PROFR. DR. EVANGHELOS A. MOUTSOPOULOS

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ON SOME SYSTEMS OF AESTHETIC CATEGORIES

PROFR. DR. EVANGHELOS A. MOUTSOPOULOS
Universidad de Atenas.

If 1. *an object in general* is what constitutes for the human consciousness an exterior aim of reference,

and 2. *an aesthetic object,* natural or artistic, is what may effect an aesthetic emotion.

and 3. *an aesthetic object* can receive, beyond any emotional appreciation, a rational appreciation and the attribution of meaning and of value such that the intentionality of human consciousness is objectified,

then, the elucidation of a whole axiology of the aesthetic object is possible.

THIS ELUCIDATION of aesthetic objects is made through categories, i.e., through very general classes of appreciative notions. These general classes of notions are of the type Plato speaks of in the *Sophist* as the highest genera or kinds *(megista genē)*.

For Aristotle, categories denote properties of being. Aristotle distinguishes ten such categories: substance, quantity, quality, place, time, activity, passivity, etc. Attempts have been made from time to time to reduce these ten categories, and the most successful attempt seems to have been that of the eclecticists of the 19th century. They condensed the ten Aristotelian categories into five: substance, form, the relation holding between theme two, and time and space.

In opposition to the categories of Aristotle, which are ontological, those of Kant are mainly epistemological. They are not attributes of beings any more, but the very tools of the mind which enable it to organize in its way the world which is initially presented to the understanding as completely disorganized. For Kant, a category is a general, fundamental notion of the under-

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standing which is independent of language, innate to the mind, and so general that it cannot be generalized further through submission under another notion. We then say that such categories are non-reducible.

However, Kant thinks that it is possible to divide the twelve categories of the mind into four classes: that of quantity, quality, relation and modality. In this he more or less follows Aristotle. But the connection between the two philosophers stops here. Space and time are, for Kant, no longer attributes of being, but *a priori* forms of sensibility. Through them, as well as through the main categories, we are able to organize the world which otherwise appears to us as confused reality.

Aesthetic categories have the following characteristics:

a) They have a double nature. They are if not *ontological,* at least *existential,* because they are parts of the nature of the aesthetic beings they qualify. And they are *epistemological,* because it is through them that the aesthetic reason appreciates and evaluates the aesthetical objects. In other words, aesthetic categories denote the aestheticity of the object, as well as the noetic and aesthetic disposition of understanding.

b) In spite of their generality, they are indefinite in number. One may even say that their combination leads to a variety of aspects which are as numerous as the aesthetic objects themselves.

c) They may be so arranged as to form axiological levels. This does not mean to say that some of them are more general than others, but only that the aesthetic objets to which they are applied occur more frequently. Their importance is, so to say, an empirical one.

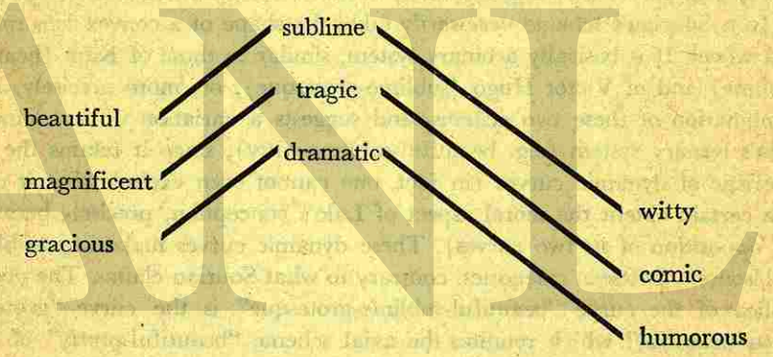
d) All aesthetic categories refer to the beautiful, not because they can be subsumed under it, but because the beautiful is, in a way, present in every aesthetic object, even negatively. In aesthetics, every appreciative effort presupposes the evaluation of beauty. In effect, the beautiful underlies every particular aesthetic category. One may even assert that it emerges *stroboscopically* from the mixture of all the other categories. The beautiful becomes the criterion *par excellence* in aesthetics, a criterion of aesthetic satisfaction.

Aesthetic categories are numerous *nuances* which, because of their number, tend to lose their categorical importance when they become mere splinters of the evaluative effort. This is why philosophers have tried to formulate secure systems of aesthetic categories. Such systems are attempts to conciliate the hierarchic and isonomic demands at a certain level of aesthetic consideration. Hierarchic tendencies are evident in Kant's distinction of four classes of categories, for instance. Isonomic tendencies are evident in conceptions in which no general classes of categories are considered and where all categories claim the same equal axiological prerogatives.

One may on a qualitative basis distinguish binary, ternary and polymeric, or manyfold systems of categories. Again, one may, on a qualitative basis, distinguish polarized or centralized systems of categories. Besides, other mixed systems are eventually possible.

Kant, after Burke, elaborates a rather naive polarized system whose two constituent notions are the beautiful and the sublime. Like Kant, Schopenhauer proposes another binary systems, based upon the opposition between the beautiful and the pretty, and Victor Hugo a similar system based upon the opposition between the sublime and the grotesque.

Charles Lalo has tried to work out a ternary system by combining nine categories, each of which exhibits certain dynamic tendencies. In effect, the nine categories mentioned are grouped in three classes and at the same time form three dynamic curves:



The first goup comprizes "possessed" categories. The second, "sought" categories. And the third, "lost" categories. Such an "axial" system admits some critical observations:

1. It has an intensely moral character.
2. It is exclusive and schematic. How can categories as those of idyllic, of poetic, of satiric, etc., be incorporated into it?
3. It is a closed system.

Unlike Lalo's system, the liberal aesthetic of Etienne Souriau pretends to lead to 1) a conception of isonomy between aesthetic categories, and 2) to a

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centered conception of categories. Souriau distinguishes two scales of categories, one descending and one ascending which he arranges circulary in what he calls "the wheel of aesthetic categories". One will observe again the existence of dynamic curves, as in Lalo's system, even if these curves suggest a different aspect. These dynamic curves have nothing to do with the circular shape Souriau seems to attribute to his system. They do not proceed from its graphic figure, but they are inherent to its very conception:

a) beautiful, noble, magnificent, sublime, pathetic, lyric, heroic, tragic, dramatic, melodramatic, caricatural, grotesque.
b) Grotesque, satiric, ironic, comic, gay, strange, picturesque, pretty, gracious, poetic, idyllic, elegiac, beautiful.

These categories are supposed to be the most frequently used in aesthetic. Souriau's scheme seems to present the advantage of permitting, theoretically at least, any other category to be incorporated into it. Its structure is claimed to be circular but it is fundamentally axial, underlined by the existence of the two special curves denoting a polarity between the beautiful and the grotesque. In fact, Souriau's scheme *necessarily* takes the shape of a convex lens not that of a wheel. It is basically a binary system, similar to those of Kant (beautiful-sublime) and of Victor Hugo (sublime-grotesque), or, more precisely, it is a combination of these two systems, and suggests a variation of an element of Lalo's ternary system (e.g. beautiful-sublime-witty), since it retains the characteristic of dynamic curves (in fact, one cannot even exclude that it retains to a certain extent the moral aspect of Lalo's conception, precisely because of the opposition of its two curves). These dynamic curves make impossible any real isonomy between categories, contrary to what Souriau claims. The negative replica of the curve "beautiful-sublime-grotesque" is the curve "grotesque-pretty-beautiful" which reunites the axial scheme "beautiful-pretty" of Schopenhauer.

TABLE OF CONCORDANCE AND COMBINATION OF SYSTEMS OF CATEGORIES

Kant	*Schopenhauer*	*V. Hugo*	*Ch. Lalo*	*E. Souriau*
sublime		sublime	sublime	sublime
beautiful	beautiful		beautiful	beautiful
	pretty			pretty
			witty	
		grotesque		grotesque

The curves thus defined are merely interpolated by means of the other categories. Furthermore, it is not clear from Souriau's thesis whether categories like gracious, poetic, lyric, etc. belong only to one curve or to both. The difficulty makes it necessary to reconsider whether the whole conception of Souriau can be maintained on a very different basis.

To be circular, and above all to save the principle of isonomy, a system of aesthetic categories has to be necessarily centered around the category of the beautiful which is supposed to fill the whole shape thus defined, and, in a way, to serve as its foundation. Therefore the shape has to be so understood as to consist of concentric circles which define circular zones indicating various classes of categories. A great number of categories belong to more that one class (and this is a warrant of their isonomy) will overlap with other zones of these classes. In this way, a more satisfactory topological repartition of the categories can be constructed which would be more accurate to the nature of aesthetic categories and their mutual relations.[1]

[1] Cf. MOUTSOPOULOS, E., *Aesthetic categories. An introduction to the axiology of the aesthetic object*, Athens, 1971.

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