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Aesthetics and the Boundaries of Rhetoric. Charles Batteaux's *Les beaux arts réduit à un même principe* (1746) and its Danish Translation (1773-74)

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In his treatise *Les beaux arts réduit à un même principe* (1746) (*The fine arts reduced to a single principle*), Charles Batteux is in search of a principle common to all the fine arts and he argues that this principle is *the imitation of beautiful nature*. Batteux's famous and influential book is an important step towards a general theory of aesthetics. There is no doubt that it had a profound impact on contemporary aesthetic debates in Germany, but opinions differ among scholars as to its impact on contemporary French debate. Diderot's devastating critique from 1751 focused on Batteux's imprecision and vagueness; for example, he accused Batteux of never actually defining the term "fine nature". Some scholars (for example, John Pizer) hold that, largely because of this critique, Batteux had virtually no impact on contemporary aesthetics in his own land¹. Others claim that the very idea of a unifying principle of the arts - no matter what principle - was taken up and broadcast by the encyclopaedists (Diderot, D'Alembert, Montesquieu); in other words, that Batteux's impact was enormous in France as well as in Germany.

The complicated history of the various editions

Les beaux arts réduits à un même principe was first published 1746 in one volume. In its wake, there followed several new editions that were substantially revised and enlarged, and had new titles. The most important steps in this history of publication are the following:

1747-48 *Cours de belles lettres distribué par exercices*, in four volumes.

1753 *Cours de belles-lettres ou Principes de littérature*, also in four volumes.

¹ John Pizer: "Lessing's Reception of Charles Batteux", *Lessing Yearbook* Vol. XXI, 1989, 29-43.

1764 *Principes de littérature*, in five volumes.

The picture is even more variegated if one takes into consideration the two German translations, one by Johann Adolf Schlegel (father of the more famous brothers), and the other by Karl Wilhelm Ramler; several revised and enlarged editions of both were published. Even the first edition of Schlegel's translation (1751) features a number of embedded commentaries and supplementary observations, which were revised and expanded in subsequent editions. Moreover, in the 3rd edition (1770) the translator introduced treatises on taste, genius and rhyme. The commentaries of the translator in this edition accounted for more pages than the original French text. According to the Swedish author, Lars Gustafsson, Schlegel's commentaries were increasingly negative and critical in the later editions of his translation².

These German translations, and especially Schlegel's comments, had an impact on the French edition of 1764, in which Batteux himself responds to the critique. In a later German translation Schlegel, in turn, responds to Batteux's replies. Thus, the French and German editions together form a sort of dialogue, exchanging questions and answers.

The Danish translation by Jens Hvas, *Indledning til de Skiønne Konster og Videnskaber*, appeared in 1773-74 in four volumes. It contains all of the previous publication history, including Schlegel's commentaries and supplements, and Batteux's replies. In addition, the Danish translator provides an introductory treatise on aesthetics. It should also be mentioned that Hvas' translation includes some Danish text examples.

A brief description of the text

The text is divided into three main parts.

The first establishes the imitation of beautiful nature as the sole principle of art, and applies this principle in general terms to poetry, painting, music and dance.

The second applies the same principle to a more detailed description of various literary genres: narrative poetry (including the fable, the bucolic and the epic), dramatic poetry (including opera, comedy and tragedy), lyric poetry (including the ode and the elegy), and didactic poetry (including the philosophical and historical poem, the satire, epistles in verse, and the epigram). This part concludes with a detailed paraphrasing of the *Ars Poetica* by Horace.

² Lars Gustafsson, " 'Imitation' och 'entusiasm'. En studie i klassicistisk poetik", *Samlaren*, Uppsala, Vol. 84, 1963, 144-75.

The third part takes up the notion of eloquence, and it is still a question of this being the one and only principle of imitation. The specific genres are: speech, story, history (i.e. historiography), and epistle. Finally, to complete the overview, Batteux adds a chapter on translation.

Aristotle and Horace

Batteux tries to capture in a simple and powerful theory what he terms the confusing variety of rules that characterise the normative aesthetics of classicism. He draws upon Cartesian epistemology, and achieves his aim by connecting the Aristotelian concept of mimesis to what he calls "beautiful nature". This combination of mimesis and beautiful nature, and especially the notions of genius and taste, constitutes the main thesis which dominates Batteux's entire theory.

Genius, he claims, is not blind force, but hard-working reason. Unable to create anything that does not exist, genius can only search for or try to discover what already is. Thus, genius is adapted to the imitation of beautiful nature.

A corresponding adaptation governs the notion of taste. Taste is the category for aesthetic assessment or evaluation, and is therefore rooted in the subjective. However, it does not create unrestrained subjectivity, thanks - once again - to beautiful nature. Taste is a matter of pleasure. What gives pleasure is what brings us closer to the perfect or allows us to hope for such a thing. This explains why beautiful nature is so charming, and why the fine arts charm us.

In addition to Aristotle, Horace is another ancient theorist who plays a significant role in Batteux's theory, particularly in the extensive quotation of *Ars Poetica*. In addition, in his claim that a single principle (for the arts) is based on the *ut pictura poesis* sentence, Batteux echoes Horace, who also distinguishes between fine arts and mechanical arts by applying pleasure and utility (*dulce et utile*) as criterion. Thus, mechanical arts are considered to be useful, while fine arts give pleasure. A third category includes the arts that serve the purpose of both utility and pleasure: architecture and rhetoric.

Those who read the later and extended editions of Batteux's work will discover a gap - in content as well in form - between the first part (the original *Les beaux arts ...*), on the one hand, and parts II and III (dealing with literature and eloquence respectively), on the other. Part I is a treatise, in which the author attempts to solve a theoretical problem in a way that has not been attempted before. The fact that Batteux manages to formulate this discussion in general terms justifies the

characterization of the book as a milestone in the history of aesthetics (Paul Oscar Kristeller)³.

Parts II and III are more like textbooks. In spite of the author's claim that this is a description of the one and only principle, this is not always the case. Batteux repeats traditional knowledge, adapting the material to young or inexperienced readers. For example, his list of narrative genres includes the fable, the bucolic and the epic in this specific order, in order to move from simple to complex, from easy to difficult.

A problem in modern aesthetics is the distance, or gap, between general theory and - to use a simple word - facts. This gap may also be explained in terms of the differences between types of texts, or types of knowledge, to which I will return later. The theorist is often a philosopher who explains what art is, what beauty is, etc., without saying a single word about the specific arts. In contrast, the historian of literature - to stick to my own field - is able to provide a lot of details without touching upon the question: What is art?

Reading Batteux, the reader encounters this problem of uniting general theory and facts. This may also explain the difficulty encountered in assessing Batteux's impact on contemporary French debate mentioned above. Was he important - or was he not? It is not for me to decide. The only thing I feel sure about is that, if he really played an important role in France, this must have been because of his general aesthetics, his cartesian-like reduction of all the arts to a single principle.

With regard to the Germans, this is not so certain. It has been suggested that Germans may pay more attention to detail. This issue is brought to mind, in this specific case, by a remark made by Jens Hvas, the Danish translator who followed the German debate closely. According to Hvas, Batteux's treatise does not reflect a theoretical turn of mind, but is practical, and this practicality was Batteux's strength.

The development of modern aesthetics also concerns the borders of the field of rhetoric, which have been narrowing. This narrowing process is reflected in Batteux's work. This can be summed up briefly, in three questions:

1. How does the mimesis doctrine affect rhetoric?
2. What does Batteux say explicitly about the relationship between rhetoric and poetry?
3. How does the rhetoric of Batteux's own text reflect this?

³ Paul Oskar Kristeller, P. O.: "The Modern System of the Arts" *Journal of the History of Ideas* XII (1951), 496-527 and XIII (1952), 17-46.

1. How does the mimesis doctrine affect rhetoric?

Mimetic poetics has dominated western tradition for centuries. Theorists have paid most attention to the main genres of drama and epic, in addition to listing a cloud of small, i. e. insignificant, non-mimetic forms. In the century preceding Batteux's work, attempts were made to encompass all types of non-mimetic poetry in a third category entitled lyric poetry. What Batteux does, is to establish a third category, which is not outside but within the borders of mimesis. This he does by moving from the narrow, Aristotelian concept of imitation *of action*, to the much broader concept of imitation *without any limitation*.

He also suggests a new conception of the lyric. Traditionally, lyric poetry was considered to express feelings. Batteux's important development of this traditional notion was to note that feelings may be fictitious, imitated or simulated, which is to say, not real feelings. The essential point is that Batteux slips silently from a possibility of fictiousness to an essential fictiousness of the feelings expressed. Gérard Genette has pointed out that it is this mute and obviously miserable "syllogism" that establishes lyric poetry as a new, third category among the imitative genres.⁴

This widening of the field of mimesis does not solve the main problem: mimesis still does not cover the whole of literature, but excludes a lot of texts and genres "whose artistic character may not be so automatically attested but is still no less evident all the same" (Ibid.) For example, genres like essay, letter and historiography are ignored. In my opinion, the artistic character of these types of texts is better explained by traditional rhetorical theory than by modern theories of literature, that primarily focus on fiction. Thus, it is extremely important to nurture traditional rhetorical theory, and not let it fall into the darkness of oblivion.

2. What does Batteux say explicitly about the relationship between rhetoric and poetry?

Batteux discusses the distinction between eloquence and poetry, but is not able to draw a sharp line. He applies different criteria, so the resultant distinction is confusing. Poetry, according to him, is partly defined as a discursive art, which gives occasion to stress its close relationship to eloquence. He claims that the notion of free style, although primarily belonging to eloquence, may also be applied to poetry. Likewise, metric style, although primarily belonging to poetry, may also be applied

⁴ Gérard Genette: *The Architext. An Introduction*, Berkeley (Univ. of Calif. Press) 1992 [1979]

to eloquence. Thus, according to him, poetry and eloquence are ultimately one and same thing. At the same time, however, as mentioned, poetry is also defined by the criterion of utility, which stresses the difference between poetry and eloquence.

3. How does the rhetoric of Batteux's own text reflect this?

Batteux criticises both contemporary critics and critiques of the tradition for not having paid sufficient attention to what the poetics of Aristotle really says. His general aesthetics, which is reduced to one principle, is based on a new reading that has self-consciously left all traditional prejudices behind. In this way, Batteux is signalling both a type of text and a type of knowledge that is very similar to that of a scientist, who puts the object on the table and studies it carefully in order to find out as much as possible about it.

However, as the Swedish scholar Anna Cullhed⁵ has pointed out, this is only one of Batteux's faces with regard to types of texts, or types of knowledge. His other face is deeply rooted in the rhetorical tradition. For instance, why does he quote Horace's words *ut pictura poesis*? Is it his intention to find out what Horace actually wanted to say? Not at all, since this applies to most of the categories or distinctions to which Batteux refers. In short: Batteux uses theory as a collection of *topoi* or commonplaces.

To conclude, Batteux's work helps to define aesthetics as a field of knowledge, and also a new poetics, including the theory of the three main genres. However, the reverse side of the coin concerns the concept of rhetoric. He does not reject rhetoric, but leaves it in a confused and somewhat distressed state.

⁵ Anna Cullhed, "Antiken i poetiken. Charles Batteux, Hugh Blair, August Wilhelm Schlegel och den klassiska traditionen", *Tidskrift för litteraturvetenskap*, Lund 1997, nr. 3-4, 90-103.