

The Autonomy of Art: A Short History in Passages

There is no art [but one] delivered to mankind that hath not the works of Nature for his principal object. . . . Only the poet, disdain[ing] to be tied to any such subjection, lifted up with the vigour of his own invention, doth grow in effect another nature. . . . He nothing affirms, and therefore never lieth.

--Sir Philip Sidney, Apologie for Poetry, 1595

The pleasant and the good both have a reference to the faculty of desire, and they bring with them, the former a satisfaction pathologically conditioned (by impulses, stimuli), the latter a pure practical [i. e., purposeful or pragmatic] satisfaction which is determined not merely by the representation of the object but also by the represented connection of the subject with the existence of the object [i. e., the subject—or self—either covets or recoils from the object on either sensuous or moral grounds]. [The sensuous or moral disposition of a subject toward an object Kant then calls “interest.”]

--Immanuel Kant, Critique of Judgment, 1790

Taste is the faculty of judging of an object or a method of representing it by an *entirely disinterested* satisfaction or dissatisfaction. The object of such satisfaction is called *beautiful*.

--Ibid.

Beauty is the form of the *purposiveness* [i. e., the unifying and generative principle] of an object, so far as this is perceived in it *without any representation of a purpose*.

--Ibid.

The BEAUTIFUL is. . . at once distinguished both from the AGREEABLE, which is beneath it, and from the GOOD, which is above it: for both these necessarily have an interest attached to them: both act on the WILL, and excite a desire for the actual image or object contemplated.

--Samuel Taylor Coleridge, “on the Principles of Genial Criticism,” 1814

All art is quite useless.

--Oscar Wilde, “Preface to The Picture of Dorian Gray,” 1891

The experience called beauty is beyond the powerful ethical will precisely as it is beyond the animal passion, and indeed these last two are competitive and coordinate.

--John Crowe Ransom, “Criticism as Pure Speculation,” 1941

The first law to be prescribed to criticism, if we may assume such authority, is that it shall be objective, shall cite the nature of the object rather than its effects on the subject.
--Ransom, "Criticism, Inc.," 1938

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