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## Foreword

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As is well known, aesthetics as a specific philosophical discipline was born in the 18th century and the first to use this term was the German philosopher Baumgarten. He reserves to it the scope of those knowledge, which coming from sensory perceptions, do not have for their object clear and distinct, but confused and vague ideas. According to Baumgarten's definition, one probably could not find in medieval authors any philosophical reflection about "aesthetics", in a proper sense. The same remark can be made for any other modern definition of aesthetics and its domain. In the introduction to his study *The aesthetic problem of the thought of Thomas Aquinas* Umberto Eco notes: «If aesthetics are only in Baumgartian terms a *scientia cognitionis sensitivae*, a *theoria liberalium artium*, a *gnoseologia inferior*, a *ars pulcre cogitandi*, a *ars analogi rationis* then medieval author's contribution to aesthetics is very small. And if aesthetics is the philosophy of a lyrical intuition of feeling, then the medieval had no aesthetic interests». The possibility to refer to medieval authors the conceptual categories typical of aesthetics is actually an open question, which has raised a quite complex historiographical debate about the very existence of a "medieval aesthetics" and, eventually, its specific characteristics in the philosophical as well as artistic sphere. The hypothesis which has inspired this volume is that, despite the quite obvious anachronism consisting in the application to medieval reflections of a modern category such as aesthetics, studying medieval authors in an aesthetical perspective has yet a relevant sense. In general, the elements on which modern aesthetics are based, like any other development in the history of philosophical thought, can find some correspondence in the philosophical reflections elaborated in the medieval context. The philosophical Middle Ages developed a strong focus on topics such as the theory of sensible knowledge, the psychology of vision, the consideration of the world as an harmoni-

ous work of God, the laws, the order and the beauty of creation. If the conceptual field of aesthetics, in a modern sense, also results from the intertwining with other domains of philosophical discourse (ontology, ethics, theory of knowledge, philosophy of mind and metaphysics), aesthetical questions could find a theoretical place in medieval philosophy, at least in an implicit way, i.e. without a clear definition of the discipline and its domain.

The essays contained in this volume can be traced back to this general and syncretic meaning of aesthetics, insofar as they develop, both at the theoretical and historical level, three key notions of aesthetics such as mind, nature and beauty. Even if these topics can't be sharply separated, one can say that essays by Maria Bettetini, Ernesto Mainoldi, Salvatore di Giacomo, Cecilia Panti, Mohamadreza Abolghassemi, Fabrizio Amerini deal mainly with the notion of Beauty; Nature is the core of the essays by Stefano Perfetti, Amalia Cerrito and Riccardo Saccenti; finally, the articles by Enrico Donato and Anna Rodolfi focus on mind and his processes.

Maria Bettetini's essay is dedicated to the concept of beauty in Augustine's thought. Through the reference to passages taken from *De libero arbitrio*, *De quantitate animae* and *De musica*, the notion of beauty in Augustine appears to be closely connected to the notions of harmony, proportion and number. These notions refer to the rational order through the creative work of God. Grasping the harmony of creation therefore means understanding its beauty as order and approaching God.

Starting from the problem of defining how medieval speculation conceived the aesthetic dimension of art, Ernesto Mainoldi's essay shows the peculiarity of the Byzantine conception of beauty and art and investigates its connection with some of the most original achievements of Byzantine speculation, such as hypostatic ontology, theology of deification, *eikonic* thinking, and especially sophianic gnoseology. Salvatore Di Giacomo's essay focuses on the notion of 'icon' and his capacity of representing the invisible and

the unrepresentable. The author shows that "icon", thanks to its *its apophatic and kenotic character*, is able to make transcendence appear in immanence, giving rise to a dynamic relation between visible and invisible.

The discussion of notion of beauty by Severinus Boethius is the subject of Cecilia Panti's paper, which deals in particular with the mathematical treatises of the author. Contrasting some positions taken by Augustine on beauty (rhythmic mathematical patterns as an exemplary representation of the unity of beauty), Boethius does not see the mathematical ratios as something concerning an esthetical judgment. For him, the physical world, totally immersed in changes and movements, does not present the stable unity, which is required for contemplating the beautiful.

Abolghassemi's essay is consecrated to another important medieval author, and his notion of beauty, i.e. Avicenna. Through the analysis of several avicennian texts, Abolghassemi investigates the main philosophical models of his reflection (namely Aristotle and Neoplatonism), whose hybridization is at the origin of its most original views about aesthetic delight and the relation between beauty and perfection.

Thomas Aquinas' thought is the starting point of the essay by Fabrizio Amerini. Analysing Aquinas' reflections on beauty, and in particular the key role played by of the notion of representation in the explanation of the artistic process, the author raises the more general question of the meaning in which we can talk of "medieval aesthetics": if meta-aesthetic considerations are rather sporadic in medieval authors, the particular relationship between the artist, an object and its representation was discussed in a more systematic and specific way.

Passing to the theme of nature, the essays by Stefano Perfetti and Amalia Cerrito explores the transformation of the representation of nature, due to the availability of Aristotelian treatises on zoology and botanic. Perfetti deals with the representation of animals (realistic and symbolic) in the Book of Job (38-41), and its commentaries by Albert the Great and Thomas Aquinas. These

crucial examples show the way Aristotelian zoology became in XIIIth century an instrument for a renewed biblical exegesis, different from the traditional allegorical and moral interpretation. Focusing on Albert's treatise *De vegetabilibus*, Cerrito underlines the importance of his naturalistic knowledge not only in itself, but also as a mean to renew the conceptual frame of the biblical exegesis, in its historical and allegorical sense.

Exploring another exegetical question, Saccetti's essay shifts back to the XIIth century, in order to examine the debate about "natural law" in St. Victor's school, where the interpretation of a passage of Paul's Epistle to the Romans was the occasion of a philosophical and theological reflection about the feature of a universal moral principle, which natural reason can understand.

The perspective of mind is finally approached by Anna Rodolfi and Enrico Donato. Rodolfi's paper deals with the problem of the knowledge of God by the human mind. Analysing the position

of Albert the Great, the author distinguishes several different epistemological levels on which the knowledge of God can be attained: in so doing, she addresses issues such as the nature of vision, the relationship between knowledge by senses and the perception of the invisible, or the extraordinary states reached by human mind when enlightened by God's grace and beauty.

Donato's paper starts from a problem formulated by Thomas Aquinas, concerning the way in which human soul can become aware of his inner habitual dispositions (*habitus*). In this way, he raises the more general question of the nature and the conditions of self-reflexivity of human mind. If Thomas' solution, following Aristotle, is centered on the distinction between actual and habitual knowledge, some others thinkers of XIIIth century, such as Matthew of Acquasparta or Roger Marston, accepted Thomas' formulation of the problem, but rejected his particular solution.