

PRACTICAL FORM



*ABSTRACTION, TECHNIQUE, AND BEAUTY
IN EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY AESTHETICS*

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UNIVERSITY PRESS

New Haven & London

INTRODUCTION



When David Hume writes, in Book 2 of his *Treatise of Human Nature*, that “beauty is nothing but a form, which produces pleasure, as deformity is a structure of parts, which conveys pain,” it may seem as though form is already fixed in place as a concept around which aesthetic theory revolves.¹ At base, Hume seems to say, beauty is form and even vice versa, inasmuch as beauty’s opposite is deformity.² The idea that form is the quality of an object in which its aesthetic value inheres is so familiar, so fundamental, that it may seem not to have a history; it seems simply, universally true, and this apparent truth galvanizes criticism and its methods in those humanistic disciplines concerned with the arts. My purpose in this book is to challenge this understanding of form, to argue that form does have a history as a concept in and for aesthetics, and to flesh out that history as it was shaped over the course of the century that gave us aesthetics as we know it: the field of philosophical inquiry into beauty, taste, and judgment. Form’s importance for aesthetics, I argue, was not immediately manifest; it emerged over time and, more important, through the techniques of perception employed by artists and artisans. By “techniques of perception” I mean, first and foremost, abstraction, which

I understand as the schematic simplification of some complex image or idea. Artistic practice requires this kind of abstraction: strategic abstraction, abstraction instrumentalized, bound to material ends.

Practical form so defined anchors a new genealogy of formalism, a genealogy that links formal abstraction with craft and technique. This is a book about the role of artistic practice in the theorization of aesthetics, which is to say, in the philosophical investigation of beauty.

When we assume, as we are conditioned to do, that *form* must be a significant term in Hume's definition, then his account of beauty seems consistent with what Kant has to say about form in his "Critique of the Aesthetic Power of Judgment" fifty years later: "what constitutes the ground of all arrangements for taste is not what gratifies in sensation but merely what pleases through its form."³ Though they sound similar, Kant's "merely" is a little different from Hume's "nothing but." Kant is introducing a distinction; where by Hume's definition anything that produces pleasure is beautiful, Kant distinguishes aesthetic pleasure—"what pleases through its form"—from another, sensual kind of pleasure, which he chalks up to "the addition of charms and emotions."⁴ The "mere" attaches to form; what's beautiful pleases by means of its mere form, its design or drawing, a "structure of parts," to borrow Hume's phrasing, stripped of that which "gratifies in sensation" (Kant's favored examples of the latter are color and tone).

Aesthetic judgment is distinguished, for Kant, by being grounded in form rather than the blandishments of sense. Kant's distinction draws attention to the inertness of form in Hume's definition. The significant term for Hume is not *form* but rather *pleasure*. For Hume, form bears no special emphasis by comparison with other pleasing qualities of objects. He uses the word *form* as a means of framing a functional claim—beauty produces pleasure—as a definition: beauty is *that which* produces pleasure. Beauty is nothing other than that which pleases; it has no further qualifications, formal or otherwise.⁵

My aim in beginning with these two canonical statements is to illustrate that what looks like a constant is actually a variable: aesthetic form is not the same, in the 1790s, as it was in the 1740s. This book addresses the question of what changed. In the Introduction, however, I pose a different and more incredulous question: how could this be? How could it be

that form might at one time *not* have mattered for aesthetics? For literary scholars today, form is an article of faith. Consider the frequency with which we claim that the salient feature of a text—or an artifact, image, or performance—is not (or not only) its *content* but rather (or also) its *form*. It's difficult, then, to imagine a criticism that doesn't invoke form—more specifically, formal complexity or, putting it more minimally, formal interest—as the defining trait of a text's literariness (and, broadening out, the trait that disposes an object toward aesthetic evaluation: “what constitutes the ground of all arrangements for taste”).

In order to establish that such a criticism could and once did exist, I turn to what may seem like an unlikely example: Alexander Pope's 1711 “An Essay on Criticism.” Pope's poem gathers and memorably hones the articulation of a whole series of ideas about literary quality. Is it, therefore, necessarily a meditation on literary form?

I do not think that it is, and before I explain why, I want to take a moment to head off an alternative framing of my point. I *could* take the position that form is an inert *concept* in the poem because the poem's formal qualities limit Pope's ability to use the *term* “form.” The claim here would be that *form* is not an easy word to rhyme, which limits its appearance in the important terminal position in Pope's lines. There might be a satisfying “gotcha” aspect to that argument—but I think it's more accurate, not to mention interesting, to notice that he avoids characterizing literature in terms of its form not because of the formal constraints of the verse, but rather because the concept *form* means, and does, something else in the conceptual unfolding of the poem.

So: does Pope's “Essay on Criticism” have a functional idea of literary form? An affirmative answer to this question is likely to focus on those well-known passages in the poem that distinguish between the content of an utterance and the particular features of its expression, a distinction felt even, or especially, in the commandment to match expression to meaning, as in “The *Sound* must seem an *Echo* to the *Sense*.”⁶ Here, as elsewhere, Pope subscribes to the decorum of fitting form to content. Certainly one of *form*'s uses today is to distinguish the sonic or lexical or rhetorical or grammatical features of an utterance from its meaning. Pope does not use the word *form* to make this distinction, however. Instead, Pope calls meaning *thought*, and its outward features *expression*

rather than form. He establishes this precept in a passage beginning around line 285, encompassing his censure of those critics misled by their “*Love to Parts*” (l. 288) to forget what he has previously called both “the *Whole*” (at ll. 252 and 264) and “the *Writer’s End*” (l. 255). (The virtuoso sound-echoing-sense passage is both apotheosis and conclusion of this part of the poem.)

A few lines from this section bear out the idea that Pope’s thought/expression dichotomy corresponds to what we might now characterize as content/form, including the famous couplet “*True Wit is Nature to Advantage drest, / What oft was Thought, but ne’er so well Exprest*” (ll. 297–98; the distracting “part” at which he takes aim in these lines is “*Conceit*” [l. 289]; conceit or false wit appears in verse in the guise of undermotivated ornament [l. 296]). Again, though, Pope’s preferred metaphor to characterize thought’s concrete manifestation is not *form* but rather *dress*, a metaphor he extends through the verse paragraph that follows:

Others for *Language* all their Care express,
And value *Books*, as Women *Men*, for *Dress*:
Their Praise is still—*The Stile is excellent*:
The *Sense*, they humbly take upon Content. (ll. 305–08)

Again, if I were making the “gotcha” version of my argument, that the idea of form is a casualty of poetic form, I might remark on the presence of a word that looks like the absent content but doesn’t sound like it.⁷ Instead, I’ll note that the dichotomy of expression and thought is here recast as sense and style. Evidently, then, Pope’s critical lexicon differs from our own, but the absence of a terminological form/content motif in the poem need not entail the absence of these concepts. So, again: does this passage endorsing expressive decorum justify thinking of “An Essay on Criticism” as a meditation on literary form?

I am skeptical. In this case, terminology matters; Pope does not use the word *form* to mean expression, or sound, or style, because he uses it to mean something else.⁸ What form means for Pope has everything to do with its verbal corollary, *form* meaning “to make” or “to shape.” Twice, Pope uses *form* as a verb: “Be Homer’s Works your *Study*, and *Delight*, / Read them by Day, and meditate by Night, / Thence form your Judgment, thence your Maxims bring” (ll. 124–26); “Thus Critics, of less

Judgment than Caprice, / Curious, not Knowing, not exact, but nice, / Form short ideas; and offend in Arts / (As most in Manners) by a Love to Parts" (ll. 285–88). It's worth noting that the object of this forming action is, in each case, critical judgment rather than literary art. Nonetheless, as a general orientation toward action rather than essence, Pope's use of the verb seems apt.⁹ No ideologue of romantic inspiration, Pope conceives of judgments about poems, like poems themselves, as made things. Analytical expertise in the domain of verse applies alike to composition and to criticism, whose relation is fundamentally reciprocal, even (ideally) cooperative. (We are, after all, talking about an essay in verse, whose place in the canon is cemented by its show-don't-tell ethos of performing what it prescribes.) The how-to sensibility of "An Essay on Criticism" militates against the conception that there is anything given about a verbal artifact; it is an assemblage of parts, a record of strategies and choices that could have been settled otherwise.

The word *form* appears only twice more in Pope's poem. But even where *form* does appear as a noun, it doesn't serve the function modern critics might expect, which is to mark the special quality of literary artworks that elevate them above ordinary utterances; form is not, for Pope, the difference between poetry and mere verse. (This, apart from its non-synonymy with expression or style.) In addition, it is in neither instance of its use the property of a verbal artifact. Instead it belongs to spatially extended objects of visual and tactile perception.

In the first instance, it appears as part of an extended metaphor. Pope illustrates his comments on poetic rule-breaking ("a *Grace* beyond the Reach of Art," l. 155) with the analogy of a sublime landscape: "In *Prospects*, thus, some *Objects* please our eyes, / Which *out of Nature's common Order* rise, / The shapeless *Rock*, or hanging *Precipice*" (ll. 158–60). In what is not quite an extension of this simile—or, more strictly speaking, in a metaphor that obscures the relation between literal and figurative established via the simile—Pope returns to the realm of human activity: "I know there are, to whose presumptuous thoughts / Those *Freer Beauties*, even in *Them*, seem *Faults*" (ll. 169–70; the referent for the pronoun "them" is "the Ancients," credited with breaking rules to sublime effect). The lines that follow this couplet both obscure a literal referent and restore the visual orientation of the simile:

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Some Figures *monstrous* and *mis-shap'd* appear,
Consider'd *singly*, or beheld too *near*,
Which, but *proportion'd* to their *Light*, or *Place*,
Due Distance *reconciles* to Form and Grace. (ll. 171–74)

The identity of these monstrous figures is not entirely clear: are they the shapeless rocks of the prospect simile? This would stand to reason considering how a prospect is constituted as an object relative to the location of its spectator. They are clearly not figures in the sense of tropes; Pope is not here talking about a poem. He is talking about visual experience, and the distance of the beholder from the object, along with the quality of the lighting, makes the difference between form and deformity. So form here not only is not an attribute of a verbal artifact; it also gains an evaluative component, connoting proper or even beautiful form.

Form, with its coordinate, grace, exists in relation to a spectator. But the key point, I think, is not that form (or grace, or beauty) is therefore subjective—though that is of course the proposition motivating much of the debate around aesthetics in the eighteenth century—but rather that form's essential meaning, for Pope, arises in opposition to formlessness; the word *form* refers to the fact of having been formed. That formation may, and in the above passage does, inhere in the relation to a spectator; the spectator composes a prospect by conferring a framing perspective on a congeries of objects and figures. Much has been written about the spectator as an organizing figure for Enlightenment thought and for aesthetics specifically. What happens, though, when we turn our attention from the figure of the spectator to what this idea of framing as making means for our understanding of form as a critical concept?

Pope's second use of *form* as a noun in "An Essay on Criticism" exemplifies this relation of form to formation without depending on the catalyzing presence of a spectator. In Pope's potted history of the rise and fall of European culture, the Renaissance is that period when "*Sculpture* and her *Sister-Arts* revive; / *Stones* leap'd to *Form*, and *Rocks* began to *live*" (ll. 701–02). Form is, here, opposed to brute matter (formlessness, not necessarily deformity). Again, it is an attribute of objects that take up space, objects that are both visible and tangible. A stone that has a form is one that has been subjected to a principle of design; it has been shaped. Still,

form in this sense is not a special quality that elevates certain objects above others, marking them out for aesthetic evaluation. To be an object at all, to be an object of perception, is to be formed, either by material modification or by perceptual framing. The alternative is to remain unformed: formless.

To recap: Pope's poem inflects the word *form* in four ways that prove surprising and instructive for the project of understanding what form meant in relation to aesthetics in eighteenth-century Britain. First, form is a verb; more precisely, it is as much a verb as it is a noun, which directs our attention to forming as an activity. Second, in relation to the criticism of poetry, it is a metaphor. It is a property of the spatially extended objects that Pope uses as figures for how we perceive verbal texts without implying that our visual and tactile perception of those texts works—or matters—in the way that seeing and touching a rock formation or a statue does. Third, it is evaluative: a return to form is also, in Pope's usage, a return to grace, just as, for Hume, deformity is beauty's opposite. But form can also be, fourth, the opposite of formlessness. This sense exists in some tension with the previous, evaluative sense (where form unmodified implies good as opposed to bad form); plenty of formed things are not by that token beautiful, including the artworks whose formation Pope alludes to. At the same time, this final inflection returns us to the first: forming is an action, and the objects of that action therefore possess, at minimum, the property of form. All of these inflections of form will be salient for my analysis in what follows, but what truly activates my argument is the closure of this circuit, linking the action of forming to form as a property or, better yet, a quality of objects. Eighteenth-century aesthetic theory discovers a usable version of form in artistic practice, more specifically in the cognitive techniques of abstraction that enable, for the visual arts, the manipulation of matter in space.

Before I situate this argument in its historical and critical contexts, I want to explain its central claim about form with reference to an example to which I will return in the book's central chapters. I have thus far suggested, with reference to Hume and Pope, that form was not a particularly salient concept for those writers in the first part of the century who were interested in thinking about the nature of aesthetic pleasure in general and about literature specifically, as an art in which one might take

pleasure (not least, in this latter case, because form was identified with spatial perception and therefore with the visual arts). Between these thinkers and Kant, who singled out form as the particular quality of an object to which its beauty is attributable, came William Hogarth, whose reputation as a painter and printmaker was well established when he published his *The Analysis of Beauty* in 1753. In this short treatise, he resolves to settle a question whose apparent ability to baffle “mere men of letters” he finds both laughable and infuriating (*AB*, p. 1). Visual artists, he argues, have long known that beauty is the property of certain spatial forms, certain shapes—specifically, sinuously curved lines and the masses they contain and define.

What Hogarth calls “the line of beauty” is, however, less crucial for my argument than his account of how and why the line pleases, which is also to say, how and why we recognize beauty in certain spatial forms. This recognition inheres in abstraction as a perceptual activity. The perceptual reduction of what we see into lines and spatial relationships is itself pleasing, in the way it holds the attention of the engaged perceiver. It is not, however, an activity we undertake for its own sake. Instead, we learn from visual artists how to resolve what we see into spatial form—artists, who do so for the express purpose of making images in two and three dimensions, in any number of different media. Recognizing beauty is therefore not disinterested, according to Hogarth and contrary to most other eighteenth-century aesthetic theorists, but rather purposive—for the purpose of making art, even if a beholder only participates in this kind of perceptual activity virtually, in order to learn how to see.¹⁰

To make this practical version of formal abstraction a bit more concrete, consider the example Hogarth offers of an engraver reducing, or a painter enlarging, an image by means of a grid. This is a technique undertaken in order to focus the practitioner’s attention on the abstract spatial forms that compose the image, to make those spatial relationships more evident to perception than the content of the image, the figures represented. Hogarth describes this technique in order to ground—indeed to familiarize—the somewhat more esoteric thought experiment he offers the reader presumed to lack the specific vocational training requisite to “painting cielings [sic] and cupolas” (*AB*, p. 23). This more esoteric thought experiment involves “considering objects thus merely as

shells composed of lines, . . . that by these means we obtain the true and full idea of what is call'd the *outlines* of a figure, which has been confin'd within too narrow limits, by taking it only from drawings on paper" (*AB*, p. 22). The point of the exercise is to understand three-dimensional as well as two-dimensional objects as defined by outlines, outlines that shift and multiply as a viewer moves around an object (or turns it around in her mind), making every view a virtual or a potential drawing composed of discrete strokes. In order to develop the acuity and sensitivity of his readers' aesthetic judgment, Hogarth wants them to understand how to think as artists do, strategically, about form—even if those readers never put pencil to paper or chisel to stone. The pleasure of the mental activity of abstraction itself (its searching quality, answered by the satisfaction of a new aspect of visual experience coming into focus) becomes the meeting point between artist and beholder or, put differently, between the ordinary appreciator of beauty and the specialist trained in techniques not just of artisanal making but also of the perception on which such making depends. What I am calling practical formalism recognizes continuity between domestic, industrial, and so-called high arts as repositories of technical knowledge, in which abstraction is a means to a material end rather than a mode of transcendence. The immanence of practical formalism recasts the politics of the aesthetic by taking as its exemplary subjects women and artisans.

By identifying aesthetic perception with artistic practice, and artistic practice with abstraction as a technique in the visual arts, I am taking up a complicated position in relation to both a short and a long tradition of thinking about abstraction in the Enlightenment. Abstraction, that is, in relation to theory and practice as paired terms: in the longer tradition of which I speak, Enlightenment as an epoch or a phase in the history of ideas is characterized as a pendulum-swing toward theory, toward rationalization, toward abstraction. The emblematic version of this characterization by Horkheimer and Adorno casts it in a tragic light: theoretical abstraction is Enlightenment's hubris, the overconfidence in reason that overlooks or, worse, justifies violence directed toward the stubborn material particulars that resist assimilation into a neatly rational world view.¹¹ The shorter and more recent tradition recovers the practical side of Enlightenment empiricism: the method of Enlightenment reasoning is inductive, attentive to

matter's particularities, even in the name of remaking rather than dismantling the comprehensive systems on which Enlightenment thinkers trained their skeptical attention.¹² This approach first took root among historians of science but has also influenced art history, if not aesthetics proper.¹³

The argument I make in this book draws on the more recent tradition of thinking about practice in order to reevaluate abstraction as a strategy (rather than a tragedy). The tragic view of abstraction holds that its dangerous ethical consequences result from its erasure of particulars. But we have already seen how abstraction employed as a perceptual technique in the visual arts does not necessarily erase particulars but rather sees them under another aspect, the aspect of spatial form. It is a philosophical conception of abstraction based in a theory of language that equates it with the cognitive process of generalization, following Locke in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*.¹⁴ The equation of abstraction with generalization certainly can operate in the visual arts—and did, influentially, in the eighteenth century, particularly under the rubric of a neoclassicism associated, in England, with Joshua Reynolds.¹⁵ And of course the category of abstract as opposed to figurative artworks was not yet available to eighteenth-century thinkers. Still, abstract artworks are not abstract by virtue of a generalizing mode of representation; they are abstract in the sense that they are nonrepresentational.¹⁶ Abstraction understood by contrast with figuration was an idea available to eighteenth-century minds through the kind of formal reduction Hogarth recommended his readers adopt by modeling their perceptual practices on the material techniques of visual artists. But as such it was a cognitive process rather than a representational style.

These divergent conceptions of abstraction trace a rift between visual and verbal media. Words do not allow for an equivalent perceptual aspect-shift in which spatial form defeats representation (or reference), however temporarily or contingently. Generalizing abstraction, as the philosophers describe it, may not belong exclusively to language, but language cannot be rendered abstract in any other way (or at least not in the same way that spatially extended forms can be). The perceptual abstraction of spatially extended forms takes place in the mind's eye prior to and apart from its potential materialization in works of art. This opens up a second rift, within the visual arts, between process and product—a rift that surely has a corollary in the verbal arts, but whose verbal corollary draws

differently on the cognitive resource of abstraction. (And indeed this is a situation in which the problem with generalizing abstraction makes itself felt: it is impossible to generalize about the many possible kinds of relation between process and product in any medium in this way. How is any poem, or novel, or painting a monument to the process of its creation? A question so rarely or tenuously answerable in a single case becomes plainly unanswerable in the plural.)

To retreat, then, to the more local matter of nongeneralizing formal abstraction, leveraged for practical ends: I am interested in the way Hogarth describes this kind of abstraction as a perceptual activity and a source of pleasure. Even he is skeptical about its concrete manifestation in art works, specifically in the engravings he made to illustrate the ideas he develops in *The Analysis of Beauty*. These images, he suggests, may well fulfill their purpose—teaching the reader how to see the line of beauty in a variety of visual contexts—without therefore being beautiful themselves: “My figures, therefore, are to be consider’d in the same light, with those a mathematician makes with his pen, which may convey the idea of his demonstration, tho’ not a line in them is either perfectly straight, or of that peculiar curvature he is treating of,” where the ideal straightness alluded to but not reproduced in a mathematician’s drawing corresponds to beauty as the quality under scrutiny in the *Analysis* (*AB*, p. 17).¹⁷ Hogarth is skeptical about the conjunction of the activity of abstraction, its material trace, and that third element essential for an analysis of beauty, namely, pleasure. Others might be content to write off this third element as a *je ne sais quoi*, but Hogarth is not.¹⁸

Still, it is fair to object that the caution Hogarth offers here about correlating product (image) with process (formal abstraction) applies not to artworks in general but, more self-consciously, to his attempts to illustrate his theory. He does not want the theory to stand or fall on the evidence of the images (which is itself an interesting claim for an artist to make about the relation of image and word). However, the illustrations are meant “to point out to the reader what sorts of objects he is to look for and examine in nature, or in the works of the greatest masters,” suggesting that lines of beauty evident in those works are traces of the process of formal abstraction, and that the trained spectator’s abstracting activity in the process of her visual analysis will mirror the artist’s own (*AB*, p. 17).

Hogarth's early interpreter Georg Christoph Lichtenberg applied a similar logic to his explication of Hogarth's graphic works. Attentive in particular to printmaking processes, Lichtenberg, according to James Grantham Turner, "reflects upon the expressive movement of eye and hand, peels back the narrative surface, reconstructs meaning from how Hogarth makes his mark."¹⁹

In this book, I follow Hogarth rather than Lichtenberg, heeding the cautionary note the artist himself sounds about his illustrations and extrapolating a similar caution about the method of reading process onto or into a finished image. If Hogarth offers his illustrations as a course of instruction in how to see, and specifically in support of the thesis that visual pleasure inheres in the cognitive activity of spatio-formal abstraction, then the illustrations, considered as a subclass of visual artworks more generally, are in an important sense beside the point. The point is not to see beauty in lines and images but to see lines as pleasure's concrete traces. On these grounds, I maintain that Hogarth's words tell us more about his aesthetic theory than his images do, notwithstanding the grounding of the theory in his image-making practice. The practical orientation of the theory, I argue, leads Hogarth to understand beauty in terms that were, in the 1750s, unusual, but that have become commonplace: that is, in terms of form. Iconology on Lichtenberg's model gives insight into Hogarth's practice—more precisely, his process—but in so doing it diverts our attention from his theory of the beautiful.

Hogarth wrote *The Analysis of Beauty* because images do not speak for themselves in the specific sense that they do not articulate the theory by which we find certain kinds of visual experience pleasing. And this is the case because the pleasure inheres in practice, in its abstracting cognitive component, which eludes encapsulation in an end product, a work of art. We are more accustomed, I think, to the inversion of this idea—that an artwork, or more specifically our aesthetic experience of an artwork, eludes (in the sense that it transcends) an accounting of its component parts and the process of its assembly. Hogarth uses words to articulate the aspects of artistic practice that are not made manifest in the objects and images produced by that practice. Viewed in this light, he is a phenomenologist of vision, more specifically of the circuit of eye, hand, and mind in the activity of drawing.²⁰ This phenomenology is his contribution to aes-

thetic theory, a contribution that resolves ultimately, I argue, into a different outlook—a practitioner’s perspective—on what we know as form.

Hogarth’s sentences testify to those elements of practice that a finished artwork conceals. Still, they testify imperfectly, and that imperfection is important. On a sheerly biographical level, Hogarth is and understands himself to be a visual rather than a verbal thinker. Writing about his early childhood, he speaks of “the natural turn I had [for] drawing rather the [sic] lear[n]ing a language.”²¹ He incorporates this self-perception into not only the framing but also the argument of his aesthetic treatise. By turns brash and halting, conversationally plain and grammatically convoluted, *The Analysis of Beauty* betrays its author’s discomfort working outside of his customary media. He does not conceal the effort required to capture in words something that does not lend itself to verbal articulation. However, this resistant *something* encompasses not just visual ideas but also craft knowledge, which is to say, the expertise by which he authorizes his own dissident approach to questions of taste and beauty. Hogarth’s frustrated sense of what he cannot do as a writer has conceptual implications. Describing the problem of writing about artisanal expertise, Paola Bertucci explains how, “as a nonverbal ability, embodied skill could not be fully captured in textual or visual representation.”²² She goes on to define “writing about making as a process of intersemiotic translation, predicated on the impossibility of fully communicating everything.”²³ A verbal theory of visual practice does not risk failure so much as court it; failure shows what parts of visual and tactile experience are incommensurate with verbal articulation.

In an early draft of the *Analysis*, Hogarth seems to understand verbal inarticulacy as a badge of artisanal distinction, correlating with a fluency beyond words (the “embodied skill” of which Bertucci speaks). The artists he refers to as “great Italian masters” were by virtue of their “excellency” spared “the trouble of enquiring into the Physical causes of their effects and therefore incapable of communicating any regular account in words, any more than the cabinet maker who daily practices the use of the waving line which gives such excellency to his chairs and tables.”²⁴ In a later draft, the confidence with which he associates “excellency” with the flagrant failure of verbal communication gives way to a more conventional correlation of inarticulacy with rote mechanical labor. His analogy descends the social ladder: rather

than using the cabinet maker to elaborate on the painter's reticence, he instead sarcastically compares that same craftsman's ability to account for the waving line "as a principle Just as a day labour [sic] who uses the leaver every day would give of the Machanical Powers."²⁵ Hogarth here seems to move in a similar direction to what Bertucci describes in the French context as the appropriation by theoretically ambitious artisans of "discriminating motifs formulated by the savants."²⁶ Like the French *artistes*, Hogarth establishes his own authority by distancing himself from other practitioners.

"Discriminating motifs" like this implicitly reject the pluralist logic of craft expertise as embodied knowledge, only partially translatable into words. Instead they operate on the principle that verbal coherence is the single standard for the communication and understanding of theoretical knowledge. Tied to Hogarth's derision of the day-laborer, however, is a more pronounced, even tortured, sense of his own writerly shortcomings. His derision is conventional, to be sure, but it's also defensive, adopted to deflect attention from his own felt inadequacy to the task he undertakes. In yet another draft, this one of the introduction, Hogarth describes his attitude as he confronts drafting the *Analysis*: "I was so conscious of . . . acting out of my own sphere," he writes, "and so sensible of my inability."²⁷ Consoling himself with the prospect of supplementing his "deficiencies in writing" with drawings ("like one who makes use of signs and jestures to convey his meaning, in a language he is but little master of"), he concludes the passage with another analogy to artisanal labor:

Hopeing, that as the mechanick at his Loom is as likely to give as satisfactory an account of the materials, and composition, of the rich Brocade he weaves (tho uncouthly) as the smooth Tongue'd Mercer {with all his parade of showy silks about him} I may in like manner, make myself tolerably understood, by those who are at the pain of examining my Book, and prints together.²⁸

This time, the proposition that a craft worker might give an intelligible verbal account of his labor, however "uncouthly," seems scrubbed of irony. A hint of derision clings instead to the mercer, with his smooth tongue and "parade of showy silks."²⁹ The artisan's imperfect verbalization, his halting words, reflect his superior practical understanding of the "materials, and composition" of the work he produces.

My approach to reading Hogarth remains oriented to the idea that Hogarth's "discriminating motifs" encode an underlying commitment to practice as embodied knowledge, impervious to full verbalization. In this sense, my approach is literary; if verbal imperfection corresponds to a submerged claim in Hogarth's argument, then his particular verbal and rhetorical choices should repay close scrutiny. From the claim of untranslatability follows Hogarth's sense that words are bound to fail him in roughly the same measure that he will fail them, that is, fail to accomplish what he imagines a real writer, one for whom words are the material of his craft, would be able to do with the ideas he wishes to convey to a reader. In that mutual failure, I argue, lies the potential for a practitioner's aesthetics. Hogarth's prose draws attention to the ways in which the perceptual and cognitive abstraction engaged by the practitioner defies both verbal description and retrospective reconstruction from finished artworks.

One surprise yielded up by the process of writing this book has been the portability of its method. I had thought that the uniqueness of Hogarth's position as a practitioner-theorist in an intellectual field dominated, in the eighteenth century, by "men of letters" afforded a singular opportunity for the kind of close tropological attention with which I approach his prose. Instead, as I have sought to locate *The Analysis of Beauty* in the course of a larger tradition of aesthetic writing stretching from Shaftesbury to Kant, I have learned that the figural logic of other, more confidently philosophical writers might shed light on way they manage the idea of practice both within and beyond the visual arts, extending, reflexively, to the writing of philosophical prose. So, for example, when Shaftesbury uses the hand as a metonym for talking about skill in the moral exercise of self-reflection, he rehearses the Platonic ambivalence about figure (as unreliably attached to matter, and yet at the same time indispensable) that elsewhere in his work seems to secure his transmission of an ancient theory of Forms into modern aesthetics.

A more familiar approach to the development of aesthetic thought in this period has been to focus on its political implications—indeed, to explicate accounts of beauty as determined by the class-based prejudices of their authors, and often to argue, following Bourdieu, that the function of aesthetics was to codify certain kinds of class distinction and recruit the

NOTES



Author's Note

1. William Hogarth, *The Analysis of Beauty*, ed. Ronald Paulson (1753; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), p. 33. Henceforth abbreviated *AB* and cited parenthetically.

Introduction

1. David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, 2nd ed., ed. P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), p. 299.

2. A structure of parts that conveys pain, a.k.a. deformity, is the opposite of a form that produces pleasure, a.k.a. beauty. There's a potential circularity here; even as Hume avoids the redundant phrasing "deformity is a form, which conveys pain," his definition skirts the complementary implication that form is, itself, beauty. That which produces pain is deformed; that which produces pleasure is formed.

3. "Nicht, was in der Empfindung vernügt, sondern bloß was durch seine Form gefällt, den Grund aller Anlage für den Geschmack ausmacht." Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews (2nd ed., 1793; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), §14, p. 110. When I include the German text in parentheses or, as here, in a note, I refer to the Academy edition: *Kritik der Urtheilskraft*, vol. 5 of *Kants gesammelte Schriften*, Herausgegeben von der Königlich Preußischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2nd ed. (Berlin:

Georg Reimer, 1913). In accordance with standard practice, Guyer and Matthews provide page-number references to this edition in the margins of their translation.

4. *Ibid.*, §13, p. 108.

5. Paul Guyer makes a similar point about Hume’s understanding of beauty in the *Treatise*. Quoting Hume, he begins: “‘Pleasure and pain, therefore, are not only necessary attendants of beauty and deformity, but constitute their very essence.’ However, Hume immediately undercuts the suggestion that we respond only to purely formal features of the ‘order and construction of parts,’ such as Hutcheson’s ‘uniformity amidst variety,’ with examples that suggest that we respond with pleasure and pain to a range of associations that we make with those formal features, or interpretations that we place upon them.” He goes on to conclude that, for Hume, “the imagination plays a central role in aesthetic response, as the source of associations and appearances that cannot be directly equated with the mere order and structure of the parts of the objects” (Paul Guyer, *A History of Modern Aesthetics*, 3 vols. [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014], 1:130, 131). See also Timothy M. Costelloe, *The British Aesthetic Tradition: From Shaftesbury to Wittgenstein* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 51–53.

6. Alexander Pope, “An Essay on Criticism,” *The Poems of Alexander Pope, A One-Volume Edition of the Twickenham Text*, ed. John Butt (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963), p. 155, l. 365. Subsequent citations refer to this edition and are cited parenthetically by line number.

7. Content—scanned as an iamb, glossed as “satisfied”—appears again at line 741: “Content, if hence th’unlearn’d their wants may view.”

8. Another literary category that often goes by the name of form, one that Pope seems notably uninterested in, is genre. Despite the talk of part and whole in the lines that set up the decorum passage, the essay is not a taxonomy of genres, still less an anatomy of criticism. It doesn’t deal with form in the sense that some use it to refer to kinds or species of literary text. The identification of “the *Whole*” with “the *Writer’s End*” shows, or at least suggests, that Pope seeks not so much a theory of literature, in which form and forms would index, respectively, literature’s essence and function, as a standard of judgment. In the “Essay on Criticism,” the standard is explicitly intentionalist: “A perfect Judge will *read* each Work of Wit / With the same Spirit that its author *writ*” (233–34) and “Whoever thinks a faultless Piece to see, / Thinks what ne’er was, nor is, nor e’er shall be. / In ev’ry Work regard the *Writer’s End*, / Since none can compass more than they *Intend*” (253–56). It’s the writer’s end that matters to Pope, not the generic category to which the text belongs. Expressive decorum is one criterion indicating the achievement of that end.

9. Once we begin reading for *form* v. by contrast with *form* n., it seems to surface everywhere. Case in point: in Hume’s “Of beauty and deformity” chapter, *form* v. appears four times; *form* n. twice. Counting instances of “deformity” would tip this balance in the other direction, to be sure—though at the same time, deformity’s keyword status in the chapter seems only to draw attention to the frequency and inflection of its root, as in the following extract: “If we consider all the hypotheses, which have been form’d either by philosophy or common reason, to explain the difference betwixt beauty and deformity,

we shall find that all of them resolve into this, that beauty is such an order and construction of parts, as either by the *primary constitution* of our nature, by *custom*, or by *caprice*, is fitted to give a pleasure and satisfaction to the soul. This is the distinguishing character of beauty, and forms all the difference betwixt it and deformity, whose natural tendency is to produce uneasiness” (Hume, *Treatise*, p. 299).

10. Ronald Paulson also draws attention to Hogarth’s divergence from the consensus around disinterestedness, but he emphasizes interestedness as desire over and above interestedness as purpose (end-directedness) grounded in activity and, more specifically, vocation. See Paulson, *Art and Politics, 1750–1764*, vol. 3 of *Hogarth* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1993), pp. 74–75.

11. See Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002).

12. Some recent studies in this vein include Sean Silver, *The Mind Is a Collection: Case Studies in Eighteenth-Century Thought* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015), Al Coppola, *The Theater of Experiment: Staging Natural Philosophy in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), and Helen Thompson, *Fictional Matter: Empiricism, Corpuscles, and the Novel* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017).

13. See, for instance, Paulson, *Breaking and Remaking: Aesthetic Practice in England, 1700–1820* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1989), Carol Gisbon-Wood, *Jonathan Richardson: Art Theorist of the English Enlightenment* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), Pamela H. Smith, *The Body of the Artisan: Art and Experience in the Scientific Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), and Ewa Lajer-Burchard, *The Painter’s Touch: Boucher, Chardin, Fragonard* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018).

14. “If every particular *Idea* that we take in, should have a distinct Name, Names must be endless. To prevent this, the Mind makes the particular *Ideas*, received from particular Objects, to become general; which is done by considering them as they are in the mind such Appearances, separate from all other Existences, and the circumstances of real Existence, as Time, Place, or any other concomitant *Ideas*. This is called *ABSTRACTION*, whereby *Ideas* taken from particular Beings, become Representatives of all of the same kind” (John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Peter H. Nidditch [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975], II.xi.§9, p. 159).

15. See Joshua Reynolds, *Discourses on Art*, ed. Robert R. Wark (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997).

16. For an intellectual history that connects nonrepresentational art of the twentieth century with an eighteenth-century understanding of abstraction as generalization, see Charles A. Cramer, *Abstraction and the Classical Ideal, 1760–1920* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2006).

17. On images whose primary function is to represent processes or ideas rather than objects (and on the importance of such images in eighteenth-century Europe), see John Bender and Michael Marrinan, *The Culture of Diagram* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010).

18. See *AB*, p. 4.

19. James Grantham Turner, “‘A Wanton Kind of Chace’: Display as Procurement in *A Harlot’s Progress* and Its Reception,” in *The Other Hogarth: Aesthetics of Difference*, ed. Bernadette Fort and Angela Rosenthal (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), p. 40.
20. On Hogarth and the phenomenology of vision, see Peter de Bolla, *The Education of the Eye: Painting, Landscape, and Architecture in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), esp. pp. 26–27.
21. Hogarth, “The Autobiographical Notes,” *The Analysis of Beauty, with the Rejected Passages from the Manuscript Drafts and Autobiographical Notes*, ed. Joseph Burke (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1955), p. 204.
22. Paola Bertucci, *Artisanal Enlightenment: Science and the Mechanical Arts in Old Regime France* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017), p. 145.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 146.
24. BL Eg. MS 3011, in Hogarth, *The Analysis of Beauty*, ed. Burke, p. 168.
25. BL Eg. MS 3013, in *ibid.*, p. 181.
26. Bertucci, *Artisanal Enlightenment*, p. 26. Later, she elaborates, remarking that “the most common theme in the *artistes’* rhetoric about other artisans was their blind attachment to routine” (p. 153).
27. Add. MS 27992, in Hogarth, *The Analysis of Beauty*, ed. Burke, p. 191.
28. *Ibid.*, p. 192.
29. And yet: this analogy turns once again into a “discriminating motif” in the published text, in a passage in which the “mechanick at his Loom” becomes an avatar for the idea of inarticulate expertise: knowledge that, by virtue of being embodied, cannot be verbalized. For further discussion of this passage, see chapter 3 (*ibid.*, pp. 117–19). Ultimately, what interests me is the instability of Hogarth’s thinking on the correlation of embodied knowledge and verbal articulation.
30. See John Barrell, *The Political Theory of Painting from Reynolds to Hazlitt: “The Body of the Public”* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986).
31. Bertucci, *Artisanal Enlightenment*, p. 147.
32. James Noggle does evaluate new formalism in relation to the eighteenth-century conception of aesthetics as a theory of taste, though his reflection on form as a concept remains focused on the formalist tendencies of his own critical approach rather than the possible meanings of form in the eighteenth century. See James Noggle, *The Temporality of Taste in Eighteenth-Century British Writing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 204–11.
33. Marjorie Levinson, “What Is New Formalism?,” *PMLA* 122.2 (March 2007): 559. What Levinson calls “backlash new formalism” is defined, on her view, by its commitment to form “regarded as the condition of aesthetic experience as traced to Kant”; further, “it assigns to the aesthetic norm-setting work that is cognitive and affective and therefore also cultural-political.”
34. Whitney Davis issues a persuasive challenge to this claim to methodological rigor in his investigation of art-historical formalism. See Whitney Davis, “What is Formalism?,” chapter 3 of *A General Theory of Visual Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011).