

Wittgenstein on “Beautiful” and “The Beautiful”

Gabriele Tomasi

In his *Lectures on Aesthetics* (1938) Wittgenstein notices how unimportant the role played by the adjective “beautiful” is when aesthetic judgments are made (cfr. LA, I, 8)¹. In a remark from 1946 he goes far beyond and talks of the mischief done by the concept of “the beautiful” (CV, 55e). This may appear puzzling, if compared to a note from his *Notebooks 1914-16* where – maybe a bit out of tune with the *Zeitgeist* – he states that «there is certainly something in the conception that the end of art is the beautiful» (NB, 21.10.16)². The obvious explanation of the tension among these statements would be to connect it to the change of the views that Wittgenstein held in his early work, and to

¹ Abbreviations for Wittgenstein’s works in the text are as follows: *AWL* = *Wittgenstein’s Lectures. Cambridge, 1932-1935*, ed. by A. Ambrose, Blackwell, Oxford 1979; *BB* = L. Wittgenstein, *The Blue and Brown Books*, Harper Torchbooks, New York 1958; *CV* = L. Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, ed. by G. H. von Wright in collaboration with H. Nyman, transl. by P. Winch, Blackwell, Oxford 1980; *LC* = *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology & Religious Belief*, ed. by Cyril Barrett, Blackwell, Oxford 1966; *LA* = *Lectures on Aesthetics* (in *LC*); *LE* = “Wittgenstein’s Lecture on Ethics”, *The Philosophical Review*, 74 (1965), 3-12; *NB* = *Notebooks 1914-1916*, ed. by G. H. von Wright and G. E. M. Anscombe with an English translation by G. E. M. Anscombe, Blackwell, Oxford 1961; *TLP* = *Tractatus logico-philosophicus*, with an introduction by B. Russell, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London 1951⁵. References to *AWL*, *BB*, *CV* and *LE* are by page number; references to *LA* are to section and page number; references to *TLP* are to section number; references to *NB* are by entry date.

² It is striking that when he wrote his s entry on the beautiful as the end of art, Marcel Duchamp had already created his *Bicycle Wheel* (1913), *The Bottle Rack* (1914) and *In Advance of the Broken Arm* (1915), with the clear intention to break with the category of the beautiful and the notion of taste. On the aim of art Wittgenstein seems more in accord with the elderly Claude Monet. In those same years when Wittgenstein was at the front line, Monet was working at his *Water-Lilies* with the intention to offer to the French people, traumatized by the war, «the repainer sight of the cosmic order and the consolation of beauty» (Georgel [1999]: 18 my translation).

suppose that in his Cambridge lectures he distanced himself from his previous claim about a relation between art and beauty³.

I would like to sketch a different picture, and try to highlight an element of continuity in Wittgenstein's views on art and beauty amid the profound changes his philosophical conceptions underwent. Roughly said, what explains this continuity is the fact that Wittgenstein's ideas on art and beauty reflect more an attitude towards life than a theoretical view, an attitude that presumably did not substantially change in later years, while many of his early conceptions changed instead.

The paper is divided into five parts. In the first part I will comment on the *Notebooks* entry and suggest that it expresses the young Wittgenstein's ideas on the value of art, while – as we will see in the third part – the view presented in the *Lectures* addresses the question of aesthetic appreciation. In the second part there is an excursus on Dutch painting. In the fourth part I will say something on the possibility that Wittgenstein had acknowledged the historical character of a certain conception of beauty, and in this way I hope to offer a context for understanding his observation on the mischief done by the concept of "the beautiful". Finally, in the fifth part I will try to show that Wittgenstein saves a sense for talking about beauty in relation to the experience of art.

1. *The Beautiful as the End of Art*

The *Notebooks* observation that I quoted belongs to a series of intriguing reflections on God, the meaning of the world or of life, happiness, sin, ethics and aesthetics that Wittgenstein wrote in the second half of 1916. They offer a framework for the interpretation of the entry on beauty as the aim of art. Among them, very important are a couple of remarks on art to which that entry is directly connected. A note on art and ethics that Wittgenstein wrote a couple of weeks before the one on beauty has a crucial importance: «The work of art is the object seen *sub specie aeternitatis*; and the good life is the world seen *sub specie aeternitatis*. This is the connection between art and ethics» (NB, 7.10.16).

While art is commonly thought of as a practice, the note suggests that it is a way of seeing. It reflects young Wittgenstein's Schopenhauerian conception of art as a way of looking at things. It is presumably from Schopenhauer, who used it in relation to art,

³ This is how, e.g. Stefan Majetschak (2007): 92-93, 134-141 interprets the above passages.

that Wittgenstein borrowed the Spinozian expression «*sub specie aeternitatis*» to characterize the way art looks at things. No less idiosyncratic is his conception of ethics. Ethics is usually thought of as a normative discipline. However, Wittgenstein seems to consider it an attitude instead. Accordingly, art does not result primarily in the creation of an object of some kind, nor ethics in setting norms or in particular decisions or courses of action in keeping with them; rather, they both appear to transform a pre-existing item into something different and this not by altering it, but in virtue of the way they consider it. Whichever the precise nature of the view «*sub specie aeternitatis*», according to Wittgenstein this way of looking has a transforming effect: in the case of art, when it is seen «*sub specie aeternitatis*» a particular object is transformed into a work of art; as for ethics, it is interesting that the transformation concerns our situation as a whole. In Wittgenstein's words it is the world, that is, life (TLP, 5.621) that is transformed into the good life by the way it is looked at.

I will come back in a moment to this parallelism. As for now let me focus on art. The conception that, since art is an attitude, more than an activity, what an artist first and foremost provides is a transforming way of viewing, is confirmed in a note of 1930 from *Culture and Value*. The note also helps to characterize the transformation that occurs through art. Wittgenstein writes that the work of art compels us to see an object in the right perspective, while «in the absence of art, the object is just a fragment of nature like any other» (CV, 4e). To be a piece of nature, that is a part of the world, means to be an element of what the *Tractatus* called the *how* of the world, an element of the accidental «*Geschehen und So-sein*», where, according to Wittgenstein, there is no value (cfr. TLP, 6.41). Then what Wittgenstein is suggesting is that art can turn an object that is a mere piece of nature into something of value, into an object that is worth contemplating. He seems to echo a thought by Schopenhauer. In *The World as Will and Representation* (1818¹, 1844²) Schopenhauer writes: «Art [...] plucks the object of its contemplation from the stream of the world's course, and holds it isolated before it. This particular thing, which in the stream was an infinitesimal part, becomes for art a representative of the whole [...]». (Schopenhauer [1818¹, 1844²], Book 3, sec. 36, vol. I, 185)

Wittgenstein expresses a similar point by saying that a thing that as one among the many things in the world was insignificant, when contemplated becomes the world of the observer and as such significant (cfr. NB, 8.10.16). A characteristic of the artistic way of seeing is absorption in the object: it is not a way of seeing that considers both the ob-

ject and the relationships it has with other objects; rather it is a way of seeing in which the observer is absorbed by the object so that the object becomes her world⁴. Incidentally, we can observe that this fact underlines the imaginative character of artistic vision. Visual perception is necessarily multiple, while imagery «can detach an object from its surrounding and posit it alone»: it is selective, abstracting, and this capacity is an aspect of its inherent creativity (Cfr. McGinn [2004]: 23-24). Going back to Wittgenstein's suggestion, to understand why this way of seeing makes the object significant, at least two other elements of his conception should be recalled.

The first element is the enigmatic observation that «aesthetically, the miracle is that the world exists. That there is what there is» (NB, 20.10.16). The German text sounds: «Das künstlerische Wunder ist, daß es die Welt gibt. Daß es gibt, was es gibt». This suggests that the miracle in question is in some sense worked by art. However, we could also translate "Wunder" with "wonder", and recall that in the *Lecture on Ethics* (1929-1930), to express what he means by "absolute value", Wittgenstein mentions the experience of wondering at the existence of the world (cfr. LE, 8). As a response to the world, wonder is a sort of affective grasping of the *non-accidentality* of the being of what there is, a way of feeling its non-accidentality. Therefore, it is a way of experiencing value and sense. Going back to art, we could say that the miracle worked by art is to force us to look at things, or at the world, with a sense of wonder at their existence. As we will see, also in later years Wittgenstein connects the basis of art to the concept of wonder. It is interesting that the miracle or the wonder of art does not have anything to do with the facts being in any particular way, but it simply has to do with «their being *some way*» (Morris [2008]: 328). This involves taking the difference created by art to be a matter of how the same thing *seems* to an observer. When Wittgenstein says that «in absence of art, the object is just a fragment of nature like any other», what he means is that art makes an experience of value possible.

This brings us to the second element of Wittgenstein's conception that I would like to recall. In the lines that follow the one on the artistic miracle, Wittgenstein asks rhetorically: «Is it the essence of the artistic way of looking at things, that it looks at the world

⁴ While the ordinary way of seeing considers the facts being one specific way rather than another, «the thing seen *sub specie aeternitatis* is the thing seen together with the whole logical space» (NB, 7.10.16), that is, seen «with a consciousness [...] of the way in which» it «can be combined with other things» (Morris [2008]: 326). Combinations of objects are facts, and facts in logical space are the world. When a thing is contemplated together with the whole logical space, or as capable of shaping the logical space, it becomes the world of the observer.

with a happy eye?». And he answers quoting Schiller: «Life is serious, art is gay» (NB, 20.10.16). The quote comes from the Prologue of *Wallenstein*, a drama set in the middle of the havoc, the robberies, the misery of the Thirty Years' War. It reminds us that the serenity of art is not to be found in what it presents, but rather «in *how* it is presented» (Wilde [2004]: 173)⁵. Beside joy art can embrace sorrow and the tragic dimension of life and its beauty does not depend on the subject but is connected to language.

It is intriguing that the *Notebooks* entry on beauty as the end of art follows immediately after Schiller's quote, and that Wittgenstein comments on it by saying: «And the beautiful *is* what makes happy» (NB, 29.10.16). According to other remarks in the *Notebooks*, Wittgenstein thought that «in order to live happily» one «must be in agreement with the world». He states that being in agreement with the world «is what "being happy" means», and that «only a man who lives not in time but in the present is happy». "Living in the present" means living eternally, since Wittgenstein understands by "eternity" «not infinite temporal duration but non-temporality» (NB, 8.7.16). With these being the characteristics of happiness, we understand why the artistic eye is a happy eye. It looks at the world *sub specie aeternitatis*, that is, from the point of view of a person who lives in the present, and this way of seeing is presumably what good art expresses (cfr. NB, 19.9.16). However, one could object that the detachment expressed in the idea of a vision *sub specie aeternitatis* is only the negative condition for being in agreement with the world. Living in the present certainly means living without desires, hopes or fears that project into the future and connect to the past. However, what follows from this detachment is renunciation, not yet happiness. What is then the point of being in agreement with the world?

Wittgenstein notices that we approach the world as something «that is already there» and this is why we have the feeling of being dependent on it as fate (cfr. NB, 8.7.16). In order to live happily one has to overcome this feeling of dependence. Near the end of his *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man* (1795) Schiller writes that «beauty alone confers happiness on all, and under its influence every being forgets that he is limited» (letter 27). I like to think that Wittgenstein, by quoting Schiller's lines, was hinting at the idea that beauty makes us happy since it helps us to overcome the sense

⁵ An aphorism by Karl Kraus states: «Liebe und Kunst umarmen nicht, was schön ist, sondern was eben dadurch schön wird» (<http://gutenberg.spiegel.de/buch/4692/2>).

of necessity, of constraint, that characterizes our relation to the world⁶. He appears even more radical than Schiller, because, while for Schiller the «joyous realm» of the appearance and of art is the realm of imagination, for him it is our world that is transformed, if only we look artistically at it, that is, if only we see as a miracle the being there of what there is. This is the miracle of art, and I suggest that by stating that there is certainly something in the conception that the beautiful – that which makes happy – is the aim of art, Wittgenstein is probably hinting at this miracle.

Good art, i.e. art that expresses the way in which the artist saw the (represented) object (cfr. NB, 19.09.16), offers us moments of grace in which the significance of the world, that is, of life, is revealed (Cfr. Budd [2011]: 775-776).

However, I do not think we should read Wittgenstein's notes as a sketch of a theory of art; anyway, if they were, it would not be a good theory of art, although they probably catch the point of some art and the reason why it has value for us. As I read them, they express a point of view on value. Wittgenstein seems to have thought that sense and value are packed together in the experience of wondering or when the presence (or presentness) of things is felt more intensely as our world. When he speaks of the artistic miracle he is hinting at a way of seeing that can be characterized as the perception filled with wonder of the presence (or presentness) of things, as if art embodied the possibility of illuminating the world with meaning and value or the possibility of a happy life⁷.

⁶ What, according to Schiller, frees us from the seriousness of reality is a condition that he describes using the word "play". Now, nothing of what Schiller summarizes with the term "duty" and "destiny" ceases to exist (Schiller, letter 15). Rather, what characterizes the condition of play is that the element of constraint present in our needs and duties is overcome, is made contingent. However, together with necessity is also contingency that is overcome. Therefore, Schiller maintains that when a human being is in the condition of play, she is really free, that is, she realizes her destination (cfr. Schiller, letter 14). According to him, it is art and beauty that bring the human being to this condition where the capacities of thinking and acting can flourish. For Schiller, what art delivers is a sense of our destination. Maybe I am reading too much into Wittgenstein's quote from Schiller, but it is tempting to think that Wittgenstein was familiar with these ideas.

⁷ That "beauty" as well as "good" is a term for what is of value is confirmed by the thesis of the *Tractatus* that «ethics and aesthetics are one» (TLP, 6.421) and also by what we read at the beginning of Wittgenstein's *Lecture on ethics*: «I'm going to use the term Ethics [...] in a sense [...] which includes what I believe to be the most essential part of what is generally called Aesthetics. [...] Now instead of saying "Ethics is the enquiry into what is good" I could have said that Ethics is the enquiry into what is valuable, or, into what is really important, or I could have said Ethics is the enquiry into the meaning of life, or into what makes life worth living, or into the right way of living» (LE, 4-5).

The beautiful as the end of art is nothing other than the world seen *sub specie aeternitatis*. Since for Wittgenstein "being happy" means being in agreement with the world or living in the present, we can understand why he thinks that the beautiful is what makes happy. Do we really find a different picture when we move to the writings of his later years? As for the lectures from the 1930s, the fact that Wittgenstein mainly focuses his attention on the adjective "beautiful" instead of on its use as a noun or on the noun "beauty" should make us doubt. Before turning to those texts, I will briefly expand on a passage of the early 1930s, which I have already partially quoted. It is a passage that signals the existence of continuities between Wittgenstein's earlier and later conception of the aim and value of art⁸.

2. *Excursus: Wittgenstein and Dutch Painting*

In the note from *Culture and Value* Wittgenstein recalls a conversation between him and his friend Paul Engelmann when Engelmann said that when he, at home, looks at a drawer full of his manuscripts, they appear to him valuable and worth publishing; but when he considers publishing a selection of them «the whole business loses its charm and value». To help his friend understanding this strange experience, Wittgenstein suggests him a comparison: «I said that it was like the following case: Nothing could be more remarkable than seeing a man who thinks he is unobserved performing some quite simple everyday activity». He then suggests a kind of thought experiment:

Let us imagine a theatre; the curtain goes up and we see a man alone in a room, walking up and down, lighting a cigarette, sitting down, etc. so that suddenly we are observing a human being from outside in a way that ordinarily we can never observe ourselves; it would be like watching a chapter of a biography with our own eyes, – surely this would be uncanny and wonderful at the same time. We should be observing something more wonderful than anything a playwright could arrange to be acted or spoken on the stage: life itself. (CV, 4e)

In a sense the theatrical situation gives structure to the former case and Wittgenstein focuses his attention on the effect of the vision from the outside, from a detached point of view: an ordinary scene becomes extraordinary, remarkable. He thus suggests that the way we look at things can have a sort of power of transformation. It is the power he talked about in the *Notebooks* entry of 8.10.16 and illustrated with the stove-example, suggesting that the everyday can become a domain for the aesthetic: something familiar

⁸ On continuities and changes in Wittgenstein's conception of art see now Wilke (2012).

becomes wonderful. Now, it is interesting that in the note of 1930, Wittgenstein not only claims that «only the artist can so represent the individual so that it appears to us as a work of art», recalling the *Notebooks* entry of 7.10.16, but also maintains that a work of art «forces us – as one might say – to see it in the right perspective» (CV, 4e), that is, it makes us capable of wondering at the existence of what there is. The theatre thought experiment adumbrated in the note suggests that art offers a kind of space where something – an object, a situation, a character, etc. – comes to presence or, better perhaps, where presence (or presentness) is felt more intensely. Sense and value are packed together in this experience for Wittgenstein, it seems.

There are certain artworks that can be considered an exemplification of this conception. Photography offers many examples. Works like the photographs of industrial structures by Bernd and Hilla Becher, the landscapes photographs by Robert Adams, or cityscapes by Alfred Stieglitz, Walker Evans and Paul Strand seem to allow for a way of seeing that transcends the limits of individual perspective in the sense intended by Wittgenstein. One could also think of works by contemporary photographers like Clare Richardson, or by Jeff Wall. Above all Wall's *Morning cleaning* (1999) could be interpreted as embodying a way of looking at things akin to the one Wittgenstein hints at⁹. However, maybe it is in XVII century Dutch painting that we find an attitude towards the world which is very similar to what Wittgenstein considers the artistic way of seeing. Consider paintings such as *The Courtyard of a House in Delft* (1658) by Pieter De Hooch, *Woman Reading* (late 1660s) by Pieter Janssens Elinga, *Woman peeling apples* by Gerard Ter Borch (ca. 1660), or Johannes Vermeer's *The Lacemaker* (1669-70). Without getting into interpretative details, I suggest that those artists, by depicting the most commonplace scenes with the greatest accuracy and skill, so that they look stunning and beautiful, make us acknowledge that even the least interesting objects can be seen – and depicted – as immensely valuable. Through their works they have shown that beauty can be found in the most meaningless objects, in the most obvious gesture and ordinary scene. But what makes beauty appear is the quality of the (artist's) gaze. It is actually the gaze of the painter that by means of selecting an object or a scene from the world and transforming it, puts us in contact with beauty (cfr. Todorov [2000]: 88)¹⁰. Furthermore, as

⁹ Michael Fried conjoins it to the just recalled note from *Culture and Value* in a revelatory and suggestive way (cfr. Fried [2008]: 63-93).

¹⁰ As we have seen, according to Wittgenstein art compels us to the right perspective. How it can "force" us is an interesting question that I cannot pursue here. However, as for Dutch painting, it

Tzvetan Todorov notices, there is a sense of suspension of time in De Hooch as well as in Ter Borch and Vermeer that suggests a (Spinozian) vision *sub specie aeterni*, so that the transient is captured and becomes eternal. The depicted scenes are taken from ordinary life – a lady writing a letter, a woman peeling apples, people drinking in a courtyard, etc. –, but the subjects look as if they did not belong to the scene anymore. Once again, this is the effect of the painter's gaze, a gaze full of grace that rejoices in the existence of things, that transforms life illuminating it with meaning and beauty (cfr. Todorov [2000]: 116). It is, I believe, the same grace Wittgenstein evokes while speaking of art as of a way of looking at things *sub specie aeterni* or with a happy eye. Both Wittgenstein's stove example and the ordinary scene performed in a theatre conceived of in the note from *Culture and Value* are, at least in spirit, near to the Dutch painterly experience that beauty can be found in the most common and humble objects¹¹. If I am not wrong, in the early 1930s Wittgenstein still thought that art can make the trivial significant and that beauty – or the beauty of art – is one with an experience of meaning and value. Let us now turn to the lectures from the 1930s.

3. *The (Alleged) Insignificance of "Beautiful" in Aesthetic Evaluation*

No doubt also in regard to aesthetics a new landscape delineates from the Thirties on. Aesthetics is no longer examined in its connection to ethics, and art is not approached by Wittgenstein as a kind of vision. Maybe he put into practice his belief that, as a perspective onto the world, art and aesthetics cannot be expressed (cfr. TLP, 6.421). Be that as it may, when he now talks about aesthetics, he focuses more on contexts of artistic

seems possible to conjecture that the shifting of our attention from the scene represented, to its quality of absorption – to use Fried's notion – occurs not only because very often the depicted subjects are themselves absorbed in their actions, but also because the painter appears to be absorbed in them himself. His attentiveness and interest in the scene, the meticulousness, commitment and intensity with which he paints it, suggest the scene may deserve the beholder's attention and makes significant what is in itself insignificant.

¹¹ As a reader of Schopenhauer, Wittgenstein could have had in mind a passage from section 38 of book 3 of the *World*, where Schopenhauer hints at Dutch painting. Further, he may have found in the following passage an attitude similar to the one exemplified by Dutch painting: «Every state or condition, every person, every scene of life, needs to be apprehended only pure objectively, and made the object of a description or sketch, whether with brush or with words, in order to appear interesting, delightful, and enviable». (Schopenhauer [1818¹, 1844²]: 371, *Suppl.*, Book 3, cap. 30)

production and evaluative practices, intertwined with other aspects of what he calls a "form of life", that is, the structured activities of groups of human agents¹². A better name for his *Lectures on Aesthetics* would have been "Lectures on criticism"¹³. He discusses both ordinary practices such as the evaluation of the length of a suit (LA, I, 13, 5), or of the height of a door and the aesthetic judgment of poems or of pieces of music, apparently considering them on a par. Accordingly, he sees aesthetics connected to the knowledge of a form of life, a culture, an epoch and its styles, rules and standards of evaluation, and to the knowledge of the history of artefacts.

This comprehension of aesthetics being the background of Wittgenstein's discussion of the word "beautiful" in lectures from the 1930s, it is obvious that his considerations concern essentially the use of the word in evaluative practices. They could be organized according to two perspectives; although they are strictly connected, I will distinguish between them and call one "the conceptual", and the other "the developmental perspective".

(i) *The conceptual perspective.* Wittgenstein's *Lectures on Aesthetics* begins with the statement that the subject "Aesthetics" is «entirely misunderstood», and the first observation on the topic concerns the very word "beautiful": «The use of such word as "beautiful" is even more apt to be misunderstood if you look at the linguistic form of sentences in which it occurs than most other words. 'Beautiful' [...] is an adjective, so you are inclined to say: "This has a certain quality, that of being beautiful"» (LA, I, 1).

Wittgenstein criticizes the misunderstanding of the word "beautiful" as a word denoting a quality, something all beautiful things have in common¹⁴. Apparently it is intel-

¹² Since our human form of life is essentially cultural, Wittgenstein usually connects aesthetic practices also to the culture of a period. He states that «the words we call expressions of aesthetic judgment play a very complicated role, but a very definite role, in what we call a culture of a period. To describe their use [...] you have to describe a culture. [...] What belongs to a language game is a whole culture». (LA, I 25-26, 8)

¹³ I owe this suggestion to Mark Rowe. Needless to say, we are dealing with more or less fragmentary notes, taken by students who attended Wittgenstein's classes. Though many of these notes record spontaneous remarks more than articulated opinions, they offer a clear idea of Wittgenstein's new approach to the topic "art and beauty", when compared to the *Notebook* and the *Tractatus*.

¹⁴ In the *Blue Book* Wittgenstein speaks of our «craving for generality» and associates it to tendencies connected with «particular philosophical confusions». He describes some of these tendencies and it is interesting that the first one he names, that is the tendency «to look for something in common to all the entities which we commonly subsume under a general term», is then exemplified with the term "beauty" among others: «The idea of a general concept being a

ligible to say that beauty is a quality of things; but, if it is, how does one know that a thing has this quality? In Alice Ambrose's notes from Wittgenstein lectures of 1932-33 Wittgenstein is reported to have asked precisely this question. Take a face: is the arrangement of its colours, profile, contour of the brows, etc. what we mean by a beautiful face, or are these features only a symptom of beauty? Wittgenstein observes that in order for something to be the symptom of something else, it should be possible to pursue an independent investigation of it. He makes the following example: «If I want to know whether a rod is elastic I can find out by looking through a microscope to see the arrangement of its particles, the nature of their arrangement being a symptom of its elasticity, or inelasticity. Or I can test the rod empirically, e.g., see how far it can be pulled out». Now, while the nature of the arrangement of the particles is something from which the rod elasticity can be concluded, and arguably is something that all elastic rods have in common, it seems that a separate investigation is not possible in the case of beauty. Rather, it is just «a certain arrangement of colors and shape» what we mean by a beautiful face. But, if beauty is inherent in an arrangement of colours and shape, then there is nothing that all beautiful faces have in common. Wittgenstein further notices that «no arrangement is beautiful in itself» and this helps him to make the more general point that «the word "beauty" is used for a thousand different things. Beauty of face is different from that of flowers and animals».

By arguing that what makes a thing beautiful – say a face – may differ from what makes another thing – say a flower – beautiful, Wittgenstein is somehow making the point that "beautiful" is most often used as an attributive rather than a predicative adjective (Cfr. also Budd [2011]: 778). However, it is interesting that he corroborates his belief, observing that "one is playing utterly different games" when discussing beauty of face or beauty of flowers, etc. The word "beautiful" is «bound up» with the words it modifies, and when applied to a face is not the same «as when applied to flowers and trees. We have in the latter a similar 'game'» (AWL, 34-36). A thought close to this appears in a couple of remarks from *Culture and Value* coeval with Ambrose's notes, where the context is that of comparative judgments:

common property of its particular instances connects up with other primitive, too simple, ideas of the structure of language. It is comparable to the ideas that *properties* are *ingredients* of the things which have the properties; e.g. that beauty is an ingredient of all beautiful things as alcohol is of beer and wine, and that we therefore could have pure beauty, unadulterated by anything that is beautiful». (BB, 17)

If someone says, let's suppose, "A's eyes have a more beautiful expression than B's", then I should say that he is certainly not using the word "beautiful" to mean what is common to everything we call beautiful. On the contrary, he is playing a game with the word that has quite narrow bounds. But what shows this? Did I have in mind some particular, restricted explanation of the word "beautiful"? Certainly not. – But perhaps I shall not even feel like comparing the beauty of expression in a pair of eyes with the beauty in the shape of a nose. So perhaps we might say: if there were a language with two words so that there were no reference to anything common to such cases, I should have no trouble about using one of these two special words for my case and my meaning would not be impoverished.

If I say A has beautiful eyes someone may ask me: what do you find beautiful about his eyes, and perhaps I shall reply: the almond shape, long eye-lashes, delicate lids. What do these eyes have in common with a gothic church that I find beautiful too? Should I say they make a similar impression on me? What if I were to say that in both cases my hand feels tempted to draw them? That at any rate would be a narrow definition of the beautiful. (CV, 24e)

Wittgenstein then suggests that if we seek our reason for calling something beautiful, the peculiar grammar of the word in a particular instance will be evident. These references to language games and grammar bring us to the second aspect of Wittgenstein's strategy. He is reported to have said: «one thing we always do when discussing a word is to ask how we were taught it. Doing this on the one hand destroys a variety of misconceptions, on the other hand gives you a primitive language in which the word is used» (LA, I, 5, 1). As we will now see, since Wittgenstein maintains that the occasion on which "beautiful" is used, the «situation» in which it has a place can be highly complicated, that we have a primitive language is of the greatest importance.

(ii) *The developmental perspective.* Both in the lectures of the early Thirties and in those of 1938 Wittgenstein draws the attention of his audience to «how we learn» words such as "beautiful" and "ugly". According to Ambrose's notes, he reiterates his criticism to the idea of beauty as a common property by observing: «We do not as children discover the quality of beauty or ugliness in a *face* and find that these are qualities that a *tree* has in common with it» (cfr. AWL, 35-36). In the lectures of 1938 he returns to the children situation, focussing the attention on how a child learns the word "beautiful". He is reported to have said that a child learns it as an interjection, that is, as an expression logically on the same level as an "Oh!" or a smile, and that the word is taught «as a substitute for a facial expression or a gesture» of approval (LA, 5, 2, 2)¹⁵.

¹⁵ What makes "beautiful" an interjection of approval, Wittgenstein notices, «is the game it appears in», the «occasion» on which it is said. He considers as the «main mistake» of the philosophers of his generation, that when they look at language, they look at the form of sentences.

As we have seen, according to Wittgenstein asking how we were taught a word destroys a variety of misconceptions and gives us a primitive language in which the word is used. The two things are connected. The word "primitive" has not necessarily a pejorative nuance. When he says that words such as "beautiful" are used as interjections in «primitive languages», he presumably means that they are used in this way in languages less complex than our own. At the same time, however, Wittgenstein seems to consider a primitive language as a model to which our language could be compared¹⁶. Otherwise it becomes difficult to understand why by asking how we were taught a word we can destroy a variety of misconceptions. The case of "beautiful" is clear enough. As far as the primitive language in which it is used as an interjection goes, problems about what the word is about, what its real subject is, Wittgenstein says, «don't come up at all» (LA, I, 7, 3). It is obvious that, as such a substitute, "beautiful" cannot denote anything.

If, on the one hand, by inviting us to conjure up how we learn the word "beautiful" Wittgenstein corrects our image that the word refers to a common quality, on the other hand, the equation of the game in which the word is used as an interjection with a primitive language suggests that further materials are needed to arrive to our language, and to the much richer activities that are our aesthetic practices¹⁷. Presumably Wittgenstein assumes that the practice of aesthetic evaluation has grown from primitive forms of reaction, that is, from pre-linguistic forms of reaction such as facial expressions or

«Language – he has reportedly said – is a characteristic part of a large group of activities»; therefore, we should concentrate on the «enormously complicated situation in which the aesthetic expression has a place». (LA, I, 5, 2, 2)

¹⁶ On the notion of primitive language see Schulte (2004).

¹⁷ Wittgenstein writes in 1937: «The origin & the primitive form of the language-game is a reaction: only upon this can the more complicated forms grow» (CV, 31e). It is worth quoting a passage from the *Blue Book* (1933-1934) in which Wittgenstein explains what he means with the expression "language game" and why he believes it useful to consider these primitive forms of language: «[...] what I shall call language game [...] are ways of using signs simpler than those in which we use the signs of our highly complicated everyday language. Language games are the forms of language with which a child begins to make use of words. [...] When we look at such simple forms of language the mental mist which seems to enshroud our ordinary use of language disappears. We see activities, reactions, which are clear-cut and transparent. On the other hand we recognize in these simple processes forms of language not separated by a break from our more complicated ones» (BB, 17). Actually, it is by perceiving them as part of our form of life that they can function as a model for comparison. It does not come as a surprise, that Wittgenstein considers aesthetic reactions «perhaps the most important thing in connection with aesthetics» (LA, II 10, 13). For the interpretation of this claim of Wittgenstein see Säätelä (2002).

gestures of approval, and that these forms of reaction are prototypes of modes of thought. As such, they put a grammatical or conceptual weight on the use of "beautiful" within the practice of aesthetic evaluation.

With regard to this, Wittgenstein's considerations have a critical import. Since he depicts the reaction that the word "beautiful" substitutes or expresses as rather elementary, it could be doubted that this is a true aesthetic reaction. In fact, according to him, an aesthetic reaction is not the mere expression of a feeling as a subjective state, but an expression that «takes the form of a criticism», that is, that has a cognitive character¹⁸. The following passage from his *Lectures on Aesthetics* is emblematic. Wittgenstein does not refer to "beautiful", but I think we can extend his observation also to this word: «When we make an aesthetic judgment about a thing, we do not just gape at it and say: "Oh! How marvellous!" We distinguish between a person who knows what he is talking about and a person who doesn't» (LA, I, 17, 6).

Though we may think that "beautiful" expresses an aesthetic reaction, Wittgenstein emphasizes that a person who reacts to a piece of music or a poem by using this word or others similar to it does not know «what he is talking about»¹⁹. Aesthetic appreciation is approval put into words²⁰; therefore it presupposes knowledge of the relevant rules or standards together with personal sensibility or «discernment» (cfr. LA, I, 8-15, 3-5)²¹.

Maybe Wittgenstein is going too far with his criticism. It is possible to save a role for "beautiful" in aesthetic judgment, that is, as an expression of the experience a critical discussion issues in, or, in other words, as a term to express the value an object has in

¹⁸ As Simo Säätelä points out commenting on Wittgenstein's *Lectures on Aesthetics*, an aesthetic reaction essentially involves an intentional element and is «conceptually dependent upon our perceiving the object in a certain way» (Säätelä [2002]: 62). He further observes that what is interesting when aesthetics is concerned «is not primarily what I feel or experience, but instead the object of my reaction [...] what exactly disgusted or delighted me, i.e., the object of my disgust or delight» (Säätelä [2002]: 65).

¹⁹ As Thomas Tam points out, had Wittgenstein construed interjections as forms of aesthetic reaction, «he would not have repeatedly asserted that aesthetic adjectives, as words of approval or disapproval, play hardly any role in aesthetics». (Tam [2002]: 314)

²⁰ I owe this phrasing to Goyet (2011): 64.

²¹ By talking about rules, Wittgenstein stresses the embeddedness of appreciation in a culture and a form of life, its historically specific character (cfr. LA, I, 20, 7; I 24-29, 8-9; I 35, 11 and CV, 80e and 96e). As Thomas Tam writes, «it is the whole culture of a period that renders possible a certain form of appreciation and gives it meaning» (Tam [2002]: 319). The learning of rules and standards is important, since they provide a basic understanding of the arts, so that a person, in considering, say, an eighteenth century sonnet, at least knows what she is talking about.

virtue of its possession of aesthetic qualities of the kind Wittgenstein hints at when he talks about music, poetry, suits or eyes²². I will not pursue his consideration on aesthetic evaluation any further. Let me simply observe that neither his criticism to the idea of beauty as a common property nor his emphasizing that an aesthetic adjective such as "beautiful" plays hardly any role in aesthetic appreciation, do *per se* undermine the idea of "the beautiful" as conceived of in the *Notebooks*, since "the beautiful" was there neither a common property of beautiful things nor a quality that we can point out and at least try to describe. However, Wittgenstein also hints at the mischief made by the concept of "the beautiful". In the next section I will try to show that his observation may be understood if we read it against the appropriate historical background.

4. *The Historical Character of Beauty*

According to Wittgenstein appreciation is embedded in the culture of a period; it presupposes knowledge of styles, poetics, etc. Actually, to appreciate a work of art one has probably to understand if not necessarily admire the culture to which it belongs. In a remark from 1949 Wittgenstein observed that one reason why authors «become dated, even though they once *amounted* to something», is that their writings, without the «reinforcement» by their «contemporary setting», die, «as if bereft of the illumination that gave them their colour». He exemplifies the point recalling the beauty of mathematical demonstrations that charmed Pascal and comments on it: «Within *that* way of looking

²² In Ambrose's notes Wittgenstein is reported as saying that «aesthetic discussion is something that goes on inside the range of likes and dislikes» (AWL, 38). It is possible that by saying «This is beautiful» one is responding to the value she recognizes in an object or, more precisely, one is noting the value of the object with pleasure – obviously, admiration is not necessarily pleasurable, but I doubt someone would use "beautiful" if her admiration for something were not pleasurable. As we have seen, in a remark from *Culture and Value* Wittgenstein imagines to say that the eyes of a person are beautiful and, being asked why he finds them beautiful, to reply that he finds beautiful «the almond shape, long eye-lashes, delicate lids» (CV, 24e). He clearly imagines himself describing qualities of the eyes that make him appreciate them or that are the reason for his calling the eyes beautiful. In cases like this, "beautiful" is not the name of an ingredient of things; however, it also is not the mere expression of a feeling as a subjective state; rather, it expresses a kind of value or merit we attribute to things on the ground of their possessing certain other (aesthetic) qualities. These qualities are reasons for exclaiming «How beautiful!», though, to use an expression by Mark Rowe, it is not *by reasoning* that one arrive at judgments like «This melody is beautiful». Cfr. Rowe (2004): 89 and 84-91 for a convincing defence of the idea that critical discussions «can only take place within an affective response». (Rowe [2004]: 91)

at the world these demonstrations did have *beauty*. [...] Again, a crystal is not beautiful in just any 'setting' – though perhaps it always looks *attractive*». (CV, 79e) He closes the remark observing: «Strange that whole epochs can't free themselves from the grip of certain concepts – the concept of 'beautiful' and 'beauty' for instance». (CV, 79e)

Maybe he is suggesting that beauty has an essentially historical character and that we cannot abstract the concept of beauty from its "environment". Once the environment has changed, we have to free ourselves from that concept, otherwise it hinders the appreciation of works of art and other objects. Wittgenstein hints at this risk also in an intriguing remark on an observation on Mozart by Grillparzer. The remark is interesting also because it is possible to scent between the lines his early idea of "the beautiful":

When Grillparzer says Mozart countenanced only what is "beautiful" in music, I think he means that he did not countenance what is distorted, frightful, that there is nothing corresponding to *this* in his music. I am not saying that is completely true; but even supposing it to be so, it is still prejudice on Grillparzer's part to think that by right it ought not to be otherwise. The fact that music since Mozart (and of course especially through Beethoven) has extended the range of its language is to be neither commended nor deplored; rather: *this is how it has changed*. There is something ungrateful about Grillparzer's attitude. Did he want *another* Mozart? Could he imagine what such a being might have composed? Could he have imagined Mozart if he had not known him?

The concept of "the beautiful" has done a lot of mischief in this connection too. (CV, 55e)²³

The remark is pregnant with meaning. I do not even try to offer an interpretation of it and limit myself to a couple of observations. The first is chronological: Grillparzer was born in 1791, the year of Mozart's death. Many things had changed and were still changing in Austrian society and culture. Wittgenstein hints at how music since Mozart has changed, apparently suggesting that it is ungrateful of Grillparzer to judge the music of a period according to standards that were of a different time. According to Wittgenstein great art is expressive of a form of life and cannot be appreciated without assuming the form of life embodied in it. This is true also of Mozart's works. One can be nostalgic for his music, but cannot want another Mozart or other music of a Mozartian kind, because the "environment" of that music has changed. The devotion to the concept of "the beautiful" prevents from acknowledging how, as a matter of fact that should not be deplored, music has changed its language according to changes in the form of life.

²³ Grillparzer (1837) wrote: «Shakespeare could employ the horrible; Mozart's limit was the beautiful».

My second observation is that Wittgenstein seems not completely to agree with Grillparzer's statement that Mozart countenanced only what is "beautiful" in music. I quoted the passage skipping its first lines. It begins by stating that we can speak of the «distorted in music» in the sense in which we speak of «features distorted by grief». As features are immediately evident, Wittgenstein seems to suggest that there is music in which the distorted lies, so to speak, at its surface. Very often Wittgenstein speaks of a face [*Gesicht*] of music (cf. e.g. CV, 22e); he further states that «the face is the soul of the body» (CV, 23e). Wittgenstein does not say that the face expresses the soul; rather, he evokes something like a bodily soul. This does not rule out that there is something deep under the surface, such as a soul *in* the body.

In another remark on Mozart, Wittgenstein observes that in his music «fate [*das Schicksal*] plays no role of any sort. That is not the *concern* of this music», though Mozart could have well encountered great tragedy «in his *life*» (CV, 81-82e)²⁴. In a sense Mozart's music expresses independence from fate and agreement with the world²⁵. Going back to the remark of the *Notebooks* I commented on in the first part of this paper, it is tempting to think that Wittgenstein sees the features of happiness in the beautiful face of Mozart's music. However, maybe he does not see it just like Grillparzer does. He distances himself a little from Grillparzer in that he takes as not completely true the playwright's words about Mozart's music. Maybe Wittgenstein would like to make room for the possibility that in that music there is something corresponding to the distorted or frightful, that the admittedly beautiful face of Mozart's music cannot be considered to be all there is to it. The beauty of Mozart's music might have a depth; it might not merely consist in its enjoyable character (cfr. Tam [2002]: 321). In other words, there could be something in it corresponding to the distorted, but it would be something that does not appear in its surface, that does not affect its features.

If this is correct, then Schiller's line «Life is serious, art is gay» quoted by Wittgenstein, as well as Wittgenstein's idea that there is something in the conception that «the

²⁴ What Brian McGuinness recalls with regard to Schubert is interesting. He writes that Wittgenstein was attracted by Schubert also for a reason «in which the ethical and the aesthetic were intertwined: the contrast of the misery of his life and the absence of all trace of it in his music, the absence of all bitterness». (McGuinness [2005]: 124)

²⁵ According to the theologian Karl Barth, what in Mozart's music «touches and soothes the soul is this: it seems to come from a height [...] from which you can contemplate together, in their reality but also their limitations, the bright and the dark side of existence and therefore the joy and pain, good and evil, life and death». (Barth [2008]: 22, my translation)

beautiful», that is, what makes happy, is the end of art, catches an important feature of Mozart's music. However, once the possibility that "the beautiful" has a depth is neglected, and maybe Wittgenstein blames Grillparzer for having neglected it, what is left is the beautiful as the merely pleasant, or what Wittgenstein refers to as what «superficial people call beauty» (CV, 79e). This is the easier way in which a concept of beauty, mainly defined in formal terms as it happened, for example, in eighteenth-century aesthetics, can be misunderstood. It is easy to misunderstand the concept of beauty as confining beauty to the surface of things, setting it apart from any depth, from both cognitive and moral value. No doubt, there is mischief in the appreciation of art that this conception of "the beautiful" may foster or make worse (cfr. CV, 55e).

Wittgenstein seems to acknowledge that the environment in which the concept of beauty had a point has changed, and his observation about the mischief of "the beautiful" is apparently connected to this historical awareness²⁶. However, I am not sure that, in some way aligning himself with the *Zeitgeist*, he changed his opinion about the point of the conception that the end of art is the beautiful. A remark from his later years seems to confirm that he was looking at art in terms that were very similar to those of his earlier work.

5. *Still Wondering (After all These Years)*

Before commenting on the remark I hinted at, I would like to make a couple of very brief observations about two passages from Wittgenstein's *Lectures on Aesthetics*, where he apparently makes room for particular cases of art appreciation. According to Wittgenstein, the learning of rules and standards is a prerequisite for appreciation, since they provide a basic understanding of the arts of a period. However, he acknowledges that «there is an extraordinary number of different cases of appreciation» (LA, I, 21, 7), and that there are cases in which rules apparently do not apply to art. He is reported as saying:

We talked of correctness. A good cutter won't use any words except words like 'Too long', 'All right'. When we talk of a Symphony of Beethoven we don't talk of correctness. Entirely

²⁶ We read in a remark from 1949: «My own thinking about art and values is far more disillusioned than would have been *possible* for someone 100 years ago. That doesn't mean, though, that it's more correct on that account. It only means that I have examples of degeneration in the forefront of my mind which were not in the *forefront* of men's mind then». (CV, 79e)

different things enter. One wouldn't talk of appreciating the *tremendous* things in Art. In certain styles in Architecture a door is correct, and the thing is you appreciate it. But in the case of a Gothic Cathedral what we do is not at all to find it correct – it plays an entirely different role with us. The entire *game* is different. It is as different as to judge a human being and on the one hand to say 'He behaves well' and on the other hand 'He made a great impression on me'. (LA, I, 23, 7-8)

Wittgenstein seems to make room for a kind of evaluation different from the one in terms of correctness. There are cases in which talking of correctness appears inappropriate not because the work that we encounter is not rule-governed, but probably because it made a great impression on us, so that we feel in some sense dominated by it. Without being incorrect, or maybe breaking some rules, the work goes beyond the idea of correctness. Wittgenstein's comparison of such cases to the judging of a human being is revealing. By saying: «He behaves well» we apply to another person the same standards of correctness that apply to us; but when a person makes a great impression on us the kind of response is different: we are not appreciating her for the correctness of her behaviour (cfr. Tam [2002]: 317).

In a later section of the *Lectures*, Wittgenstein seems to acknowledge that not only the critical attitude of connoisseurs counts as appreciation, but also the response to a work of art that could be characterized as being impressed by it. He speaks of a person «who looks intensely» at a couple of paintings, among the few he has seen, which make «a profound impression on him» (LA, I, 30, 9). Being impressed by a work is clearly an emotional response; if nevertheless Wittgenstein calls it "appreciation", presumably it is because he assumes that it presupposes at least an implicit knowledge of the rules of a genre and a culture²⁷. However, it is also possible to read the passage as an admission that a sense of fascination, of admiration could belong to our response to art. Though not every work can command such a response, there are cases in which, in our appreciation of a work of art, it is essential that we feel enthusiastic, that we feel a sense of wonder about it. In regard to this, the following remark of Wittgenstein from 1947 is revealing:

The miracles of nature.

One might say: art *shows* us the miracles of nature. It is based on the *concept* of the miracles of nature. (The blossom, just opening out. What is *marvellous* about it?) We say: «Just look at it opening out!» (CV, 56e)

²⁷ A similar point is made by Tam (2002): 322.

This text echoes the young Wittgenstein's idea that the artistic miracle or the artistic wonder is that what exists does exist. Wittgenstein seems to consider the concept of miracle or wonders of nature as the basis of art. Again, not every work can command such a response. We should not generalize Wittgenstein's claim. However, we can make room for cases in which a sense of admiration, or of wonder belongs to our appreciation of art. Sometimes it is feelings like these that words such as "beautiful" or "marvellous" convey and when this is the case, they are not mere substitutes of interjections, nor expressions of an emotion. Uttered when being impressed by something, be it the opening out of the blossom or a work of art, "Marvellous!" or "Beautiful!" articulate our sense of wonder and wonder is more akin to a way of seeing things than to an emotive response.

There is a further point worth noticing in Wittgenstein's remark. To the question «What is *marvellous* about the blossom opening?» he does not answer with a description, but with an exhortation: «Just look at it opening out!». As Thomas Tam points out, this exhortation must be taken «as a *pointing* to or a *showing* of something, rather than a mere expressive gesture» ([2002]: 315). This suggests that art is sometimes a kind of showing of, since what it points to – the miracles or wonders of nature – is beyond language and therefore can only be shown. If we connect this suggestion to the idea articulated by Wittgenstein in the remark from *Culture and Value*, according to which art forces us to the right perspective, we have that for Wittgenstein art, or at least some kind of art, is like an invitation to a certain kind of experience of contemplating an object; and we can see that in relation to this kind of art the use of "beautiful" has a point.

Going back to Wittgenstein's blossom example, this hints at the fact that finding something marvellous or beautiful is connected to paying attention to it and recommending it to the attention of others, while being unable to conceptualize the reason why it draws our attention. It is tempting to link the blossom example with the following passage that we read in students' notes from a lecture by Wittgenstein, which was part of a lecture-series on description:

One of the most interesting points which the question of not being able to describe is connected with, [is that] the impression which a certain verse or bar in music gives you is indescribable. «I don't know what it is. [...] Look at this transition. [...] What is it? [...]». I think you would say it gives you experiences which can't be described. First of all it is, of course, not true that whenever we hear a piece of music or a line of poetry which impresses us greatly, we say: «This is indescribable». But it is true that again and again we do feel inclined to say: «I can't describe my experience». I have in mind a case that saying one is incapable of describing comes from being intrigued and *wanting* to describe, asking oneself: «What is this? What's he doing, wanting to do here? – Gosh, if I could only say what he's doing here». (LC,

37)²⁸

Following a suggestion by Avner Baz, I speculate that this finding ourselves wanting to describe something that we see or hear or otherwise encounter and whose description eludes us, gets us close to the use of "beauty" or "beautiful" I am talking about, when we resist the temptation to seek to ground our being so drawn into something other than the thing as we experience it.

In an important sense, beauty is about the presentness of and responsiveness to something, and there are moments in which, by calling a work of art "beautiful" we lend our voice to what in the work reveals itself to us (cfr. Baz [2004]: 70)²⁹. In these cases it is not for not knowing «what is in it at all», that we gape at it and say: «How beautiful!» or «How marvellous!»; rather, it is because sometimes art confronts us as a miracle or presents us the wonder of the being there of what there is. In such cases the reasons of our appreciation of the work remain ineffable because we simply cannot put into words what is beyond language.

6. Conclusion

In this paper we have seen that Wittgenstein denies that beauty is a property and argues that in practices of art appreciation the aesthetic adjective "beautiful" plays hardly any role and is mainly used by people who lack basic understanding of art. Furthermore, he acknowledges that the form of life in which the concept of beauty had a point has changed. However, he still makes room for beauty and the beautiful. And it is interesting that this happens, insofar as he connects art to miracle. It is because of this very connection that I am tempted to say that Wittgenstein's early idea that there is something in the conception that the beautiful is the end of art was still alive in his later writings. And I guess the reason is that this idea was deeply rooted into Wittgenstein's attitude towards life.

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²⁸ My attention was drawn to this text by Baz (2004): 69-70.

²⁹ Also in the experience of art we encounter the miracle of the «that it is» of the world, precisely because art is ultimately inexplicable.

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