THE QUESTION of the AESTHETIC

edited by GEORGE LEVINE
The Question of the Aesthetic
The Question of the Aesthetic

Edited by

GEORGE LEVINE
# Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>List of Illustrations</th>
<th>vii</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>List of Contributors</td>
<td>ix</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>George Levine</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## 1. TWO THEORIES

1. The Experience of Art
   *Derek Attridge* 27

2. The Ontology of Artworlds: A Post-Human, Coevolutionary Framework for Aesthetics, Art History, and Art Criticism
   *Richard O. Prum* 42

## 2. BEAUTY AND UTILITY

3. Beauty and Her Sisters in the Nineteenth Century and After
   *Jonah Siegel* 71

4. Gates of Horn in Ivory Towers: On Beauty’s Truth
   *Herbert F. Tucker* 98

## 3. AESTHETICS AND POLITICS

5. What We Do: The New This and the New That
   *Isobel Armstrong* 117

6. Can Migrants Be Seen? Some Representations of Migration in Contemporary Art, Film, and Literature
   *Josephine McDonagh* 137

7. Aesthetic Poison
   *Edgar Garcia* 159

8. Aesthetic Criticism and the Postcolonial
   *Ankhi Mukherjee* 170
4. READING CLOSELY: FORM AND MEANING

9. On the Last Paragraph of the 1859 Edition of Darwin’s *Origin of Species*  
   *Myra Jehlen*  
   187

10. Wild Aesthetics: D.H. Lawrence’s “Art for My Sake”  
    *Philip Davis*  
    191

11. “Whose Eye Darted Contagious Fire”: Aesthetic Form, Performative Action, and *Paradise Lost*  
    *Richard Eldridge*  
    206

12. Tennyson’s Tears, Brooks’s Motivations  
    *Susan J. Wolfson*  
    221

5. OVERVIEW

13. Do Birds Disagree? The Place of Aesthetic Value in Advocacy for the Humanities  
    *Helen Small*  
    243

Works Cited  
263

Index  
281
# List of Illustrations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Illustration</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2.1a and b</td>
<td>Visualizations of artworlds</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>Contexts of aesthetic evaluation</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>The ontology of canons</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>The hut bower, mossy courtyard, and curated aesthetic collections of a male Vogelkop Bowerbird (<em>Amblyornis inornata</em>, Ptilinorhynchidae) in the Arfak Mountains of Irian Jaya, Indonesian New Guinea</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Photo courtesy of Brett Benz.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.1</td>
<td>Engraving first published in The Illustrated London News, 28 August 1897</td>
<td>239</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
List of Contributors


Derek Attridge has long had an interest in philosophical approaches to literature, reflected in such books as Peculiar Language: Literature as Difference from the Renaissance to James Joyce (Cornell, 1988); The Singularity of Literature (Routledge, 2004/17); Reading and Responsibility: Deconstruction’s Traces (Edinburgh, 2010); and The Work of Literature (Oxford, 2015). He edited Jacques Derrida’s Acts of Literature (Routledge, 1994), and co-authored The Craft of Poetry: Dialogues on Minimal Interpretation (Routledge, 2015) with Henry Staten. His other books deal with South African writing, the history and forms of poetry, and the work of James Joyce, and he is completing a book on modernist form in fiction since Joyce. He is Emeritus Professor at the University of York, UK, and a Fellow of the British Academy.

Philip Davis is Emeritus Professor of Literature and Psychology, University of Liverpool, where he was Director of the Centre for Research into Reading, Literature and Society (CRILS). His books include The Victorians 1830–1880, Reading and the Reader, The Transferred Life of George Eliot, and Reading for Life, all published by Oxford University Press. My William James is forthcoming in 2022 as part of a new series with Oxford University Press, My Reading, which he edits along with the series The Literary Agenda. He is also editor of Studies in Bibliotherapy with Anthem Press.

Richard Eldridge is a Lecturer in Philosophy at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville and Charles and Harriet Cox McDowell Professor Emeritus of Philosophy at Swarthmore College. He is the author of The Persistence of Romanticism (2001); An Introduction to the Philosophy of Art (2003, 2104); Literature, Life, and Modernity (2008); Werner Herzog: Filmmaker and Philosopher (2019); and several other books. He is the General Series Editor of Oxford Studies in Philosophy and Literature and the Editor of The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy and Literature.
Edgar Garcia is a poet and scholar of the hemispheric cultures of the Americas. He is the author of *Skins of Columbus: A Dream Ethnography* (Fence Books, 2019); *Signs of the Americas: A Poetics of Pictography, Hieroglyphs, and Khipu* (University of Chicago Press, 2020); *Infinite Regress* (Bom Dia Books, 2021); and *Emergency: Reading the Popol Vuh in a Time of Crisis* (University of Chicago Press, 2022). He is Associate Professor in the Department of English Language and Literature at the University of Chicago, where he also teaches in the department of Creative Writing.

Myra Jehlen is Professor Emeritus of English at Rutgers University. Her essays and books comprise readings whose common thread is a view that the meaning of a literary work is in the writing.


Josephine McDonagh is George M. Pullman Professor in the Department of English Language and Literature at the University of Chicago. Before coming to Chicago she taught in a number of universities in Britain and Ireland, most recently King’s College London. She is the author of *Literature in a Time of Migration: British Fiction and the Movement of People 1815–1876* (2021); *Child Murder and British Culture, 1720–1900* (2003); *George Eliot* (1997); and *De Quincey’s Disciplines* (1994), and has co-edited several volumes on topics including gender politics, literature’s encounters with nineteenth-century science, Dickens and the French Revolution, colonial commodity culture, and migration studies. She is currently Director of the Nicholson Center for British Studies at the University of Chicago, and an editor of Modern Philology.

Ankhi Mukherjee is Professor of English and World Literatures at the University of Oxford and a Fellow of Wadham College. She is the author of *Aesthetic Hysteria: The Great Neurosis in Victorian Melodrama and Contemporary Fiction* (Routledge, 2007); *What Is a Classic? Postcolonial Rewriting and Invention of the Canon* (Stanford University Press, 2014); and *Unseen City: The Psychic Lives of the Urban Poor* (Cambridge University Press, 2021). *What Is a Classic?* won the British Academy prize for English literature in 2015. Mukherjee has published articles on a wide range of topics—Victorian literature and culture, postcolonial studies, and intellectual history—in peer-reviewed journals such as *PMLA, MLQ, Contemporary Literature, Criticism, Parallax*, and others. She has edited *A Concise Companion to Psychoanalysis, Literature, and Culture* (2014, with Laura Marcus); *After Lacan* (2018); and *Decolonising the English Literary Curriculum* (2022, with Ato Quayson). Mukherjee was visiting fellow at the Humanities Research Centre, Australian National University, in 2014, and the John Hinkley Visiting Professor at Johns Hopkins University in 2019.
Richard O. Prum is the William Robertson Coe Professor of Ornithology in the Department of Ecology and Evolutionary Biology at Yale University, and Curator of Ornithology at the Yale Peabody Museum of Natural History. Prum has done research on avian phylogeny, anatomy, behavior, song, feather development and evolution, plumage coloration, sexual selection, and aesthetic evolution. Prum’s book The Evolution of Beauty—How Darwin’s Forgotten Theory of Mate Choice Shapes the Animal World—and Us (Doubleday), was a 2018 Pulitzer Prize Finalist in general non-fiction.

Jonah Siegel is Distinguished Professor of English and co-director of the British Studies Center at Rutgers University. He is the author of Desire and Excess: The Nineteenth-Century Culture of Art (Princeton University Press, 2000), Haunted Museum: Longing, Travel, and the Art-Romance Tradition (Princeton University Press, 2005), and Material Inspirations: The Interests of the Art Object in the Nineteenth Century and After (Oxford University Press, 2020), as well as the editor of The Emergence of the Modern Museum: An Anthology of Nineteenth-Century Sources (Oxford University Press, 2008). His most recent monograph, Overlooking Damage (Stanford University Press, 2022), is a study of the cultural politics of antiquities at risk.

Helen Small is Merton Professor of English Language and Literature Merton College, at the University of Oxford. Her books include The Long Life (Oxford University Press, 2007) (awarded the Truman Capote Award for Literary Criticism, and the British Academy’s Rose Mary Crawshay Prize for 2008) and The Function of Cynicism at the Present Time (Oxford University Press, 2021). Her 2013 book The Value of the Humanities is a critical account of the principal arguments most often used to defend the value of the Humanities. It is widely credited with clarifying and sharpening the terms of contemporary public debate.

Herbert F. Tucker holds the John C. Coleman Chair in English at the University of Virginia, where he serves as an editor for the Victorian series and for New Literary History. He has written books on Browning, Tennyson, and the British epic poem during the long nineteenth century, and some hundred essays and reviews chiefly to do with Romantic and Victorian poetry and poetics. Edited volumes include Under Criticism, Victorian Literature 1830 – 1900, and A New Companion to Victorian Literature and Culture. His online scansion tutorial For Better for Verse remains a work in progress open to all comers. His next book seeks to correlate the ineffability of charm with the irreference of spell-casting language.

Susan J. Wolfson, Professor of English at Princeton University, has had a long care for the subtle dynamics of poetic formings, first explored in her award-winning Formal Charges: The Shaping of Poetry in British Romanticism (1997). Subsequent books include Borderlines: The Shiftings of Gender in British Romanticism (2006); Romantic Interactions: The Social Turns of Literary Action (2010); Reading John Keats (2016); and Romantic Shades and Shadows (2018); On he flared (a contextualized close reading of four letters by Keats, 2021). Forthcoming is A Greeting of the Spirit (also on Keats), and The First of a New Genus: Mary Wollstonecraft’s Vindication of the Rights of Woman (2023).
Introduction

George Levine

1. The Urgency of the Beautiful

I write in the shadow of Covid-19, and its scarily evolving variants. I sit at this computer now, hoping not to die before there is sufficient vaccine to protect me. In such conditions, it seems odd, to say the least, that I am writing not about failures in the distribution of the vaccine, not about the political malfeasance that has allowed and in effect caused so many deaths, but about “the question of the aesthetic.” And I write with a sense of urgency as I orchestrate a set of deeply engaged, creative, fresh and very various explorations of why and how the aesthetic matters to human psychological, social, and economic flourishing. Don’t I have better things to do? More important things to worry about? Did I need to enlist a dozen or so critics and scholars to engage this issue while Rome and the rest of the world are burning? Obviously, getting the aesthetic right will do nothing to protect me or the millions of others from the deadliness of the pandemic, or from the political violence and intrinsic injustices that are further emerging with the extension of globalization. The aesthetic has nothing to do with survival, reproduction, or money (well, let’s keep that in reserve and settle for adding the word “directly” to follow “nothing”).

That “nothing” is part of the point, but the “directly” is equally important, a kind of hedge, implying of course, that in the long run, though only indirectly, the aesthetic does have something to do with the very basic conditions of our lives. It is an old point and, by now, a much embattled one. Anyone at all interested in the subject has been through the routine that runs from Baumgartner to Kant, with a little Schiller thrown in; has shrugged with leftist defiance or scientistic contempt at the idea that any human product, anything at all extant in the world, can somehow be cut loose either from constraining context or the survivalist and reproductive energies of all life. If it survives and thrives (this is the basic argument of ultra- Darwinism and most evolutionary psychology) it is functional, embedded in the normal algorithmic processes of natural selection. It seems that all sides cannot be right: we can’t accede to the overwhelming evidence that all life is constrained by the rules of survival and reproduction and by the cultural forces impinging on everything we do, and at the same time argue for the existence of elements that are miraculously free of those constraints.
That, however, is where the “aesthetic” this book sets out to defend and affirm finds itself. Or almost. It is that seemingly impossible position that makes for its singular power, and for its singular difficulty in cultures in which utility is all. I am not arguing, nor would any of the contributors to this volume, that there is anything entirely free from the constraints of the material and cultural conditions in which we have our being—not even our understanding, our deeply personal feelings, our reason. And yet the art and literature with which the essays in this book are concerned, and whose contextual importance, at the moment of their production, is obviously the primary motive for their particular existences, enter the world in forms that, however paradoxical it may seem, resist the universal and irresistible constraints. That’s one of the reasons the Kantian ideal of purposeless purpose, worked out in his voluminous and complex consideration of perception and judgment, keeps emerging, even as it is so regularly dismissed in modern criticism as merely idealistic. The essays in this volume are themselves all over the place in relation to this idea, but I think it fair to say that all of them, in their variety, accept the idea that the aesthetic occupies a peculiar and indispensable place in the epistemological and ethical and biological economy that constitutes ordinary human life. All else, outside of the world of play (which evolutionary psychology would also include as utilitarian), is immediately and fully subservient to the exigencies of necessity and utility. The aesthetic defers that subservience sufficiently to represent, at least imaginatively, possibilities and satisfactions beyond the limits of immediate usefulness, and in so doing becomes variously and powerfully useful.

With this volume, I am not proposing even to try to resolve the problem upon which, through centuries, we have never been able to reach agreement. The primary object is, perhaps ironically, more practical: to bring the aesthetic unembarrassedly to the center of critical attention, to affirm its importance and explore its singularity and its potentialities, and along the way to be unapologetic and occasionally even sentimental about it. In the face of diminished support for degree programs in literature and the arts, and of culture-wide assumptions, with significant financial consequences, about the inutility of aesthetic studies, it is important to make a case for what is distinct, what is singular about the subject, and about what, in its singularity, it brings to the table. The aesthetic—with all its aura of inutility—needs defending. Within the literary professions themselves there is considerable doubt that a case for literary education can be sustained without demonstration of immediate practical, moral efficacy. With all the important developing interest in the aesthetic, “Literary studies,” claims Michael Clune, “is paralyzed not because it has no compelling rationale, but because it is divided by two incompatible visions of its work: as artistic education and as moral education” (Clune 2019). Confronting the question of the aesthetic, this book is unapologetically committed to making a case for “artistic education,” to demonstrating the critically important role it plays in our culture. Exploring it afresh is...
one goal of this book; demonstration of its compatibility with a wide range of critical approaches—some of them often regarded as incompatible with an aesthetic emphasis—is an essential component of the exploration. Such demonstration is aimed at disarming the critique, from outside and inside, of the uselessness of the aesthetic. The outside resists support of the arts and humanities disciplines (despite sometimes significant investment in the arts), the inside swerves to the work of the more ostensibly useful social sciences.

My argument here, however complicating the variations on it in the essays, begins with this: the aesthetic is a fundamental element in all forms of sentient life. While it opens a space of excess, in the sense that it entails something other than mere utility, it is no excretion. It is the space of excess and of creativity and change that is regularly underestimated just because it can seem so detached from usefulness and necessity. It is the very basis of art and literature, not simply belles-lettres but essential to its shaping, its forms, its capacity to engage and break free in imagination of alternatives from the constraining necessities of survival and reproduction. Each instance of art comes laden with meaning and possibilities that can stretch out far into politics and large social and cultural problems of the day and deep into the personal and the intimate, and almost always into the particular. That literature can engage such problems may well be a truism among a generation of remarkable literary scholars who have trained themselves so impressively as historians and social scientists. But unlike the knowledge that other disciplines produce, it produces knowledge with affect, knowledge tinged with moral energy. The usefulness of the aesthetic is not directly “practical”; its value lies in its peculiarly humanizing force, in its capacity to expand boundaries of thought and feeling beyond the practical norms of every day and the linear thinking of non-fiction. If we are to “sell” English and language departments to universities and the societies that support them, it must be because we value artistic education and talk about how, whether it gets it right or wrong, art does things that other modes of expression can’t do; it opens up, explores, reveals, and creates new angles of perception. The knowledge it generates is not discursive and generalizing but persistently singular. It poses critical questions that disciplines and discourses, not engaged with problems like form or “beauty,” cannot.

As the writers in this volume affirm the centrality of the aesthetic in their understandings of literature and art, they engage, almost inescapably, with the kinds of problems that have become increasingly important to criticism as it leans toward ethical education and is directed with moral passion and determination to address injustices, inequality, prejudices, imperialism, sexism, racism, economic disparities. Herbert Tucker gets at one of the points that led to the development of this book. He claims that attention to the demands that the aesthetic imposes on creativity and criticism “can put a salutary check on the rush to relevance in contemporary humanities study, which will labor to better effect, even in service to the causes that summon it most urgently, as it redoubles attention to the resources
of artistic form, and the unsuspected truth that beauty harbors” (this volume, Chapter 4). Both sides of this bold assertion are crucial to my point: the importance of attention to the aesthetic; the value of the aesthetic when put to the uses of “the causes that summon it most urgently.”

Undertaking this sort of book, I would be, to say the least, disingenuous, if I didn’t recognize how embroiled the subject is in conflicts about politics and cultural relevance. My own earlier efforts to reconcile a concern for the aesthetic with the various political agenda that were coming to prominence in critical discourse were often broadly contested, both as analysis of what was going on and as retrograde retreat from politics. Michael Bérubé’s strong critique of my Aesthetics and Ideology (1994), beautifully formulates a question which I thought I was asking then, and which is a significant part of the rationale for this book: “Is it necessary to overlook the specific properties of literature in order to read literary works in terms of their relations to larger cultural formations?” (Bérubé, 1998, p. 13). His answer and mine are the same: “no.” If we differ it is primarily about the degree to which the distinctive work of the aesthetic is in fact often obscured by what Tucker has called in Chapter 4 the “rush to relevance,” and on what is lost with that obscuring. More recently, another attack on my earlier work takes a rather different line. Joseph North claims that the effort to give priority to the aesthetic in criticism, “in the absence of any positive commitment to the political per se, in fact quickly turns it into the enemy” (North, 2017, p. 135). My differences here are of course far greater than they are with Bérubé’s. But on one factual point, I agree. Politics are not the point of my argument. Artistic education is. Attentive and politically insightful criticism can indeed operate together. But while I am eager to insist on the compatibility of an emphasis on the aesthetic and a commitment to a political reading, politics are not my point, though they do not consequently become the enemy. I want to argue, and demonstrate through the essays gathered here, that not making politics the point does not preclude recognizing political implications, the politics both of the art and of the criticism of the art. Art and the aesthetic do not emerge from a vacuum. The aesthetic might be thought of as “a means to,” that is, the condition that allows a particular mode of attention to virtually any subject, any object. Attention to the aesthetic strategies by which the artist creates the work can open the way to an effective kind of political concern that is specific to what art can do and other discursive forms cannot. That attention to the aesthetic is not incompatible with attention to politics is, then, a crucial part of the point of this enterprise. I must leave it to the essays included here to demonstrate. Isobel Armstrong (Chapter 5), for example, argues forcefully and with stunning examples that not only are they not incompatible, but that the disappearance of the aesthetic from central focus is intimately connected to a parallel disappearance of the political. Similarly, Frederic Garcia (Chapter 7) inspects with poetic intensity the materials of art to get at what might be thought of as political, cultural meanings, otherwise invisible.
In Chapter 8, Ankhi Mukherjee provides strong evidence that recognition of “larger cultural formations” is not only totally compatible with emphasis on the aesthetic; thinking about it heightens and intensifies recognition of the force of those formations. Chapter 6, Josephine McDonagh’s essay on immigrants and immigrant literature, demonstrates the way in which attention to art, to the aesthetic elements integral to the work, allows for distinct and extremely valuable insights about a particularly crucial and inadequately treated human crisis.

I don’t want to be disingenuous here: obviously, as Tucker has implied, the bias of the arguments I am trying to make is that it is a mistake to take the work of literary criticism as primarily that of addressing, and actively addressing, political problems. But it is crucial to the book’s own more or less political objective to be clear that while my major object is to focus attention on the aesthetic, another is to break down the binary between aesthetics and politics, to demonstrate how attention to the aesthetic can intensify and heighten political energies. The aesthetic operates wherever there is story, music, art. It is, as it explores all ranges of human experience, a source of pleasure, or, put perhaps less decadently, of intensified feelings. What I want to emphasize here is that attention to the aesthetic allows for endless variations, is not an impediment to concern with those large cultural matters that Bérubé invokes.

Art is the nearest thing to life, George Eliot argued, and art, not politics, is the direct object and subject of this book. If for some readers that means that the book is either conservative or radical, so I have to leave it. The criticism I am urging here would attend to the aesthetic, and go wherever that might take us, but it is not, as North (2017) would have it, designed to make what it attends to better. The aesthetic and aesthetic criticism is work of “judgment”; that judgment may have political implications, and may not. But this book’s insistence on the singularity of the aesthetic does, after all, have a political object (in part by claiming that the aesthetic in itself is politically neutral): to help establish a firmer standing ground for literature and the criticism that studies it in a university culture and among institutions that regularly devalue or ignore them.

In one of the strongest among many recent efforts to re-establish in criticism the importance of “form,” Caroline Levine has claimed that her book “like many others in the humanities, is an attempt to think about how we might make our world more just” (2015, p. xii). I suppose, given that I think of myself as a fairly nice guy, I would say that this book too is such an attempt. But the thinking about form, language, beauty, art, to which this volume is committed is not “an attempt to think about how we might make the world just.” It is, rather, to make a case for the valuing of and the study of the aesthetic. We can, and often do, put the aesthetic to moral use, but obviously there is no inevitable link between aesthetics, aesthetic criticism, art, and moral improvement. Although I almost inevitably assumed, as I progressed through the lit./crit. profession, that there was something inherently good-making about art and literature, I had to deal with the reality that
a lot of many unattractive projects written by many unattractive people were part of my developing canon of beautiful and moving works. I might find myself, and have found myself, in company with much finer criticism than mine, judging approvingly work that I found, let us say, uncongenial. The power of the aesthetic to attract can certainly be read in a moral mode, but the first step is to watch and understand its movement. The element beyond analysis in literary works, an element evoked variously here by the essays of Philip Davis and Susan Wolfson (Chapters 10 and 12, respectively), requires attention. Art is a medium through which all of us experience emotion, uncover emotion, share emotion. Yes, of course, I am morally engaged, but the interest of this book is to account for the experience of the aesthetic and its multiple possibilities, to explore more fully and self-consciously the singularity of the aesthetic.

I believe it necessary to back away from the idea that professional consideration of the aesthetic requires, morally speaking, some larger end: moral or political transformation. North is no enemy of many of the tools that this book will employ and endorse: close reading, for example, which will necessarily entail implicit or explicit attention to the formal qualities of the texts. But this close reading, he insists, taking as his model I. A. Richards, is aimed at moving beyond mere scholarship that analyses culture and moving on from the analysis for the sake of improving it (North 2017). The break here between the work of getting things right, explaining things, accounting for their power, attending to the strategies of meaning and the work of transformative injunction is striking. In this formulation, the direct object of art and the criticism that illuminates it is to make the world better. My argument, which is precisely the one that North rejects, is that while literature can be used as an instrument, it is not an instrument. The objective of some ultimate good is an object once-removed. Certainly, I—and I take it all the writers gathered here—believe deep in their professional and personal souls, that the world is better for art, and better for the criticism that lives on and off it. But the aesthetic, as Philip Davis here emphasizes and as is central to the work of Elizabeth Grosz, is a site of not knowing—a site of openness and exploration. Where we get in the course of our explorations is an open question, and the consequences of the search and the “arrival,” if we ever arrive, are unpredictable. They are the “once-removed.”

The idea of the “once-removed” has—as I will suggest when I turn to considering, of all things, Darwin’s theory of sexual selection—critical importance in sustaining the distinction I am wanting to preserve, between North’s (2017) and Caroline Levine’s (2015) commitment to the immediate good, and my commitment to the aesthetic. To get there, I will have to move again, though in a very unKantian way, to the notion of purposeless purpose.

The association of the aesthetic with the useless and the excessive is part of the reason it is so frequently associated with the morally retrograde, the merely self-indulgent, the politically quietist, and thus rejected. In North’s argument, the
turn, as he sees it, from the immediate intention to improve is a symptom of the dominance of neo-liberal ideology. But I take the idea of uselessness, which makes for excess, to open a way to understand the creativity of art, the crucial importance of form, the distinctness of art among the multiple possibilities of discourse. The quality, the word, “beauty,” has similar importance and similar affects. I am here committed to arguing unabashedly for the centrality of the “beautiful,” which is, as Jonah Siegel (Chapter 3) plays out in an allegory of the aesthetic, the third and least morally respectable of the three sisters who compose it—ethics, knowledge, and beauty. The sister “in the attic” as it were, but without whom the others lose their efficacy. (It is worth noting that outside of this introduction and Siegel’s essay, the word “beauty” does not emerge as a significant overt topic of any of the essays, and in Derek Attridge’s (Chapter 1) meticulous theorizing positively drops from consideration in discussions of art). Yet when I was attracted to art and criticism it was certainly in part because art was “beautiful.” Art begins by attracting, even if in highly developed forms, it manifests itself as importantly repulsive, or unattractive, a deliberate violation of our instinct for the beautiful. If particular works engaged me intellectually and, say, politically, it was not because I shared their politics (though that certainly helped), but because it was—let’s say it—“beautiful.”

Beauty, is of course, a loaded word, with a long history of definitions and understandings but, on the whole, with a reputation—at least at this historical moment—for leading critics and scholars down the primrose path to quietism and conservatism, that is, to precisely the self-image against which there is such a strong reaction in literary study. Here, however, I am going to be loading on to “beauty” elements of its other aesthetic sisters. And beyond that, I am going to follow some of the directions laid out by Elizabeth Grosz and Richard Prum (Chapter 2), among others, to make claims for the creative, even activist implications of “beauty.” Beauty, far from being the last resort of the self-indulgent, the plaything of the haute bourgeoisie, is a generative, creative force. It is the excess that creates new forms, that, in creating those forms, adds value and gives meaning. It makes for the distinctive work the aesthetic does and can do, which its sisters, knowledge and ethics, cannot do without her. I contend that the aesthetic, however widely it opens up, gets its power from beauty, and that its morally dubious position is unjustified.

It’s best to make clear here that I am not thinking of “beauty” as a thing that inheres “in” aesthetic objects. Obviously, the old cliché holds: beauty is in the eye of the beholder, and beauty is, for example, part of our experience of “nature”—beautiful cliffs, forests, flowers. Although Attridge excludes it as an identifying quality of art and would almost certainly disagree with this part of my argument, I see “beauty” as a concept entirely compatible with his view of art, not as an object but as an event. In the elaboration of the possible significances of “beauty,” elaborately considered in Jonah Siegel’s essay, the idea of the beautiful is
compatibility with developments in art that are distinctly not “beautiful” in any
conventional sense. Richard Prum, like Attridge, does not see the beautiful as a
thing inherent in an object but as an experience, an exchange between perceiver
and perceived. The beautiful, in that sense, is what attracts one viewer to the other,
and that thing may not be what we conventionally think of as pretty. This curious
insubstantial but totally material condition helps account for the almost endless
variety of definitions to which the aesthetic has been subject. But whatever its
nature, beauty, though not perhaps a criterion of art, remains stubbornly in its
vicinity—and without it an account of the aesthetic is impoverished. Aesthetics
has, historically, been seen as “a branch of philosophy dealing with the nature of
beauty.” Fair enough, I say, though to say so is only a beginning.

This volume is not a work of philosophy (though philosophical it will become
from time to time), but what I would like to think of as a common-sense effort to
re-affirm the value of the “aesthetic” in its most current senses, which are helpfully
vague and multiple, but which point us to efforts to understand, critique, absorb,
learn from, enjoy art in any of its forms, in any of its contexts. My starting point is
that, however fuzzy the edges of its definition, the aesthetic is distinguished from
the instrumental purposes of virtually every other product of human labor and
human expression. It is, by its nature, excessive—more than is necessary (where
“necessary” points to utility). To do its job on your omelet or your pork chop, did
that fork have to be designed just as it is? To house those people efficiently, did
that house have to be designed like that? To assert the horrors of war, and
particularly the war in Spain, did we really need “Guernica”? The turn to the
beautiful, even in objects that are understood as “functional,” is a form of excess.
What’s going on here?

The “morally dubious” element of the “aesthetic” has to do with the undeniable
fact that it, and the beauty with which it is concerned, lug around a vague perfume
of the aesthete—the dandyish preoccupation with orchids and lilies, and peacock
feathers, and decadence, and a rather snotty hierarchy of taste. But delight in
“attractive” things is not the exclusive property of the rich and self-indulgent.
Benjamin’s attack on the attempt to establish firm boundaries for the aesthetic has
taken firm root in modern criticism, though he himself was seduced by the “aura”
he saw surrounding art, and his argument was situated in a critical moment of
new fascist domination. Politicizing art, partly as a consequence of his powerful
arguments, has become for many an essential condition of criticism. But it seems
to me that in our moment, the rejection of focus on the aesthetic comes from a
culture bound to a dangerous economic rationalism, from that very neo-liberal
energy that banishes all but the practical, all but the power of wealth. Oddly then,
“Beauty,” which in the Benjaminian context has largely become the embarrassing
sister, surrendering to an ethical polemic, can in our present context be regarded
as a critical element in resisting the fascism with which Benjamin associated it.
Without trying to seal the aesthetic off from the living contexts in which it
emerges, I want to emphasize in this book what I might call in relation to
Benjamin’s critique, the “non-fascist” aspects of the aesthetic. I would add yet
another complication to these arguments by way of Jonathan Kramnick’s remark-
able treatment of the subject in Paper Minds. Critically for my purposes here, he
identifies two modes of the aesthetic and of the beautiful. The one, which he
develops in considering the word “handsome,” is intimately engaged with repre-
senting the world close to hand and of use, an ecologically engaged mode of
representation. The other is “aesthetics as contemplation”: a quiet viewing of the
beautiful as not close to hand, but out there, to be admired passively (Kramnick,
2018, p. 84). I take it that it is the latter form of aesthetics that Benjamin (and
North) was resisting.¹

The attractiveness of beauty digs down to roots in sexuality, and the aesthetic
obviously transcends even those extraordinary peacock feathers whose
extravagance so upset Darwin on his quest for a unified theory of evolution.
Mathematicians think of their theorems and solutions as “beautiful.” Remarkable
athletic performance is often described, even by the most macho of us, as “beauti-
ful.” “Design” is a critical element in almost any product that is circulated in human
society. Beauty, though natural objects may be beautiful, implies art of virtually any
kind, and certainly more than mere prettiness, including matters of form and style,
but also matters of knowledge, and, among the three allegorical sisters, ethics (and
therefore, politics). Although, despite Keats, truth is not equivalent to beauty, and
beauty not equivalent to truth, the argument here is that the aesthetic should be
recognized to imply that beauty gives access to a kind of knowledge that might not
emerge without it. The idea of “justice” is not baked into nature; it is a human
imagination of equality, of equitableness, of balance, of form. It is a conception in
excess of natural processes that evolve not on grounds of justice or desire, but in
response to the pressures of necessity. The world (if not humans) would get on quite
well without justice, but it wouldn’t be nearly as much fun.

It is important to note that the Oxford English Dictionary definition of the
aesthetic that emphasizes “beauty” is the second. The first is “of or pertaining to
sensuous perception.” And I want to swerve from the idealistic elements of the
Kantian tradition by emphasizing that root in the sensuous, the material—a
materialized Kantianism. In any case, the tortuous history of the word until it
emerges here as another entrant in a two-century-long debate cannot disguise its
root in the senses. We may have left behind the Greek root, probably derived from
an ur word *aw., to perceive, but the aesthetic is all about sense perception. Even
the dandified form of it, with its emphasis on taste, invokes a word rooted in the

¹ A detailed reading of Kramnick’s remarkable analyses would almost certainly qualify my persistent
argument for “inutility,” and “indirection.” But I think that on the whole, his reading is compatible with
the arguments I make here, particularly in recognition of the materiality of the aesthetic, and also in
relation to the development of the aesthetic through sexual selection, in which the recognition of the
beautiful is also immediately social and transformative.
material: “taste.” However idealistic aesthetic theory can become, it never completely loses its fundamental connection with the senses. The aesthetic, the beautiful—these are not, as they have been taken often by both friends and enemies of the humanities, mindful luxuries to be considered only after attention to the serious business of life, economics, politics. They are sources not only of pleasure—something that as “serious” critics we are likely to underestimate—but of different ways of thinking and feeling. Although I want to include here in the idea of the aesthetic an unabashed commitment both to the beautiful and the simple pleasures that follow from it, the responsibility of this book is to make a case for the distinctive things that aesthetic work can do even as its province is so often worlds elsewhere, worlds imagined. Several of the essays here examine works that unfold their meanings primarily through strategies of representation, techniques, forms.

It takes no deep insight to notice how, as the pressures of the pandemic intensified and spread, as we became isolated in our own bubbles via lockdowns and quarantines, people emerged on balconies singing; zoom concerts for full orchestras and choirs circulated around the world; novels, music, museum collections online for viewing, movies, became fundamental to the daily lives of millions of people all over the world. A whole genre of the extended serial and the booming habit of binge-watching blossomed. Given that human contact is absolutely essential to the well-being of us social animals, we have struggled to find ways to make our lives supportable again, and the world of art, in all its various forms, has been central to that struggle. During this time of constraint, suicides have increased and mental health problems and domestic violence have surged. Marriages have disintegrated. And almost universally, in resistance to the inescapable constraints that have exacerbated all these problems, we have turned to art in all its varieties, great and improvised, ingenious and crude, clichéd and clumsy, and often very beautiful. These things, in excess of the various vaccines and antibodies essential to our survival, are demonstrably fundamental to human life. The aesthetic, that province of aesthetes, of snobs, matters. As I write, the very future of the city of New York depends significantly (and economically) on whether the theaters and museums and concert halls will be able to reopen before it is too late. People, says Mr. Sleary, “mutht be amuthed. They can’t be alwayth a-learning, nor yet they can’t be alwayth a-working, they an’t made for it” (Dickens, 1966, bk 3, ch. 8, p. 222).

Perhaps the emphasis in the aesthetic on sense perception points to a more solipsistic condition, one in which the individual absorbed in his feelings, in private sense perceptions, is cut off from that community and is all the more vulnerable to Covid-bred isolation. But as Isobel Armstrong points out in her essay here, the aesthetic is powerfully social—Septimus Smith and Clarissa Dalloway, from worlds apart, unite without meeting over “Fear no more the heat of the sun.” The experience of the beautiful is rarely solo—the need to
share it is part of our most common discourse. That “tastes differ” is clear, and it’s rare that everyone agrees about what is beautiful or not, but the beautiful thrives on exchange. Lives now in solitude have, by sharing the experiences of art, sought consolation in the beautiful, and through it have made human connection, manifested sympathy, encouraged, consoled, shared. If anything, then, the nightmare of Covid-19 has only re-enforced the view that the aesthetic matters enormously. Manifesting itself in its form as conscious art, as intentional beautification, it is, and has been from the known beginnings, fundamental to human life. It is vital without being able to protect us from bacteria and viruses, from death, from all those threats to survival, economic as well as physical, that we construct our lives to resist as long as possible. Its powers of useful uselessness are integral to human development and to human history. Here is the ultimate indirection: the beautiful is fundamental to human life just because it isn’t much use.

Yes, distinctions will have to be made—was Mr. Sleary actually worrying about things “aesthetic,” or did he simply want to take people’s minds off the problems to do with their own survival and quality of life? Is the “beautiful,” or aspiration thereto, something intrinsic to all forms of art and entertainment? Are poetry and pushpin just about equivalent? I have learned to take Mr. Sleary more seriously than I had been taught to do from critiques of Hard Times that I most admired when I was in graduate school, critiques that insisted on the inadequacy of Dickens’ response to the terrible conditions of industrial England that he had so powerfully dramatized. Mr. Sleary was not a political man. The circus he ran did not address the social and political problems Dickens had engaged. And this kind of critique of the aesthetic is distinctly a work of the aesthetic: if we judge Mr. Sleary inadequate it is because he does not weigh sufficiently against the pressures of the rest of the book. It is, that is to say, a matter of failure of form that allows and justifies a political and ethical judgment.² Mr. Sleary was, let us say, the “aesthete” of the working class, standing out against the utilitarian emphasis of early Victorian industrial culture. While it is certainly possible to blame him and Dickens, who invented him, for shifting attention so as to keep the exploited working classes quiet as industry ground them down, I credit them both with good faith, because they both were right. “People muth be amused.” (The criticism that addresses these issues in Hard Times depends in part for its readings and judgment on the symmetry or asymmetry of the character, “Sleary,” with Gradgrind

² Anne Humpherys, in a reading of the novel that exemplifies finely the relation between attention to the aesthetic and concern with political issues, the constraints of form and the possibilities of meaning, notes in concluding: “while we must be amused, we must also be reminded again and again of the universal human needs for art and play, for moral virtues and compassion not only in personal relations, but also in the workplace and in government, and, above all, for the imaginative power to understand and sympathize with the lives of others, a power that literature like Hard Times always gives us.”
and Bounderby and the life of the factory—the form of the book is intrinsic to its politics.) Written not as a tract but as a “novel,” its attractiveness—let me say, its beauty—becomes a means, through particular narratives and particular conditions, to engage the very serious questions of industrial life in ways outside the calculations of political economy and outside our modern versions of that field.

I am not equating the aesthetic with pushpin, but I am insisting that a critical element in the aesthetics’ relation to the beautiful is just the presence of pleasure in the experience, a pleasure that is infinitely various but essential. Elizabeth Grosz, drawing on Darwinian sources to which I will return shortly, is insistent on the centrality of sensation to art’s broader significances:

Art comes from that excess, in the world, in objects, in living things, which enables them to be more than they are, to give more than themselves, their material properties and possible uses, than is readily given in them. Art is the consequence of that excess, that energy or force, that puts life at risk for the sake of intensification, for the sake of sensation itself—not simply for pleasure or for sexuality, as psychoanalysis might suggest—but for what can be magnified, intensified, for what is more, what is perhaps too much, but through which creation, risk, innovation are undertaken for their own sake. (Grosz, 2011, p. 3)

Grosz even turns here to the otherwise generally despised ideal of art “for its own sake,” but with anything but a satisfied self-indulgence and fascist narrowness as its end. The excess that is the essence of art and of the aesthetic, driven by the intensity of feeling that has its deep basis in sexual attraction, is the way to the new, the creative.

Surely, it is in part because we believe it pleasurable that we go once again to watch Desdemona die at Othello’s hands, or Cordelia die in that unbearable last act of King Lear. Intensification of feeling is the immediate aim. But in intensifying, the aesthetic can also be implicitly political, as, for example, William Morris, the socialist aesthete understood it, because, among other things, in its emphasis on feeling it is resistant to the dominance of the economic (even though it can be exploited, like everything else, so as to become the playground or the tool of the rich). While it is inadequate to think of the aesthetic as somehow a strong counter to the utilitarian (and capitalist) bias of our culture, since it is obvious that any given work or art may, in devious ways pointed out by a generation of critics, be complicit with that bias, it remains in its nature significantly resistant to it. But even given the inescapable evidence of their importance to the very texture of our lives, the arts and the humanities which study them are, particularly in times of crisis, under the pressure of utility, both from those institutions that support them, and from the culture that thrives in part because of them. While aestheticism in its snobbier forms has been condemned for the very reasons that critics condemned the Sleary solution to the economic problems Dickens had dramatized, the
aesthetic survives, despite its regular co-option, not only as “amusement,” but as a constant challenge to the values of a utilitarian, money driven, neo-liberal society. And it makes its challenge not so much by direct or implicit resistance to particular ideologies but by requiring attention to values resistant to the dominance of the cash-nexus, even where particular works explicitly or implicitly endorse it. As Auden wrote about Yeats: “Time that with this strange excuse, Pardons Kipling and his views, And will pardon Paul Claudel, Pardons him for writing well.”

So, one of the reasons that, in between futile phone calls to find someone to vaccinate me against Covid-19, I push on with investigation of the question of the aesthetic is that all this mess has made me feel even more intensely that the aesthetic matters. Attention must be paid. In the midst of various crises of the humanities, culturally and economically determined, it is critically important that we establish a strong justification for their study—even aesthetes have to seek practical support from institutions and governments—a justification that will entail a clear sense of their intrinsic distinctiveness. In one sense, then, our self-justification is ultimately utilitarian, an attempt to answer the question: what of value do we do, as critics and scholars of the aesthetic, that other disciplines don’t and can’t? A satisfactory notion of the aesthetic ought to entail a substantiation, a materialization, of the Kantian idealist theory of purposeless purpose. What artists do is “useful” in not being governed by, determined by, socially established ideas and ideals of usefulness. This is the negative formulation, but the more positive would begin with beauty itself, and insist that in not being useful the aesthetic is freed to enhance a life constrained everywhere and always by necessity, to imagine and re-imagine, to explore, to invent, to push beyond the limits that necessity in any of its myriad forms impose upon us. And it is free to speculate dramatically about things as they are, expose through language manipulated without discursive regard for the constraints of logic or the merely “rational,” the possibilities of experience itself. We awaken to the millennia of injustices that are built into our culture in all of its forms by way of intensely imagined individual experiences, by way of stories, images, sounds that penetrate through the thick layers of generalization and argument; perhaps our best way toward an understanding is through art itself. Even history, that description of the world’s life as in itself it really was, unfolds in narratives whose forms entail new ways of imagining.

The variety of perspectives included by the essays gathered here reflects some resistance to a single, unified theory of the aesthetic, but embodies rather a sense of its multiple possibilities. This introduction, though aiming at something like a synthesis, is as idiosyncratic as any of the other essays, aspiring to an understanding of why the aesthetic matters, how it matters, and suggesting its almost infinite range of possibilities. Although all the contributors to this volume joined because they shared a general sense of the value and urgency of the question of the aesthetic, none has signed off on my particular arguments here, with which, my
guess is, there will be no universal agreement. The contributors have not had the opportunity to engage each other and certainly, had we done so, disagreements would have been prominent. The essays are unified neither in recommending a single theory of the aesthetic, nor in affirming a single way to do criticism, but in recognizing the fundamental and distinctive value of the aesthetic, understood as a family of possibilities, and in demonstrating various ways in which it is consequential for the culture at large. Long before Covid, the humanities were becoming the stepsisters of the modern university. The humanities and the arts seemed not to be “essential workers.” This book insists that they are. As Isobel Armstrong wrote to me when I proposed this volume, “I am arguing that we are fiddling as a profession while Rome burns—the aesthetic is being eroded everywhere in public life and education.” In her remarkably nuanced and compendious consideration of the value of the humanities at a moment when we need urgently to make their case to a skeptical public, Helen Small considers their importance in matters political and social. That they are important in that way is obvious, but, she says,

I suggest that we should treat with caution a version [of justification] that lends unduly narrowed and exclusive importance to the humanities on the basis of their serious but not definitive role in assisting the informed and properly critical perspectives on social and political life…With those caveats in place, the claim stands that the humanities, centrally concerned as they are with the cultural practices of reflection, argument, criticism, and speculative testing of ideas have a substantial contribution to make to the good working of democracy. (2013, p. 6)

Art is the space where ideas and practices and ways of life and politics and movements can be tested by working through the particularities organized into forms that are distinct and not generalizable. Critics may, of course, judge those forms from the perspective of ethical judgment, but their authority lies in their capacity to detect the moral work a literary form might be implying. It is an aesthetic, not an ethical judgment that justifies literary practice. And the aesthetic is a field of perception and a field of judgment: to enter it is to make a choice, imply a preference: this work is worth the trouble, that one not. If an ethical objective emerges from the work, it is, then, by indirectness. But of course, that aesthetic world is the world of possibility, and the power and “usefulness” of its testing in fictions, in images, in sounds, depends on the space that the aesthetic occupies, that the demands of beauty impose. Its aim is not to do good but to be beautiful, in the expanded sense I have been urging.

Criticism has important work to do in justifications of the value of a subject field that is notorious for self-critique and that is not that good at public relations because it is so embedded in a long and contested history and so open to
ambivalences, ambiguity, alternative perspectives. Critical practitioners, and those in the culture at large to whom art and literature matter importantly, along with those who regard art and literature as mere frills and diversions from the serious business of life and politics, will in different ways resist the implicit argument of this book that it is crucial that we recognize the “aesthetic” as a condition that makes possible all of the extraordinary work it has, in a vast variety of ways, been shown to do, and for which the words psychological, social, and political are inadequate. The aesthetic is no mere frill. It is a mode of experience. It is also a mode of knowledge—a kind of science of the individual rather than of the general. The forms with which it is concerned are not generalizable, as the discursive language of science, in particular, would require. It entails the entanglement of knowledge and feeling. It is a form of play that stands in for reality and illuminates it; it is a means of discovery, of exploration, which is, unlike most discursive prose, open-ended. It is our passport to the beautiful and its pleasures.

We begin with a trust in the importance of the aesthetic in the same way that, say, a biologist finds out what there is to be found out about nature, not to determine how nature should or might have been, but on how it is, in the conviction that biology itself is valuable. It is part of the consistent nature of the aesthetic that it entails some of those activities Small invokes for the humanities more generally—“reflection, argument, criticism, and speculative testing of ideas.” Although I agree with Clune that English departments and other disciplines whose study is the arts can claim the significance of their work by way of their expertise in “artistic education,” as opposed to “ethical education,” this book is not designed as another piece of artillery in various critical wars in which attention to the aesthetic is pitted against larger, more ethically driven projects in politics, social criticism, and cultural study. With it, I invite beauty back to full sisterhood, and argue that its appreciation is essential to our lives.

2. A Darwinian Theory

I leave it to the essays that follow to provide fruitful examples of ways of thinking about the aesthetic, and ways of working with it. Here I throw in my own two cents, independent of the commitments of any of the contributors, to re-enforce my case for the centrality of the aesthetic to our lives. I do so risking something that, among others, Helen Small warns against in her overview of the work of this book in its last chapter. That is, I invoke “nature” for support of a cultural argument. The history of this sort of invocation is not promising. My own rejection of the current movement of literary Darwinism is partly anchored in that movement’s commitment to evolutionary psychology, a practice that, as Prum himself argues in Chapter 2, “explicitly aimed to reduce the humanities, sociology, and psychology to human manifestations of adaptation by natural selection.” Literary Darwinism
offers natural selection as a kind of key to all mythologies explaining all behavior. The argument there is that the survival of anything in a world governed by natural selection requires adaptive efficacy in that “anything.” Such a move ends by turning literature into a kind of handbook of adaptive strategies. I nevertheless continue to believe, with Prum, that it is a mistake to exclude science from our considerations of matters cultural, particularly of the aesthetic. Despite the radical and dangerous misevocation of nature to justify such things as eugenics, nature and nurture are not exclusive of each other. My own dive into “naturalism” has, I would like to think, a more benign point, that is, to support the argument that the aesthetic is not a frill added by culture to human equipment, but something built into the human. And such a perspective opens on some wider implications for the aesthetic.

“We need,” says Richard Prum, “to embrace Darwin’s aesthetic view of life and fully incorporate the possibility of nonadaptive arbitrary aesthetic evolution by natural selection” (p. 328). Disqualified as an arbiter in scientific controversy, I nevertheless want to accept Prum’s invitation, to adapt what he sees as Darwin’s “aesthetic” view of life, the view that across the animal kingdom the work of the aesthetic is fundamental and consequential. And most interestingly to me, it is both “arbitrary” and “non-adaptive.” Those words make Prum’s argument controversial in the scientific community and beyond, but they are remarkably consonant with some traditional views of the aesthetic, and they have the virtue of strong scientific sanction—that is, at least among some scientists. In the mate choice of Peahens and Manakins and Birds of Paradise, Kant’s idealist theory takes material root. Both Prum and Grosz develop this argument, if in very different ways, from their reading of Darwin. Both believe that recognizing the interaction and the connections between science and art becomes a valuable tool in developing an adequate theory of the aesthetic and adequate modes of aesthetic criticism. Darwin’s theories might be taken as a palimpsest for the aesthetic, an evolutionary take on the transformations that move from the sexual attraction within animal life to great works of human art.

Among the elements of aesthetic theory intimated (or empirically confirmed) here, is the argument that the aesthetic is not merely an excrescence, an “extra.” While it is more than seems to be needed for the fulfillment of the requirements of utility and necessity, it is built into nature, built into animal life itself, a condition inherent in our sexuality, in our very development as humans. Just as humans are born with a capacity for language, so they inherit from their evolutionary ancestors and are born with a capacity for appreciation and judgment of beauty. And just as the capacity for language does not determine which language we will speak—for that is culturally determined—so the aesthetic capacity does not determine the form of the beauty in any given case, for that is culturally determined. In a sense, the particular forms of the aesthetic are “arbitrary,” like the variations of cultural mores. As the language faculty does not entail commitment
to any particular language, so the aesthetic faculty entails no commitment to any particular aesthetic order. The language one speaks, the “beautiful” one finds attractive, are largely culturally determined. (Obviously, there are correlations with elements of the environment and history in which cultures develop, but the same environments do seem capable of nurturing diverse cultural practices.)

The form of the language and the form of the aesthetic vary with cultural difference. Every culture has a language. Every culture has an aesthetic. For Darwin, the presence of this aesthetic faculty, with its consequence of cultural diversity, was part of his argument for the unity of human ancestry—we are, all races, quite literally brothers and sisters.³ At the same time, the theory releases the aesthetic from any universal characteristics embodied in the aesthetic object, and suggests that in fact the aesthetic depends on an interchange between the perceiver and the perceived. It is the sensuous embodiment of cultural relativism.

Critically for my primary argument about the aesthetic, Darwin’s theory of mate choice in sexual selection also provides a model of a force in nature that operates against the pressures of utility. “Non-adaptive” is Prum’s word for it. At least in appearance, sexual selection often runs counter to the pressures of natural selection, that overriding evolutionary force that, algorithmically (so it is now said), has been thought to account for all evolutionary change. Prum outlines the case against this view and the idea that what seems arbitrary change is actually “honest signaling” is probably still predominant in evolutionary biology (Prum, 2017, pp. 44–8). But sexual selection seems to offer an example of purposeless purpose in nature itself. As Prum describes it, the attraction of one mate to the other, usually, as with birds, of female to male, is “arbitrary.” That is, it cannot be tied to the usual evolutionary explanation that it is driven by the adaptive forces that lead to survival and reproductive success. It is driven, on Grosz’s and Prum’s account, by the whims of desire. Darwin, and scientists who followed him, worked to find a way to reconcile an apparently counter-utilitarian development with a vision of nature that saw utility, in the processes of adaptation and survival, as all-determining. But Darwin remained convinced, against the mainstream of science from his day to ours, and despite his own deep investment in the idea of natural selection as the prime mover of evolution, that sexual selection was another force, not a mere subset of natural selection. He saw the aesthetic sense as something in nature in excess of what was necessary, with real effects that natural selection, in its rigorous narrow procedure of killing all excess as adaptive, or less adaptive, could not have achieved on its own.

This almost paradoxical condition might be understood as an enactment in nature of what I have been calling the action “once removed,” or “indirectly” of my very first paragraph. That is, the evolutionary developments that emerge from

³ For extended discussion of this aspect of the theory of sexual selection, see Desmond and Moore, 2009, pp. 362–74.