

## REVIEWS

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**Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten. *Ästhetik*. Latin-German edition. Trans., preface, notes, indexes by Dagmar Mirbach. 2 vols (vol. 1, pp. LXXX, 1–595; vol. 2, pp. IX, 596–1305). Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 2007.**

In many respects aesthetics is a unique philosophical discipline. One of its distinguishing features is its strong bond to its founding father – Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten (1714–1762). Surely no respectable philosophical dictionary or history of philosophy would neglect to mention that this leading representative of eighteenth-century German rationalist philosophy emerged with a project for a new discipline, aesthetics as the logic of a lower, pre-rational cognition, which is firmly linked to considerations of beauty and art, with poetry at the forefront. Aesthetics is generally understood to be Baumgarten's child, a discipline which was established at a precisely determined time and place: first of all in the thesis *Meditationes philosophicae de nonnullis ad poema pertinentibus*,<sup>1</sup> defended at the Prussian university of Halle and published in 1735, later developed in lectures series at the University of Frankfurt an der Oder and subsequently embodied in two editions in 1750 and 1758. The majority of commentaries nevertheless add that Baumgarten's achievement resides particularly in establishing the word 'aesthetics' as a title, rather than in the acceptance of his conception of the nature of the new discipline. The definitive international promotion of 'his' term, which can be considered to have been adopted by the English philosophical tradition in the nineteenth century,<sup>2</sup> had no connection to Baumgarten's project in terms of content.

A curious mixture of the intensive identification of the establishment of aesthetics with a specific person and the sudden, almost immediate casting into doubt of the actual project, culminating in its neglect, presents a challenge for us to seek causes, reasons, and motivations for this evident reticence. In this

<sup>1</sup> *Reflections on Poetry; Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten's Meditationes philosophicae de nonnullis ad poema pertinentibus*, trans., with the original text, introduction, and notes, by Karl Aschenbrenner and William B. Holther (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1954).

<sup>2</sup> For the progressive promotion of the term 'aesthetics' in selected European languages, and its transformation in terms of content, see Hans Reiss, 'Die Einbürgerung der Ästhetik in der deutschen Sprache des achtzehnten Jahrhunderts oder Baumgarten und seine Wirkung', *Jahrbuch der deutschen Schillergesellschaft* 37 (1993): 109–38, 137–8; Karlheinz Barck and Jörg Heininger, 'Ästhetik/ästhetisch', part 5, in *Ästhetische Grundbegriffe: Historisches Wörterbuch in sieben Bänden*, eds Karlheinz Barck et al., vol. 1 (Stuttgart, Weimar: Metzler, 2000), 342–68.

respect two circumstances appear to be decisive. The first is connected to the complex and, with regard to Baumgarten's conception of aesthetics, markedly critical manner of its reception in the second half of the eighteenth century. Within the German philosophical tradition, the Frankfurt *professor ordinarius* was primarily honoured as a metaphysician and philosopher of ethics. Aesthetics played a peripheral role in positive evaluation, as accentuated by Dagmar Mirbach, the editor of the volume under review. Moreover, it is aesthetics that immediately became, as repeatedly shown by the scholarly literature, the subject of systematic and diverse criticism. The philosophical doubts of Christian Wolff, the literary-oriented attacks of Johann Christoph Gottsched, the anthropological criticism of Johann Gottfried Herder and Georg Hamann, and particularly the explicit rejection of the very fundamentals of Baumgarten's aesthetic considerations by Immanuel Kant forced any interest in his standpoint to the sidelines.<sup>3</sup> The more pronounced and, mainly, more persistent promotion of these fundamentals was not helped even by those supporters from the ranks of opponents to Gottschedian poetics and embracing not only poets (in particular the Anacreontic),<sup>4</sup> but also the emerging generation of critics headed by Moses Mendelssohn and Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, as well as certain philosophers, in particular Baumgarten's colleague, Georg Friedrich Meier, *Professor Ordinarius* of Philosophy at Halle.<sup>5</sup> Nor were these adherents, who primarily subscribed to Baumgarten's conception of the poem as the perfect sensual language, able to challenge the authority of Kant in his focused polemic against Baumgarten's project throughout the 'critical period'.<sup>6</sup> Kant's opinions on beauty and taste, casting doubt on the possibility of their strictly logical scientific nature and also intentionally directed beyond the boundaries of sensual perception, met with great acclaim and were – in contrast to Baumgarten's opinions – developed consistently over

<sup>3</sup> On the reception of Baumgarten's aesthetics see Hans Reiss, 'Die Einbürgerung der Ästhetik in der deutschen Sprache des achtzehnten Jahrhunderts oder Baumgarten und seine Wirkung', *Jahrbuch der deutschen Schillergesellschaft* 37 (1993): 109–38; Dieter Kliche, 'Ästhetik/ästhetisch', parts 2–4, in *Ästhetische Grundbegriffe: Historisches Wörterbuch in sieben Bänden*, eds Karlheinz Barck et al., vol. 1 (Stuttgart, Weimar: Metzler, 2000), 331–42.

<sup>4</sup> For the relationship of Baumgarten and the Anacreontic poets, compare the works by Theodor Verwey, part of the project 'Alexander Gottlieb Baumgartens Ästhetik und ihre Rezeption im 18. Jahrhundert'.

<sup>5</sup> See Georg Friedrich Meier, *Frühe Schriften zur ästhetischen Erziehung der Deutschen*, 3 vols, eds Hans-Joachim Kertscher and Günter Schenk (Halle: Hallescher Verlag, 1999, 2000, 2002).

<sup>6</sup> For more on Kant's approach to Baumgarten's aesthetics and with reference to Kant's individual works, see Dieter Kliche, 'Ästhetik/ästhetisch', parts 2–4, in *Ästhetische Grundbegriffe: Historisches Wörterbuch in sieben Bänden*, eds Karlheinz Barck et al., vol. 1 (Stuttgart and Weimar: Metzler, 2000), 333–6.

time. It was not until post-Adorno aesthetics that an attempt was made to rehabilitate and update Baumgarten.<sup>7</sup> The renewed interest was connected with a constantly growing historiographical interest which is evident over the last three decades, as testified to by the many articles, prefaces, conferences, and monographs.<sup>8</sup>

An integral corollary of this interest – and here we come to the second group of reasons for the reticent attitude towards Baumgarten's aesthetics – was the growth of modern German translations (as well as French, English,<sup>9</sup> and Italian) of his works originally written in Latin, even if the translations were incomplete. The fact that Baumgarten wrote his core aesthetic treatises in Latin at the very end of the period in which scholarly works were written in Latin, compounded by the fact that this was a form of Latin which even his contemporaries found difficult to comprehend, was another serious obstacle which prevented the spread of his ideas. The linguistic inaccessibility was further burdened by the rationalistic methodology used, fully linked to systematic references to Graeco-Roman poetry and rhetoric, approaches soon definitively superseded by Kant's criticism. Even the considerable scope of Baumgarten's aesthetics, despite its fragmentary nature, did not make the study of his work any easier. This inauspicious situation began to improve in the 1980s, with modern German translations accompanied by comprehensive prefaces and critical apparatuses.<sup>10</sup> Although of extraordinary merit, they were limited to only selected passages of Baumgarten's *Aesthetics*. The book under review – the first complete German translation of the two volumes of Baumgarten's *Aesthetics* from 1750 and 1758 – is the fine fruit of these endeavours to make his writings accessible to a wider circle of scholars. The texts were translated and edited by Dagmar Mirbach, Associate Professor in the Department of Philosophy at Eberhard Karls Universität, Tübingen.

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, the articles by Howard Caygill, Rüdiger Campe, Eberhard Ortland, and Steffen W. Groß in *Deutsche Zeitschrift für Philosophie* 49 (2001): 233–98. See also Dieter Kliche, 'Ästhetik und Aisthesis', *Weimarer Beiträge* 44 (1998): 485–505; and Axel Spree, 'Die Aktualität der Ästhetik Baumgartens', in *Aktualität der Aufklärung*, ed. Ryszard Rózanowski, 153–65 (Wrocław: WUW, 2000).

<sup>8</sup> For more on this, see the bibliography in the book under review.

<sup>9</sup> Charles Harrison, Paul Wood, and Jason Gaiger, eds, *Art in Theory 1648–1815: An Anthology of Changing Ideas* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 487–91.

<sup>10</sup> See Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten, *Texte zur Grundlegung der Ästhetik*, trans. and ed. Hans Rudolf Schweizer (Hamburg: Meiner, 1983); Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten, *Theoretische Ästhetik: Die grundlegenden Abschnitte aus der 'Aesthetica' (1750/58)*, trans. and ed. Hans Rudolf Schweizer (Hamburg: Meiner, 1983). Also compare Michael Jäger, *Kommentierende Einführung in Baumgartens "Aesthetica"* (Hildesheim, New York: Olms 1980); Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten, *Meditationes philosophicae de nonnullis ad poema pertinentibus / Philosophische Betrachtungen über einige Bedingungen des Gedichtes*, trans. and ed. Heinz Paetzold (Hamburg: Meiner, 1983).

Work on this overall demanding project began in the 1990s. The publication itself was preceded by the creation of a special website dedicated to Baumgarten (<http://www.alexander-gottlieb-baumgarten.de>), which the editor continually adds to, providing numerous initiatives to develop the study of Baumgarten beyond the boundaries of the published book. The edition itself comprises two volumes. The first is a bilingual Latin-German version of Baumgarten's *Aesthetics* from 1750, supplemented with the content of both volumes, an introductory note, and introduction; the second is a Latin-German edition of the second part of *Aesthetics* from 1758, the content of both volumes, errata, notes, an appendix with passages from Baumgarten's *Metaphysics* and *Philosophy of Ethics* to which *Aesthetics* refers, a glossary, an index, and a bibliography. The mere enumeration of the critical apparatus which the editor has provided the book is vast and merits particular mention.

The publisher's notes (pp. 935–1050) comprise not only the usual information about the quoted authors and works, but also draw attention to the different manners of translating the relevant parts of the text in comparison with previous translations, as well as additions to quotations from the German notes made by an unknown student attending Baumgarten's lectures, which were discovered by Bernhard Poppe.<sup>11</sup> These notes frequently specify and identify the standpoints of the Latin original. The combination of the original text, translation, and notes provides the reader with a strikingly more comprehensive conception of Baumgarten's ideas. The appendix (pp. 1051–1116) contains chronologically arranged sections from Baumgarten's main non-aesthetic works to which *Aesthetics* refers. These sections are reprinted in the complete Latin original with German translations. The glossary (pp. 1117–92) provides an alphabetical listing of all Latin terms appearing in *Aesthetics*, together with their German equivalents as used by Baumgarten for translation in his German works or taken from dictionaries of the time, selected German philosophical works of his contemporaries and German indexes to their Latin works. The German equivalents always include bibliographic references. The editor herself describes the glossary as a tool enabling the reader to check the quality of her translation. The benefits of the glossary are far greater than just this. The linking of the Latin terms with their German counterparts, for example, allows readers whose mother tongue is not German to gain insight into the overall complexity of the individual Latin terms in the

<sup>11</sup> Bernhard Poppe, *Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten: Seine Bedeutung und Stellung in der Leibniz-Wolffschen Philosophie und seine Beziehungen zu Kant; nebst einer Veröffentlichung einer bisher unbekannten Handschrift der Ästhetik Baumgartens* (Borna, Leipzig: Noske, 1907).

context of the German philosophical usage of the time. It also reminds one to watch out for the constant pitfalls of ahistoricism and always to be extra careful when dealing with Latin and German philosophical works. The index of names (pp. 1193–1201) covers historical, literary, and mythological figures in the German translation; the subject index (pp. 1203–51) serves as a complement to the glossary, and contains the Latin and Greek terminology used by Baumgarten. The volume ends with an extensive bibliography (pp. 1253–1305), divided into three parts: primary sources (covering editions of Baumgarten's works, including translations, lecture notes, reviews, obituaries, and a list of works cited by Baumgarten), a selection of the secondary literature, comprising works relating directly to Baumgarten and to eighteenth-century aesthetics, poetry, and rhetoric, as well as a list of general reference works.

This highly useful, broadly conceived system gives the impression that the publisher has endeavoured primarily to help the reader understand the text of Baumgarten's *Aesthetics*, to understand Baumgarten far more than a mere translation would allow, even a precise facing-page translation or the original itself, unless read in immediate connection with earlier Baumgarten works from which *Aesthetics* emerged. *Aesthetics* here is the alpha and omega of it all; the German translation opens up the work in a manner that is as integral as possible, with the aim of enabling even the reader who does not sufficiently understand modern philosophical Latin to penetrate the original as deeply as possible.

In the Introduction (Einführung zur fragmentarischen Ganzheit von Alexander Gottlieb Baumgartens *Aesthetica* (1750/58), I; pp. XV–LXXX), Mirbach has entirely detached herself from the complex, mainly hostile reception of Baumgarten's *Aesthetics*. She was probably worried that such a digression could hinder her main aim: to concentrate on the text itself, its opening up 'from within'. She started from the premise, which she attempted to substantiate in interpretation, that Baumgarten's *Aesthetics*, despite its fragmentary nature, is a highly systematic and thoroughly elaborated project, any inconsistencies or internal tensions of which are illusory and can be eliminated by appropriate interpretation, taking into account either Baumgarten's philosophical work as a whole or the decisive authorities on Baumgarten, headed by Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz. Her interpretation thus eschews both contemporary updates and interpretative movements. All is subjected to the aim of presenting the inferences of Baumgarten himself, free, if possible, from later contaminations, to demonstrate his stringent logicity and subsequently to demand an eminent position for his work in the German and European philosophical tradition. Mirbach finds arguments which are intended to convince us of their

importance particularly in their metaphysical overlap. She hails Baumgarten as the first philosopher to redeploy Leibnizian 'Christian metaphysics' 'in eine umfassende, ontologisch und psychologisch begründete ästhetische Theorie, [...] in der die in der sinnlichen Erscheinung des *phaenomenon* zutage tretende Schönheit nicht nur als Ausdruck der menschlichen Erkenntnis der in Gott gegründeten Vollkommenheit der Welt, sondern zugleich auch als Ausdruck des – im Zweifelsfall gegen gegebene historische, politische oder gesellschaftliche Normen gerichteten – freiheitlichen menschlichen Strebens nach der gottgewollten Verwirklichung des Besten erwiesen werden soll' (p. LXXIX).

It is impossible to say with certainty whether Mirbach will succeed in the aims of this ambitious, imposing work of translation and editing, whether the attention of the scholars other than specialists will be drawn to Baumgarten's aesthetics, whether this work will help Baumgarten's aesthetics to be better understood, if possible directly and unmediated, or whether this work will become an important source of new initiatives for contemporary philosophy. What can be stated with certainty, however, is that it would be difficult to conceive of a work more thoroughly familiarizing one with Baumgarten's *Aesthetics*.

Tomáš Hlobil

Charles University, Prague

THlobil@seznam.cz