

Kant's Aesthetic Ideas as Axiological Memory

NICOLAE RÂMBU*

Alexandru Ioan Cuza University of Iași, Romania

Abstract

By *axiological memory* I mean the capacity of a society to establish a set of fundamental values in the memory of its people, so that these values become indelible and unforgettable. The thesis that I will argue in this essay is that *aesthetic ideas*, which are closely related to Kant's theory about genius and taste from the *Critique of Aesthetic Judgement*, are *values* that the genius creates and translates into works of art in order to be set in the collective memory. Aesthetic ideas shape the tastes of others so that the collection of works and especially masterpieces of a particular civilization forms a genuine support for the axiological memory.

Keywords

axiological memory, Immanuel Kant, aesthetic ideas, work of genius, contemplation of Ideas.

1. Aesthetic ideas as values

Karl Jaspers, in his work *Psychologie der Weltanschauungen*, says that Immanuel Kant's theory of ideas is treated in the literature almost exclusively from a theoretical perspective. Unfortunately, this century-old thesis remains valid even today. When Kant's theory of ideas is engaged, *The Critique of Pure Reason* is considered almost exclusively, including the transcendental ideas of pure reason. His theoretical ideas have been investigated and interpreted in different ways, though 'the theory of ideas of Kant is however targeting all areas. Therefore, it is the centre of his philosophy (Jaspers 1922, p. 482). However, Kant

* Philosophy Professor at the Alexandru Ioan Cuza University of Iași (Romania). E-mail for contact: nikolausrambu@yahoo.de. This paper is supported by the Romanian National Authority for Scientific Research and Innovation, CCCDI – UEFISCDI, project number 17/2016, Heritage Plus – HeAT, within PNCDI III.

treats not only theoretical ideas, but also practical and aesthetic ones with the same interest and depth of his two *Critiques*. Despite Jaspers' very accurate assessment, he devotes only one page to aesthetic ideas in *Psychologie der Weltanschauungen*.

To begin, let us look briefly at Kant's conception of aesthetic values, focusing on those issues that confirm our thesis, according to which these enigmatic *ideas* are actually *spiritual values*. Moreover, the section *On the Powers of the Mind Which Constitute Genius* in the *Critique of Judgement*, is dedicated primarily to aesthetic ideas, with a few remarks about the spirit (*Geist*): "Of certain products that are expected to reveal themselves at least in part to be fine art, we say that they have no *spirit*, even though we find nothing to censure in them as far as taste is concerned. A poem may be quite nice and elegant and yet have no spirit. A story may be precise and orderly and yet have no spirit. An oration may be both thorough and graceful and yet have no spirit. Many conversations are

entertaining, but they have no spirit" (Kant 1987, p. 181). From an aesthetic point of view, the spirit is therefore the element that makes the difference between a work of art and a masterpiece. Instead of offering a definition, Kant notes that the "spirit (*Geist*)... is the animating principle in the mind (Kant 1987, p. 181-182)." This idea, clearly, is not new; on the contrary, in the Protestant cultural tradition, the distinction between *letter* and *spirit* was well established. Still, the novelty that Immanuel Kant brings to our understanding of the spirit is that "this principle is nothing but the ability to exhibit *aesthetic ideas*" (Kant 1987, p. 182).

An aesthetic idea is not in any way what is typically meant by an idea in general; it is not an opinion, judgement or Kantian theory about aesthetic issues. Even for a thinker as rigorous as Kant, it is difficult to give it a precise definition. "By an *aesthetic idea* I mean a presentation of the imagination which prompts much thought, but to which no determinate thought whatsoever, i.e., no [determinate] *concept*... to which no *intuition* (presentation of the imagination) can be adequate" (Kant 1987, p. 182).

Therefore, an aesthetic idea is a representation of the imagination that does not correspond to a concept, while *the idea of reason* is a concept that does not correspond to intuition. Hence, we have a serious language problem. Kant states that, since an aesthetic idea does not correspond to any particular concept, no language can express it adequately to make it fully intelligible. The only language in which aesthetic ideas can be revealed is through

works of art. This concept, outlined only in the *Critique of Judgement*, is developed by Arthur Schopenhauer in his seminal work *The World as Will and Representation*.

Although they cannot be thought through and cannot be adequately expressed in everyday language, aesthetic ideas can be represented in art, which provides the opportunity to intuit them. We can hear them in profound music or poetry or see them expressed in works of painting, sculpture or architecture. Thus intuited, they indeed give much food for thought, as Kant says, so that they fundamentally change those who resonate with their spirit, liberating admirers from the content of the work through their admiration of it. Kant does not forget to specify that the creative imagination “sets the power of intellectual ideas (i.e., reason) in motion: it makes reason think more, when prompted by a [certain] presentation, than what can be apprehended and made distinct in the presentation” (Kant 1987: 183). What else marks brilliant works of art? Unlike examples of simply *agreeable art*, as Kant dubbed it, or works intuitively can reduce political, moral, or religious theories or ideologies to simple concepts, genuine works of art embody aesthetic ideas. Therefore, they “give much food for thought,” as Kant says, and their effects, unlike those producing only momentary satisfaction, can be felt for centuries.

Embodied in artistic creations, aesthetic ideas cannot be adequately expressed in written or spoken language because the works themselves are an untranslatable language; or, as Goethe puts it, “the idea always remains infinitely operative and unattainable so that even if it is put into words in all languages, it still remains inexpressible” (Goethe 1972, p. 206). Kant's conception that aesthetic ideas are truly expressible only in works of art also represents a certain resolution of the question regarding the criterion by which we distinguish a simple product of human labor from a work of art. Also, Kant's theory included a criterion for distinguishing between the work of art that belongs to mere craft and the genuine work of art or masterpiece. The true work of art is that which contains in its essence aesthetic ideas. “In a word, an aesthetic idea is a presentation of the imagination which is conjoined with a given concept and is connected, when we use imagination in its freedom, with such a multiplicity of partial presentations that no expression that stands for a determinate concept can be found for it. Hence, it is a presentation that makes us add to a concept the thoughts of much that is ineffable, but the feeling of which quickens our cognitive powers and connects language, which otherwise would be mere letters, with spirit” (Kant 1987, p. 185). Although it is an impulse for knowledge, “An *aesthetic idea*

cannot become cognition because it is an *intuition* (of the imagination) for which an adequate concept can never be found. A *rational idea* can never become cognition because it contains a *concept* (of the supersensible) for which no adequate intuition can ever be given. I think we may call aesthetic ideas *unexpoundable* presentations of the imagination, and rational ideas *indemonstrable* concepts of reason” (Kant 1987, p. 215). In this context, *indemonstrable* does not mean, like in the today’s usage, logically impossible to prove, but instead that which cannot be exemplified. “In fact, Kant calls aesthetic idea the ‘counterpart’ (*Gegenstück*) of a rational idea” (Bruno 2010: 132). The comparison between an idea or reason and aesthetic ideas, which Kant uses to clarify the meaning of the latter, fails to substitute a definition, which is impossible to give. An aesthetic idea can never be defined scientifically, because it is not a concept, but a value. In this capacity, the aesthetic idea is always shrouded in a dim light that exceeds the capacity of knowledge, which is why it “gives much food for thought.”

Beauty, as a representation of aesthetic ideas, must not be judged according to certain concepts, “but according to the purposive attunement of the imagination that brings it into harmony with the power of concepts” (Kant 1987, p. 217). This basically means that the act of creation has a deep unconscious side, enigmatic for the creation itself, for which the rules and regulations of a certain *ars* mean nothing.

By Kant’s conception, the imagination has both an epistemological function, which is subject to the constraints of intellect, and an aesthetic function, which allows it to be free. In this form, it combines the spirit of the genius with the intellect to an extent that cannot be reproduced in any formula because this “happy proportion,” as Kant put it, belongs to spontaneity. No science can expose it, and, even if it hypothetically could, the most diligent student could not learn it because, by its nature, genius embodies aesthetic ideas: “Genius is the exemplary originality of a subject’s natural endowment in the *free* use of his cognitive powers. Accordingly, the product of a genius (as regards what is attributable to genius in it rather than to possible learning or academic instruction) is an example that is meant not to be imitated, but to be followed by another genius” (Kant 1987, p.186-187).

Here we find Kant’s concern to alleviate the exceptional status of the genius and to integrate it into a larger community of high spirits, a community formed somewhat by chain reaction. Even if it is a rare jewel of nature, the genius is an impulsion, for genius natures discover themselves. The genius does not establish a ‘school’ as they call it in the

various art history manuals, but, paradoxically, can only be imitated in terms of his uniqueness. A disciple, in the traditional meaning of the term, who enters the school of a master in order to imitate him, cannot be of a common nature, but must also be a genius. Thus, a genius can only learn from Rafael to be unique, as Rafael himself was. If the genius prescribes the rules of art, they cannot be exposed in the didactical form to be assimilated by zealous disciples, for they are the creators of masterpieces, and ultimately, the rules boil down to one: Be yourself! For the real young, creative spirits, “fine art is to that extent imitation, for which nature, through a genius, gave the rule” (Kant 1987, p. 187).

Kant's notion of the work of a genius as being a representation of aesthetic ideas is developed and clarified by two great Kantians: Schiller and Schopenhauer. *Letters Upon The Aesthetic Education of Man* is proof that an author can and must be understood better than he understood himself. Schiller, the greatest Kantian of all poets, as Mme de Staël rightly called him, clarifies the most obscure places in Kant's conception of aesthetic ideas. In the *First Letter*, he states that there is the truth of a feeling, which can only be expressed as a work of art: “With regard to the ideas which predominate in the practical part of Kant's system, philosophers only disagree, whilst mankind, I am confident of proving, has never done so. If stripped of their technical shape, they will appear as the verdict of reason pronounced from time immemorial by common consent, and as facts of the moral instinct which nature, in her wisdom, has given to man in order to serve as guide and teacher until his enlightened intelligence gives him maturity. But this very technical shape which renders truth visible to the understanding conceals it from the feelings; for, unhappily, understanding begins by destroying the object of the inner sense before it can appropriate the object (Schiller).”

This truth of the feeling that scientific or philosophical analysis destroys is precisely what Kant called an aesthetic idea, and what will later be called a value. The work of art is not imbued with strictly aesthetic values, but also living “truths,” which cannot not be expressed in rational terms without being destroyed, but must be conveyed metaphorically. Schiller also metaphorically expresses the thesis according to which the deepest truths are not formulated in mathematical language, but in the language of art: “Humanity has lost its dignity, but art has saved it, and preserves it in marbles full of meaning; truth continues to live in illusion, and the copy will serve to reestablish the model (Schiller).” Schiller's

thesis about truth and beauty as values that define a genius' work of art has a practical consequence, especially for education, namely: "There is no other way to make a reasonable being out of a sensuous man than by making him first æsthetic (Schiller)." On the one hand, says Schiller, aesthetic values are more accessible to the human spirit than those of rational knowledge; and, on the other, "Beauty is indeed the sphere of unfettered contemplation and reflection; beauty conducts us into the world of ideas, without however taking us from the world of sense, as occurs when a truth is perceived and acknowledged (Schiller)." This is how it is reformulated so that the Kantian conception of aesthetic ideas becomes much clearer. They represent values, namely spiritual elements that manifest in the sensitive world and can be intuited by fitting them in various works of art, their ensemble becoming, as mentioned, a form of axiological memory.

From another perspective, Kant addresses axiological memory in terms of the character of a particular nation. It is stated in the *Anthropology* that nations essentially differ based on a specific set of values that corresponds with not only the culture's creations, but also its actions. For instance, the claim that the English people are pragmatic, or that English is the common language of trade (Kant 2001, p. 250) only means that economic values are predominant in the English spirit. Also, politeness, says Kant, is a central value of the French spirit (Kant 2001, p. 252). The thesis according to which national character is essentially determined by specific values was taken from Kant and further developed by a number of researchers in the sciences of culture.

2. The Artist of Axiological Memory

In a slightly modified form, so that it fits into the new philosophical system, Kant's conception of aesthetic ideas is taken up by Schopenhauer in his seminal work *The World as Will and Representation*. Book III of the first volume of this famous work, in which The Platonic Idea as an object of art is addressed, contains, in our opinion, a conception of axiological memory almost identical to Kant's in the *Critique of Judgement*. Although Schopenhauer highlights the object of this authentic art in the subtitle of his 'Book' as the Platonic Idea, he really has in mind the *aesthetic idea* of Kant. As we will see below, sometimes, Schopenhauer borrows the words of Kant when presenting the Platonic Idea that the artist of genius fits into various works of art.

As shown in *The World as Will and Representation*, the Idea is an objectivation of the metaphysical principle that Schopenhauer identifies as will, and this in turn is identified with what Kant calls the thing-in-itself. Everything that exists in the sensitive reality represents a degree of objectivation of the will. The first step of this process includes *Ideas*, in the Platonic sense of the term. For our research on axiological memory, it is important to note that *Ideas* for Plato, beyond the known metaphysical meanings, are values toward which elevated spirits tend. He who aspires to such values is valuing himself; and, ultimately, the education of the human race means only its orientation towards these spiritual values, which, although they will never be achieved, represent ideals that play a tremendous role in elevating the human spirit. This interpretation is present in Schopenhauer's discourse about Ideas as the objects of the art, and is supported by passages from *The Republic* and other works of Plato.

The artist is the only one able to properly intuit the Idea, on the one hand; and, on the other hand, he is endowed with the ability to create works in which Ideas are kept and preserved forever in the memory of humanity. At the origin of all masterpieces is, according to Schopenhauer, the knowledge of Ideas, and the sole purpose of the art is to communicate this knowledge. Art "reproduces the eternal Ideas grasped through pure contemplation, the essential and abiding in all the phenomena of the world; and according to what the material is in which it reproduces, it is sculpture or painting, poetry or music. Its one source is the knowledge of Ideas; its one aim the communication of this knowledge" (Schopenhauer 1909).

Positive sciences, said Schopenhauer, follow an endless number of causes and effects, with the truth (or goal) always out of reach, resulting in a terrible dissatisfaction, no matter how much knowledge you acquire. "Art, on the contrary, is everywhere at its goal. For it plucks the object of its contemplation out of the stream of the world's course, and has it isolated before it. And this particular thing, which in that stream was a small perishing part, becomes to art the representative of the whole, an equivalent of the endless multitude in space and time. It therefore pauses at this particular thing; the course of time stops; the relations vanish for it; only the essential, the Idea, is its object" (Schopenhauer 1909).

In Schopenhauer's conception, the genius is the only one endowed by nature with the faculty of contemplating the Ideas and rendering them into works of art. Although he states, like Kant, that the genius is a gift of nature but occurs rarely in the human race, he

admits, however, as do most romantics, that, to some extent, every person has such a capacity, but it manifests in a very low degree. The creative process of the genius has two stages: the contemplation of Ideas, and their embodiment in masterpieces. When Schopenhauer argues, on the one hand, that the genius as an exceptional status, belonging somewhat to a miracle, and on the other, that, in general, man is essentially a genial person, he does not contradict himself. He refers to the fact that a certain capacity for the contemplation of Ideas is universally human; otherwise, we would be unable to appreciate works of art, be completely insensitive to beauty, the sublime, and other aesthetic values.

As hypertrophied as the faculty of contemplation of Ideas would then be, nobody is really a genius if he is not endowed with the other faculty, that of communicating the spiritual content imbued in works of art. In this context, it has been said that, in fact, nature produces two categories of special people: those who create the values, and those who admire them. Thus, viewing axiological memory as a form of collective memory in Schopenhauer may seem a forced interpretation of *The World as Will and Representation*. However, Schopenhauer himself, repeating Kant's thesis about "the temperature of élan" of the genius through individual taste, thus integrating his works into the culture, presents the genius's creations as landmark values of humanity. "Only true works of art, which are drawn directly from nature and life, have eternal youth and enduring power, like nature and life themselves. For they belong to no age, but to humanity" (Schopenhauer 1909).

The problem of memory is carefully treated by Schopenhauer as a certain form of madness. First of all, the genius himself, from the moment he "sees" the idea, seems gripped by madness, has snapped or gone mad. This aspect of genius was well known to the German romantics, but Schopenhauer explains it in light of his philosophical system thusly: "The transition which we have referred to as possible, but yet to be regarded as only exceptional, from the common knowledge of particular things to the knowledge of the Idea, takes place suddenly; for knowledge breaks free from the service of the will, by the subject ceasing to be merely individual" (Schopenhauer 1909). For the concept of axiological memory, two aspects interest us, particularly, those which Schopenhauer marks in the creative works of a genius. Firstly, once he has been introduced to Ideas, the genius ceases to be an individual subject; in other words, he no longer belongs to himself, but to humanity. Secondly, Schopenhauer, resuming Plato, remarked on that "semblance of madness" which marks the genius, both in the acts of contemplating ideas and in creating,

concentrating the embodiment of those ideas in works of art. Plato's thesis, according to which no one does evil except from ignorance, is well known. As we know, people have knowingly done evil and made evil plans to do harm not infrequently in the history of humanity. However, Plato means ignorance in the sense of not knowing the Idea of Good. He who encounters such an Idea becomes so fascinated by it that he can no longer do evil. In his enthusiasm for the Idea of Good, the visionary is filled with a kind of madness that Plato called *mania*. This concept is reiterated in his own way by Schopenhauer. The genius, once he discovers the Idea, is so free from the constraints of the will, and contemplates it with such serenity, that he is perceived by others as crazy. Moreover, the work of genius can trigger in certain historical circumstances a genuine collective madness. In Schopenhauer's conception, madness is, above all, a matter of memory. A madman, he says, mixes the true with false in his biography. The work of a genius produces some collective madness by deeply disturbing the axiological memory of a collectivity, or humanity. It is just these moments of crisis or "reversal of all values," as Nietzsche would say, when works of an outrageous originality appear, such that nobody can say exactly what their values or non-values are, who is a genius, or who is too far-gone.

The work of art, Schopenhauer repeated many times, is a reproduction or representation of a genius' idea. Through the work of art, the man of genius communicates to other people "the Idea he has grasped. This Idea remains unchanged and the same, so that æsthetic pleasure is one and the same whether it is called forth by a work of art or directly by the contemplation of nature and life. The work of art is only a means of facilitating the knowledge in which this pleasure consists. That the Idea comes to us more easily from the work of art than directly from nature and the real world, arises from the fact that the artist, who knew only the Idea, no longer the actual, has reproduced in his work the pure Idea, has abstracted it from the actual, omitting all disturbing accidents. The artist lets us see the world through his eyes. That he has these eyes, that he knows the inner nature of things apart from all their relations, is the gift of genius, is inborn" (Schopenhauer 1909).

From this intuitive knowledge of Ideas, said Schopenhauer, were born all artistic, literary, and philosophical creations. The fact that Ideas are *values* is unquestionable, since Schopenhauer himself relates, through Kant, to Plato, whose theory of Ideas is fundamentally an axiology. The good, beauty, love, friendship, justice, and all other Ideas,

which are the subject of his Dialogues, are first of all values. In *The World as Will and Representation*, the Ideas are intuited by genius, on the one hand, and, on the other, they become active as values when they awaken in the human soul specific feelings or experiences. The sublime and beauty are just two examples that Schopenhauer mentions, following Kant, as well as a whole tradition that highly esteemed these two values. St. Peter's Basilica in Rome is an example of an architectural work that awakens in the soul of the visitor the feeling of the sublime, along with that of the sacral. Similarly, all genius works of art bear Ideas that awaken in the soul a number of values not only aesthetic, but also religious, ethical, or otherwise. Under certain historical circumstances, these *awakenings* have triggered in individuals and societies true spiritual revivals. This is possible when the values held in the works, which may be ignored for centuries, are suddenly rediscovered or remembered. The concept of *axiological memory* is particularly useful in explaining such phenomena of the almost miraculous, cultural Renaissance type. They suddenly appear on the stage of history, as a kind of reminder or sudden awakening to some apparently forgotten values. Then, the creative energies that break down around them are those that constitute the essence of the periods of maximum creative effervescence.

Conclusion

The principle of romantic hermeneutics, according to which an author must be better understood than the author understood himself, is perfectly applicable to the texts *Critique of Judgment* in which Immanuel Kant speaks of aesthetic ideas. I reached out two authors in this regard that clarified Kant's concept of "aesthetic ideas" better than Kant himself did: Friedrich Schiller and Arthur Schopenhauer. From this point of view the aesthetic ideas seem to be values that the genius artist embodies in works of art, so to be fastened in the collective memory of humanity.

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