natural science, but instead considered it a discipline with its own rules and principles.

Lastly, a close link is visible between the scientific pretensions of the Herbartians and their definition of beauty as something *objective* – rather than as a merely fleeting psychological or subjective phenomenon. For, and this is the crucial point, only if the objective character of beauty can be proved can it become a matter of science; a merely psychological approach would not suffice to make beauty a subject of rigorous research. With that in mind, beauty is defined as a form, that is, a set of relationships between objectively determinable elements: be it sounds, colours, thematic units, and so forth (see esp. pp. 28–29). It needs to be said that Maigné does not explicitly link the question of science and the question of

objectivity together; the two are discussed separately. Nevertheless, the linkage is apparent and should be emphasized.

The book opens with Bolzano's treatise *On the Concept of Beauty*. The selected paragraphs (§§ 37–40) represent above all a detailed criticism of Kant's aesthetic principles. Bolzano points to (1) the multiplicity of definitions of taste (that is, the four moments of the 'Critique of Aesthetic Judgement' become his target, p. 57); (2) paradoxical concepts (for example, Bolzano renounces the notion of purposiveness without a purpose, p. 66); and (3) a number of presuppositions he considers unacceptable (for example, Kant's claim that something can be beautiful without being good, p. 59). Nevertheless, positive aspects of Bolzano's view of beauty also emerge throughout his criticism. The key argument resides in the claim that beauty is not without a concept, that it is rather subsumed under a concept which does not appear clearly in the consciousness. Thus, analyzing the phenomenon of beauty, Bolzano claims: 'the concepts of which we are not *conscious* can nevertheless be *available* and *must* always be such when a judgement is to be made' (p. 61; see also p. 71).

The key parts of Herbart's text concern the matter of a scientific approach to aesthetics and the idea of the objective, that is, the not merely subjective or psychological, nature of aesthetic phenomena. The first matter is touched upon in the following claim: 'Because beauty is objectual (*gegenständlich*) or objective it is necessary […] to separate it from the subjective states of the soul.' (p. 83) Concerning the matter of science, Herbart claims that the beautiful and the ugly as fundamental aesthetic phenomena 'must be exhibited and represented in their original purity and determination. General aesthetics is bound to accomplish this task and to organize the exemplary concepts (Ideas)' which accompany the beautiful and the ugly (p. 80). In other words, these concepts correspond to particular aesthetic phenomena and must be systematically ordered in general aesthetics. When this task is accomplished, such a conceptual system can serve as the foundation for different doctrines of art.

Zimmermann's essay, 'Towards the Reform of Aesthetics as an Exact Science', is a representative work of Austrian formalism. It includes the typical formalist claim that aesthetics should go through a fundamental change in order to become a science. Such a reform requires a precise definition of the subject matter of aesthetics and its being clearly distinguished from the subject matter of other domains. To achieve this definition, Zimmermann presents an interpretation of the Kantian principle of harmony between two capacities of mind. As he puts it: 'The harmony between *understanding and imagination*, in which Kant sees the only principle of aesthetic satisfaction, is just one example of how this satisfaction comes about.' In fact, 'harmony as a cause of satisfaction is *necessary*,

the nature of that which enters the harmony can be considered *contingent*' (p. 123; emphasis mine). In other words, Zimmermann seeks to generalize the Kantian notion of harmony by making it an effective principle regardless of which entities become co-related. This means that not only the interplay between mental capacities but also the harmony of sounds or colours can become a source of aesthetic satisfaction.

The other remarkable point of Zimmermann's article concerns his critique of aesthetic idealism, which, according to him, confuses *harmony*, as an aesthetic principle, with a particular type of *unity*. In this regard, he points to Fichte's subjective idealism, emphasizing that it was a fatal error 'to attribute *value*, which belongs only to the harmony between different things, to unity, which is essentially without difference' (p. 138). Making this claim, Zimmermann refers to the fact that for Fichte it is the unity of 'mental forces' which serves as the aesthetic principle, not a relationship between different elements (p. 136). Moreover, according to Zimmermann, the *objective* idealism of Schelling and Hegel is based on a similar error. For these authors, it is not the unity of a subject but rather the unity of a specific object, more precisely, of the Absolute and its phenomenalization which becomes the aesthetic principle. Such a critique deserves particular attention since it maintains the specificity of aesthetic value. A value of this sort – bound to the harmony of elements – is implicitly set apart from the ontological value of what is represented in a particular work of art (the Subject, the Absolute).

The selected parts of Josef Durdík's *General Aesthetics* provide an overview of the history of aesthetics, using the difference between the aesthetics of form and the aesthetics of content as a specific code of interpretation. Most remarkably, Durdík designates Kant as the inspiration for Herbart and Herbartian formalism, claiming that Kant started a new era in aesthetics. Quite surprisingly, however, he does not see the inspiration for Herbart in Kant's aesthetics but rather in his ethics. According to Durdík, the judgement of taste, like the categorical imperative, is formal, general, and necessary (p. 169). Following these preliminary remarks, Durdík summarizes the key notions of formalism, emphasizing its scientific ambitions and its fundamental difference from aesthetic 'mysticism' (p. 171).

The Hanslick essay can usefully be read as a complement to the Zimmermann essay. Like Zimmermann, who criticizes *idealism* in aesthetics, Hanslick criticizes the proponents of the *materialistic* approach – especially in the domain of music –, who consider the work of art to be an expression of feelings, or as a means to elicit impressions. In contrast to such an approach, Hanslick emphasizes the effectiveness of pure artistic form, claiming that a piece of music can be perceived

as an expression only as far as its individual realization is concerned. Similarly, he concedes that the listeners can be moved or impressed by particular tones, but aesthetic satisfaction stems solely from the contemplation of form (p. 208). This claim allows Hanslick to draw a categorical distinction between the aesthetic and the sensual impression of music and define the proper role of aesthetics in music theory. Such a theory does not concern the way one physiologically receives sounds; rather, it deals with the organization of sounds in a particular form or structure (p. 195).

Pursuing the question of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, Hostinský's essay presents an analysis of some of the arts and the means of unifying them into a single work. On the basis of this analysis, Hostinský formulates particular definitions concerning art and beauty. His key distinction concerns judgements about particular aesthetic relationships in a work and the total judgement that represents the sum of the particular judgements and aims at the work as a whole. Concerning the latter judgement, Hostinský argues that individual recipients might differ in their assessments since their preferences and perceptive capacities are not the same: different recipients, in their total judgement of a work of art, may aim at different relationships.

Having made this assumption, Hostinský defines aesthetic theory as an approach that abstracts from individual preferences: it ascribes the same relevance to all aesthetic relationships that are constitutive of the work. In this regard, Hostinský calls our attention to the complexity of relationships, which can be overlooked because of the preferences of uneducated recipients or amateurs (p. 229). Now a comparison to other formalists can be made: as Zimmermann and Hanslick came out against approaches that reduced the artwork to a material or ideal substance, so Hostinský focuses on a different type of reductionism – namely, the reduction of the complexity of aesthetic relations in a work.

Zich's essay also raises the question of artistic norms and the assessment of art. According to him, general norms can be obtained by abstraction, but not from particular works, the forms of which considerably change throughout history; rather, they can be obtained from constant psychological processes involved in the perception of art (pp. 249–50). Nevertheless, such a procedure – and this is his key point – leads to *descriptive* principles of perceptive processes, not to normative judgements. Having made this assumption, Zich puts forward a fundamental distinction: the laws of perception become a matter of theoretical aesthetics, whereas the formulation of norms is relocated to the doctrine of art (pp. 250–51). It needs to be added that such an approach implies a particular reduction of aesthetic principles to the principles of another domain: theoretical aesthetics now turns into a description of psychological laws. This is to say that

Zich as an aesthetician not only follows the model of other sciences, but also uses the methods of other disciplines in the domain of aesthetics.

The last work in the anthology is Utitz's essay on Bolzano's aesthetics. Utitz not only summarizes the main principles of Bolzano's doctrine, but he also criticizes the 'Leibniz-like' presuppositions that underlie Bolzano's approach. His key objection concerns the claim that the difference between the aesthetic and the cognitive relation to an object is merely a matter of degree: as we have seen, for Bolzano the experience of beauty is not without a concept; the concept of the beautiful object is only *less* clear and distinct than the concept belonging to the realm of proper cognition. But, according to Utitz, the difference between the cognition of an object and the pleasure from its representation is 'fundamental' – he talks of 'different relations of consciousness' (p. 270), arguing that the aesthetic does not include any concept whatsoever. Nevertheless, Utitz is not only critical of Bolzano's theory; among Bolzano's theoretical achievements, Utitz emphasizes his distinction between the beautiful and the aesthetic. According to Utitz, Bolzano properly recognizes that the beautiful and the aesthetic are not identical because the beautiful represents just one of many aesthetic qualities, such as the sublime, the moving, the ridiculous (p. 273).

As far as the translations are concerned, I have compared selected passages with Bolzano's, Zimmermann's, Durdík's, and Herbart's originals. In the first three essays, I did not find any serious errors: the translations are coherent, the French technical terms have been carefully selected. It seems to me, however, that the translation of Herbart's essay has several problematic spots. I will give two examples.

Section 81 of Herbart's *Introductory Philosophy Textbook* starts with the claim that *das Schöne und das Hässliche* (the beautiful and the ugly) provide a specific kind of evidence which does not always penetrate the representations that are 'von jenem verursacht' (caused by that). This claim then concludes with another claim – namely, that 'daher bleibt es oftmals unbemerkt' (because of that it often remains unnoticed). It is important that in German the pronouns *jenes* and *es* refer to both the *Schöne* and the *Hässliche*, indicating that the *aesthetic* as such is often unnoticed and that it is the cause of particular representations. But, in the French translation, the pronouns are substituted with the word *le beau* – the beautiful (p. 79) which causes a slight change in the meaning: the aesthetic is confused with the beautiful.

In the same section, the key notion of *Musterbegriffe* (exemplary concepts) is introduced as 'die unmittelbar gefallenden Musterbegriffe' (immediately pleasing exemplary concepts). Nevertheless, it is translated as 'les concepts exemplaires suscités […] immédiatement par ce qui plaît' (concepts elicited immediately by

that which pleases, p. 80). Thus, the French translation indicates that the object of pleasure is different from the concepts, whereas the original makes it clear that the concepts themselves are effective.

Finally, I should make several remarks regarding the choice of the essays or passages and their interpretation. First, it is problematic to talk of a 'Bolzano-Herbartian tradition in aesthetics', as Maigné puts it in her introduction (p. 9). One can surely agree that there was a Herbartian school, yet it is highly questionable whether there ever was a Bolzano-Herbartian tradition, since Bolzano's work, unlike Herbartism, was not a great influence in the nineteenth century. (Bolzano was explored later by Brentano and his school.) It is also problematic to talk of a Bolzanian tradition in *aesthetics*, since Bolzano wrote only two essays on beauty and art, which, again unlike those of the Herbartians, were not a great influence in this particular field.

Another point concerns the approach of the particular authors to Kant. In her introduction, Maigné speaks of the anti-Kantianism of the Bolzano-Herbartian tradition as a whole, moreover, the annotation of the book claims that formalism *rejects* both Hegel and Kant. As noted above, there is no question that Bolzano, as a Leibnizian, was a great critic of Kant – not only concerning aesthetics but also, indeed predominantly, regarding questions of theoretical philosophy. The relationship of Herbart and the Herbartians to Kant was not, however, decidedly critical; rather, it was *ambiguous*. In fact, the Herbartian approach to Kant is in a way similar to Fichte, who claimed that it was necessary 'to go with Kant beyond Kant'. (Zimmermann similarly points out that Herbart 'took Kant under his protection against Kant himself', p. 148.) All this is to say that the Herbartians, unlike Bolzano, followed some of Kant's principles, interpreting them anew and leaving aside others that they did not consider fruitful.

In fact, one can point to different claims made by formalists which either explicitly refer to Kant as an inspiration or make implicit use of Kantian philosophy. An example of the former approach is Zimmermann's use of the Kantian principle of harmony (pp. 123–24); another is Durdík's claim that Kantian formalism played the key role for Herbart (p. 169). An example of the latter approach is in Utitz's essay where he criticizes Bolzano for overlooking the distinction between the aesthetic and the cognitive (p. 270).

Another point that needs to be mentioned concerns Maigné's claims that 'Herbartism undoubtedly participates in the liberation of the work of art from metaphysics' (p. 45), and that Herbartism represents an essentially anti-idealist or anti-Hegelian approach. These claims are definitely correct insofar as formalism heads towards science and insofar as it constantly criticizes the aesthetic *Schwärmerei* of certain idealists. Nevertheless, it should also be emphasized that

the basis of this criticism is primarily the formalist refusal to *reduce* a work of art to anything other than its form. This is why the formalists renounce not only the idealist approach, which reduces an artwork to an ideal content (most obviously in Zimmermann's essay), but also the materialist approach, which reduces the work of art to its pleasing physical qualities (in this regard, Hanslick's essay is the most instructive).

This point is crucial for it makes apparent the positive criterion unifying the tradition – simply, it is a tradition based on the doctrine of form. This doctrine serves as the basis for different types of criticism: against idealism, materialism, psychological reductionism, and so forth. But this simple claim leads us to a nontrivial conclusion. If one takes form as a key criterion, one cannot claim that Bolzano and the Herbartians fall into the same tradition. For Bolzano, to my knowledge, does not consider form an aesthetic principle and, in this regard, he can hardly be associated with the formalists.

The last point concerns the scientific ambitions of formalism. As we have seen, the formalist striving to make aesthetics a science follows the example of the contemporary natural sciences. In this regard, it is important that Maigné claims that 'aesthetics had to follow the method of the natural sciences if it wanted to be established as a science, which does not imply – because the model does not presuppose identity – that it had to merge with the natural sciences, that is, with experimental psychology' (p. 48). This claim fits perfectly into the anti-reductionist drive of the Austrian formalists. As we have seen, formalism follows the model of other sciences insofar as it seeks to define the object of aesthetics and to develop adequate methods for its description. But, at the same time, the aestheticians belonging to this tradition, perhaps with the exception of Zich, never confused their subject matter and methods with the subject matter and methods of other disciplines. As it becomes clear from the individual essays, formal aesthetics sought to be *like* the natural sciences, but did not long to *become* a natural science. To me, this is one of the key points that make the selected essays noteworthy. The question arises of how to do aesthetics as a science without confusing it with other sciences, in other words, how to define the subject matter of aesthetics without confusing it with the subject matter belonging to the other disciplines. In light of today's aesthetics, such a question is highly relevant, since the scientific status of aesthetics still remains an unresolved question and since psychology or cognitivism is ceaselessly penetrating the field.

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