

BOOK REVIEW by Jennifer A. McMahon

Pre –Published version of *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 51:2 (2011) pp.229-231

The Kantian Aesthetic: From Knowledge to the Avant-Garde

PAUL CROWTHER

Oxford U. P. 2010. 209 PP. £35.00 (HBK)

Paul Crowther provides interpretations of key concepts in Kant's *Critique of Aesthetic Judgment*, indicating (particularly in very informative footnotes) how his views compare with those of other Kant commentators such as Paul Guyer, Rachel Zuckert, Béatrice Longuenesse, Henry Allison, Donald Crawford, Robert Wicks and others. One might be inclined to ask whether yet another interpretation of Kant's third critique was needed, yet compared to his other two critiques, Kant's *Critique of Judgment* can still be regarded as the neglected sibling. Its relevance to his system as a whole and in particular to his moral theory is still under appreciated. However, if one is after a study of Kant's third critique along these lines, this is not the place to find it. Crowther has his philosopher of art hat firmly in place in the writing of this study. Even so, adopting this approach Crowther shows us that there is still work to be done. Crowther takes the core of Kant's thesis and argues that its implications extend far beyond what Kant could have envisaged.

In his Introduction, Crowther clears the path for his particular art theoretical emphasis by inventing a derogatory label – “interminablism” (pp.1-3) - for the practice of interpreting each of Kant's concepts and arguments in the light of his system as a whole rather than, “engaging more directly with more general problems in aesthetics and questions of method in the understanding of the arts” (p.3). Nonetheless, Crowther does strive to make his interpretation of Kant's aesthetic theory compatible with Kant's epistemology. In Chapters 1-3, Crowther sets up the epistemological framework for this. For example, in Chapter 3, Crowther draws our attention to the “unity of apperception” and the role of schemata (productive imagination) in linking past, present and future in unified perceptions in aesthetic judgments. He points out, that aesthetic judgments are always temporally extended. The unified self that such perceptual unity entails, is very pertinent for understanding the constructive nature of perceptions of beauty (pp. 65-6, 77-80 and see particularly p. 82). Arguably, Crowther does not fully realise the implications of the schemata for the aesthetic characterisation. When he concludes: “The beauty of a configuration is independent of the will” (p.72), for example, he might have emphasized that the nature of the “configuration” is to some extent beholden to the will, that one's intellectual interest, back ground experience, knowledge and so on would constrain what one notices and what relations one could then discern between elements. Even so,

Crowther does an excellent job of drawing out the features of Kant's epistemology which are conducive to understanding the embodied nature of empirical knowledge (Ch.3).

The disagreements Crowther has with other authors are always interesting and illuminating. For example, his interpretation of the role of the categories and schemata in experiences of beauty is contrary to Rachel Zuckert's, according to which the aspects of objects relevant to their beauty elude the categories and transcendental schemata, subject as they are to contingency (p.66, fn.6; p.75-6, fn.23). I rather think Crowther's view is more compatible with the bringing of reason into our sensuous orientations to the world, which is the aspect of the aesthetic that interested Kant (although I could be accused of "interminablism" in my defence of Crowther here). Even so, Zuckert's view is intriguing and the drawing out of their disagreement is another example of Crowther's talent for knowing just which points of disagreement will offer theoretical potential to those interested in the application of Kant's theory to the contemporary art scene.

I appreciated Crowther's discussion of the relation between taste and morality (Part 4, Ch.4) but would have appreciated more on the nature and role of the *sensus communis* in grounding this relation. Had Crowther focussed more on this concept, he may have found the comparative dimension in aesthetic judgment that he argues is lacking in Kant's account (see fn.1, p. 89, for a very interesting comparison between his views on whether Kant successfully grounded universal validity and those of Hannah Ginsborg, Rebecca Kukla, Eva Schaper, Crawford, Guyer and Allison). Nonetheless, while I think he could make a lot more of the *sensus communis* in understanding the role of intersubjectivity for achieving Kant's broader theoretical aims (moral motivation), Crowther nicely captures the key point for Kant, when he writes: "the fact that an idiom of feeling can have this rational dimension shows that even at the level of sensibility humans have a vocation that leads beyond mere causally based pleasures of the senses." (p. 104)

Finding a ground for the "rational dimension of feeling" is what to my mind drives the third critique. Crowther explores this through Kant's notion of the "supersensible substratum" but he would have done better to have focussed on the *sensus communis* as when he writes: "Whilst taste focuses on the subject's own perceptual horizons, the context of public expression is a key factor." (p.110) The social aspect of taste is given due attention here, drawing attention to social, cultivated, impartial, disinterested, and universal aspects of the processes by which matters of taste constitute the fabric of a community (pp.113-4). While I would endorse Crowther's views on the social aspect of taste, I think he is mistaken to think that this comparative aspect is absent in Kant. Crowther takes himself to be reconstructing Kant on this point whereas I think that he is merely fleshing out what is there in the text of the *Critique of Aesthetic Judgment*, understood in the light of Kant's earlier work: the first two critiques and his essays that bring out the development of his thought on the sentiment-rationality dichotomy in moral judgment ("interminablism" notwithstanding).

Nothing brings out a commentator's intellectual motivation in regards to the aesthetic realm more than her interpretation of the distinction between pure and dependent beauty (Ch.5). Crowther writes: "Kant is indirectly claiming that whilst beauty is a logically distinct form of value, and pursuable for its own sake, it is, nevertheless, not of absolute and unconditional worth." (p.125) Crowther is here paving the way for his discussion of the importance of judgments of perfection (in place of adherent beauty) for our cognitive engagement with sensible phenomena, which will lead him into a discussion of contemporary fine art and culture. However, it might as easily have led to the conclusion that the ethical dimension takes precedence over the aesthetic or at least that the latter is not autonomous, a conclusion that should warn a commentator that her interpretation of Kant was taking an idiosyncratic turn. However, the chapter devoted to pure and adherent beauty has more than this to offer. Crowther identifies two notions of perfection and draws upon them to characterise dependent beauty as involving a harmony between understanding and reason as opposed to pure beauty which involves a harmony between imagination and understanding. Adherent or dependent beauty involves two inseparable but distinguishable components – pure beauty and intellectual interest, according to Crowther. Once again he locates his position in relation to influential Kant commentators such as Robert Wicks, Zuckert and Guyer.

The last two chapters (chapter 6-7) deal with fine art and the sublime respectively. In the case of fine art, Crowther criticizes Kant for failing to account for the "comparative dimension" inherent in the concept of "originality" and "exemplariness" (p.154). He thinks Kant's notion of "claims to universal validity" is also weakened by ignoring this dimension (p.89). Instead, according to Crowther, as Kant grounds originality on genius, he fails to move the account beyond the subjective and individual. I appreciate Crowther's point here not because I think he is right about Kant failing in this respect but because he provides an opportunity for bringing something out in Kant's account so often overlooked. That Crowther thinks aesthetic judgment needs to be understood as exercised "in the arena of public intercourse and transmission" (p.162) is right on the money but this should not be understood as a critique of Kant as much as a vindication of Kant's aesthetic theory. If one understands Kant's interest in art as an interest in finding evidence for a "rational dimension of feeling" (which is the way I would recommend one understand Kant's interest in art), then one is more attuned to the emphasis on intersubjectivity that runs through the *Critique of Judgment*. We judge beauty "as if it were an objective judgment" (§32); taste is a kind of *sensus communis* where the latter means "a power to judge that in reflecting takes account ... of everyone else's way of presenting ... to compare our own judgment with human reason in general" (§40); "we must ... regard taste as an ability to judge whatever allows us to communicate even our feeling to everyone else" (§41); "taste is basically an ability to judge the way in which moral ideas are made sensible" (§60). Kant is treating art as an area of experience where we arrive at what we endorse and value through cultural interchanges such as when he writes that critics should reason through examples to "correct and broaden

our judgments of taste” bearing in mind that it is only through example that they can do this as it would be impossible to do so by way of proofs (§34). The idea is that with good will and cooperation (the marks of membership to a group) one can be shown how to construe or configure an array so as to perceive a beauty where before one could not. When the project is understood in this way, then the aspects of the *Critique of Aesthetic Judgment* which emphasize the public nature of aesthetic feeling is to the fore in our reading. I think Crowther attempts to draw out of Kant’s aesthetic theory an interest in art for its own sake, and hence what he takes as the salient points of the *Critique* are somewhat different to what I do. It is not surprising that when he joins the dots he ends up with a different picture to what I get because I notice a different set of dots (to labour the point somewhat). This is not a fatal flaw in his work by any means. On the contrary, I found his discussion lively and interesting; and an illuminating example of the philosopher-of-art’s Kant which is what he explicitly aims for (as opposed to the Kant-scholar’s Kant, the culprits of “interminablism” I presume).

In the case of the sublime, Crowther focuses on the role of “infinity” and downplays its importance in his reconstruction of the Kantian sublime. He argues that his interpretation still maintains the spirit of Kant’s notion of the sublime but updates it so that it can be understood as a relevant aesthetic category for contemporary art. Crowther locates his position in relation to Patricia Matthews, Allison, Malcolm Budd and Sarah Gibbons. Once again I found something with which to disagree (the philosopher’s curse it seems). I would argue that Crowther misses the point of the sublime. Kant was not out to uncover a new evaluative category for art, as Crowther seems to imply or at least hope. Instead, Kant was interested in showing that while beauty may provide us with an explicit example of the necessary link that can ensue between feeling and reason, and can imbue the world with meaning for us (experiencing beauty in nature makes the world seem conducive to our projects), the sublime nonetheless reminds us that the most expansive and liberating ideas originate in reason, that is, in us.

Where Crowther takes himself to be deviating from Kant, that is, where he explores the comparative dimension of aesthetic judgment within the system of art, he mistakenly thinks this is a radical reconstruction of Kantian aesthetics. My objection here is not so much with how Crowther envisages some extensions of Kantian aesthetic theory, on the contrary this part of the book is interesting and illuminating (Ch. 6), but rather the way he understands what he is doing in relation to what Kant was doing. As above I would argue that the comparative dimension is implicit in the notion of intersubjectivity and *sensus communis*.

None of my objections above are actually criticisms of the book. I would expect any interesting interpretation of Kant’s aesthetics to differ to some extent from my own. I could criticise the author for putting so much of the interesting scholarly discussion in the footnotes, but even this would be a tad churlish. It is a fascinating fact about Kant’s *Critique of Judgment* (as with his entire oeuvre) that so many scholars who delve seriously

and deeply into its themes and objectives can reveal something new and illuminating about Kant's aims, purposes or implications for the present. Crowther achieves this. Ultimately, the test is whether the author's position is coherently related to other scholarship in the field of study and illuminating in its own right in some respect. Crowther's book passes this test with flying colours.

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