

REVIEWS

Tomáš Hlobil. *Geschmacksbildung im Nationalinteresse. Vol. 2. Der Abschluss der frühen Prager Universitätsästhetik im mitteleuropäischen Kulturraum 1805–1848*. Hanover: Wehrhahn, 2018, 429 pp. ISBN 978-3-86525-646-1

This eighth volume of the 'Bochumer Quellen und Forschungen zum 18. Jahrhundert' series was written by Tomáš Hlobil, Professor of Aesthetics at the University of Prague. As the word *Abschluss* indicates, this monograph forms a second part, with the first having been published in the same series with the subtitle *Die Anfänge der Prager Universitätsästhetik im mitteleuropäischen Kulturraum 1763–1805*.¹ And while my review focuses on the second volume, it is sometimes inevitable to refer to the first one as well. Hlobil's monograph offers a new and refreshing approach to the history of aesthetics. I will demonstrate three novelties represented by his approach, based on the inquiry into Central European university aesthetics.

The first novelty concerns the attribute 'Central European'. The traditional historical approaches to aesthetics are characteristically international. These approaches, for example Paul Guyer's excellent book, *A History of Modern Aesthetics*,² delineate the history of aesthetics as an immanent development of ideas, which are connected to renowned authors. These authors' national affiliations then help create the national narratives of aesthetic history, for instance the history of British or French aesthetics. However, the national narratives are based exclusively on the fact that the great authors' works were written in the national language, without any consideration for the other characteristics or references possibly determined by national frameworks. Nevertheless, that model could not be applied to the cultural relations of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Habsburg or Austrian Empire. In that field, language does not function as the main indicator of national identity. As Hlobil's books demonstrate, the language used in the Bohemian university aesthetics was German until 1882, when the University of Prague was divided into German-speaking and Czech-speaking parts. The situation was similar in Hungary, where Latin was the main language of university aesthetics until 1844. The first Bohemian professors of aesthetics, Carl Heinrich Seibt and August Gottlieb Meißner, came from German speaking families and studied at

¹ Tomáš Hlobil, *Geschmacksbildung im Nationalinteresse: Die Anfänge der Prager Universitätsästhetik im mitteleuropäischen Kulturraum 1763–1805* (Hanover: Wehrhahn, 2012).

² Paul Guyer, *A History of Modern Aesthetics*, 3 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

German universities, exactly like the Hungarian professor Johann Ludwig Schedius, who wrote a Latin monograph despite his German vernacular. In addition, Vienna's political intention to form a supranational imperial identity appears clearly in the background of this chaos. How could this cultural complexity be demonstrated? Hlobil chooses a path unusual in the history of aesthetics. The geographical references in his first volume are: Prague, Vienna, Würzburg, Halle, Leipzig. The second volume examines aesthetics at the universities of Prague, Vienna, Lemberg, Graz, Innsbruck, Olomouc, Freiburg, Würzburg, Halle, and Leipzig. This region was defined by the dominance of the German language, the close connections of the educational systems, the students' peregrination, the virtual network operated by the republic of letters, as well as some common problems. The question Hlobil poses is whether and how aesthetics could infiltrate the evolving national system of university studies. Was it possible at all? And if it was, how did it prepare the way for the development of 'national aesthetics' during the nineteenth century? Hlobil reveals, by his regional approach, that the cultural cosmos of the Central European region is a strongly coherent conglomerate. Its cohesion is demonstrated by questions and approaches common to the whole region. Hlobil's two books prove that developing research on the intellectual history of the Central European region as a unit is a productive and effective project.

The second novelty presented by Hlobil's monograph is its method, which distinguishes and describes 'university aesthetics'. As I mentioned, the traditional history of aesthetics is based on the main authors' *oeuvres* and the immanent development of aesthetic thought. University aesthetics points to another important, but unexplored field within the history of aesthetics. On the one hand, universities could be considered both intellectual centres and socially and politically defined institutions. Why is it worth connecting intellectual history to institutional history? Because, as Hlobil writes, aesthetics

has also been shaped in an important, if not decisive, way by numerous external, political, and social factors, because this kind of aesthetics is firmly linked to the university as an institution, characterized by its distinctive internal organization and governance and dependent on the political decisions of the State.³

The link between the history of aesthetics and the history of universities reveals to us the methods that embedded aesthetic ideas into the society of a certain region. Furthermore, university aesthetics provides researchers with appropriate

³ Tomáš Hlobil, '250 Years of Aesthetics at Prague University: How the History of the Teaching of Aesthetics Has Evaded Historians', *Proceedings of the European Society for Aesthetics* 5 (2013): 19.

material to investigate the practices of cultural politics. How did political circles, especially official decision-makers, try to influence, or sometimes dominate, the world of scholarship? The first volume demonstrates how Gottfried van Swieten's support was instrumental for aesthetics' becoming an important discipline at the universities of the Habsburg Empire. (Nowadays, it is ironic to read about the complaints of the Bohemian Society of Sciences from the 1780s regarding the problem of humanities oppressing natural sciences.) But aestheticians themselves sometimes succeeded in countering or changing governmental or other official influences. For example, in his second volume, Hlobil shows how the aestheticians at the University of Prague counterbalanced the influence of Vienna's official university aesthetics on the one side and of German idealism on the other, by teaching and favouring practice-oriented British authors, such as Henry Home, Edmund Burke, or Hugh Blair. As Hlobil ascertains, sometimes institutional changes initiated changes of aesthetic reception. At the University of Prague in the eighteenth century (not unlike at Hungarian universities), the faculty of arts operated at an introductory, propaedeutic level in the system of higher education. That position led to two consequences. On the one hand, the propaedeutic role did not motivate autonomous research and it obliged professors to teach aesthetics as a didactic discipline. On the other hand, aesthetics taught as a propaedeutic reached a wider public, a process that resulted in more effective dissemination of aesthetic ideas.

At the same time, universities were the main centres of academic knowledge dissemination during the period in question. For a researcher seeking to reconstruct the intellectual sources of an eighteenth century Bohemian student's perspective on values and expectations regarding the arts, it would be hardly effective to enumerate the most important contemporary authors. Bohemian university aesthetics clarify that if that student visited, say, Meißner's lectures, presumably, he would not hear any mention of Kant's *Critique of Judgement*. However, he would probably hear many observations about Alexander Gerard's, Burke's, Home's, or Joachim Eschenburg's aesthetics. One cannot completely rule out that this student read Kant's work for other reasons. However, he was certainly exposed to the British and German authors mentioned. Therefore, studying university lectures and textbooks proves the importance of minor authors, whose works have been neglected by the traditional historiography of aesthetic ideas. As both of Hlobil's books reveal, minor authors' works are essential to recognize and to reconstruct the reception of aesthetics. And if they are, then historiography is obliged to accept the consequences. For example, the second volume of Bohemian

university aesthetics contains two chapters written about Anton Müller's lectures between 1823 and 1842. His system of aesthetics concentrates on a phenomenon called 'aesthetic interest'. Obviously, it is a post-Kantian and, at the same time, an anti-Kantian concept, one whose interpretation could be further enriched by setting it in the context of Eschenburg's and Johann August Eberhard's works. As Hlobil's chapters on Müller's concept show, his ideas on aesthetic interest and his drama theory strongly influenced contemporary literature and theatre. Therefore, not only the history of aesthetic thought, but also the history of literature cannot afford to ignore it. Moreover, the history of university aesthetics uncovers strong ideological tendencies as well. As Hlobil demonstrates, the corpus of Bohemian university aesthetics articulated between 1765 and 1848 can effectively be classified into five main tendencies. At the beginning, aesthetics at the University of Prague was under the influence of Johann Joachim Winckelmann's and Moses Mendelssohn's *Regelpoetik* and *Empfindungsästhetik*, which prioritized emotion over reason in matters of art creation and reception. The decisive author of the second period, Meißner, was an advocate of *Wirkungsästhetik*, which he conceived as the theory of being moved emotionally (*Rührungsästhetik*). The next period was dominated by German idealism, marked by Joseph Georg Meinert's professed anthropological and psychological aesthetics based on Heinrich Zschokke's work. The last authority was Müller, who adjusted aesthetics to the spirit of an idealist Romanticism. It is only such an institutional microhistory of university aesthetics that has allowed Hlobil to distinguish these intellectual tendencies.

As I said, researching the history of Central European university aesthetics presents three main novelties. One concerns the focus on the region of Central Europe, another is connected to the attention paid to the institutional aspect of universities. Not surprisingly, the third novelty regards the discipline of aesthetics. Hlobil considers teaching aesthetics at universities in non-general terms. He gives very detailed descriptions of lectures, textbooks, institutional positions, their connections, and context, based on curricula and manuscript sources of university archives. He elaborates his descriptions and conclusions with a very strict and consistent series of questions. His questions, or aspects of investigation, are: What was aesthetics (or rather the disciplines in which professors handled questions of aesthetics) called? In what years and semesters were courses on aesthetics offered? What groups of people did it include? What place did it hold in the various hierarchies of faculty disciplines? Who taught it? What was their status at the universities, and what were their salaries? What textbooks and publications did they use? What place did aesthetics hold compared to the other subjects?

A well-known fact, typically supported by citing Alexander Baumgarten's *Aesthetica* published in 1750, is that the discipline of aesthetics was formed in the middle of the eighteenth century. Another well-known fact is that the discipline of aesthetics has a different meaning and position in the system of scholarship today than it did in the eighteenth century. However, historiography still owes us a methodical inquiry on that disciplinary transfiguration of aesthetics. How was the meaning, the position, the frames of aesthetics modified during the centuries? As Hlobil's monograph demonstrates, university aesthetics could be considered the basis of such inquiries.

After the novelties offered by these two volumes, I would like to summarize the questions and expectations that arose from Hlobil's grandiose overview of Central European university aesthetics. As I see it, these questions and expectations could be the seeds of further research on the topic. First, it would be very productive to track the whole process of transferring aesthetic knowledge from the professors' books and lectures to particular members of society. What kind of media, which cultural practices were used to convey and disseminate aesthetic knowledge? What was the role of scholarly networks and societies in that process? How could its efficacy and results be embraced? How did knowledge of aesthetics manifest itself in the lower levels of the educational system? Which disciplines were the auxiliary and which were central to aesthetics? Were there any fusions or amalgamations between these disciplines and aesthetics in the educational system? Can we speak of a pragmatic kind of aesthetics adapted for the needs of education? Another interesting problem is the language and terminology of aesthetics. Comparing Latin, Greek, German, and vernacular terminology, developing their sociolinguistic characteristics, and devising metalinguistic theories of aesthetics provide promising new perspectives for research.

Finally, I cannot help mentioning that an important image is missing from this brilliant regional panorama of university aesthetics: Hungarian university aesthetics. The causes of that blind spot are clear. First, the particular form of Latin in which Hungarian university aesthetics was composed makes these sources difficult to access. Second, modern, international approaches to the history of Hungarian aesthetics are lacking as well. It is up to the Hungarian researchers to fill in the missing pieces of the history of the Central European university aesthetics. I hope that our recent publication, the ninth volume of 'Bochumer Quellen' will fill part of that gap.⁴

⁴ Piroška Balogh and Gergely Fórizs, eds., *Anthropologische Ästhetik in Mitteleuropa 1750–1850 / Anthropological Aesthetics in Central Europe 1750–1850* (Hanover: Wehrhahn, 2018).

To summarize, I can only repeat and corroborate Sandra Richter's appreciation of the first volume of Hlobil's monograph:

Hlobil has provided us with an important work of scholarship which greatly enriches the history of aesthetics, a history that all too often refuses to apply its sensitivity for art to its own academic texts and their contexts. It is to be hoped that this study serves as an example for future research in the history of aesthetics as well as in the general history of education and thought.⁵

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⁵ Sandra Richter, review of *Geschmacksbildung im Nationalinteresse*, by Tomáš Hlobil, *Estetika: The Central European Journal of Aesthetics* 50 (2013): 238.