The Beautiful, Novel, and Strange
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The Beautiful, Novel, and Strange: Aesthetics and Heterodoxy.

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Preface

The aim of this book is to fill a lacuna in studies of aesthetics at its point of origin in England. The popular sense of “aesthetics” (as in the title of a recent collection of essays, Aesthetics and Ideology) is simply formalism. The scholarly sense has tended to focus either on the refinement of taste or on the aspect of beauty that came to be known as the Sublime, excluding both the Beautiful itself and certainly Joseph Addison’s third term, the Novel, New, or Uncommon (until it emerges much later in the Picturesque).

Taste derives from the aesthetics of Anthony Ashley Cooper, third earl of Shaftesbury, in which the Beautiful is a monolith, outside of which lies the deformed (low, mechanic, and ugly, a transgressive category as clearly social as aesthetic): all that matters is to define the perceptual apparatus that can enjoy the aesthetic experience of the Beautiful and to ask whether taste is relative or absolute. The Sublime derives from Addison’s aesthetics, which distinguishes kinds of aesthetic response in relation to its objects: not only the Beautiful but the Novel and the Great. Most studies, however, have followed from Longinus and Edmund Burke, who put their weight on the Sublime. While Burke is careful to define the Beautiful, it is as a foil to the Sublime, in which he is primarily interested (self-preservation, pain, and power, as opposed to society, love, and passivity).

In the 1970s Martin Battestin could still begin a study of the role of art in the first half of the eighteenth century by positing in writers from Dryden to Fielding and Goldsmith “an assumption about the
interdependence of theology and aesthetics.”4 Those words in fact comprise an oxymoron: English aesthetics began as an antitheology, essentially deist. Its origins were in the philosophical twins of empiricism and heterodoxy. In Michael McKeon’s terms, the discourse of aesthetics replaced religious discourse, which had been put in question by empirical discourse (in time it replaced empirical discourse as well).5 Even Neoplatonism, which had been used by priests to theologize the Beautiful, provided Shaftesbury a model for the deist’s merely transcendent god.

This is not to deny that “deism” is a slippery term; that most writers labeled “deist” (or Socinian or Arian) claimed to be orthodox Anglicans. Robert Sullivan, for example, in his study of John Toland, rightly describes deism, *sub specie aeternitatis*, as “a convenient term to describe the revision of traditional Christian formulas which occupied so many English writers between the Civil War and the French Revolution.”6 But in the 1700s “deist” was a term tossed back and forth in the context of heterodoxy. It was used to mean certain things ranging from freethinker to atheist, but the arch-heretic Bernard Mandeville defined it thus: “He who believes, in the common acceptation, that there is a God, and that the world is ruled by providence, but has no faith in any thing reveal’d to us, is a deist; and he, who believes neither the one nor the other, is an atheist.”7 Mandeville meant that deists were essentially disbelievers in miracles (in God’s intervention in daily events once he had created the world) and critics of the priests who enforced belief in miracles by insisting on the divine authority of biblical texts.

In fact, Shaftesburian deism supported the Protestant establishment and sanctioned religion as an acceptable expedient. Shaftesbury dissociated himself from the name deist, referring it as a term of opprobrium to his opponents.8 The Shaftesburian heritage of Whiggery and connoisseurship established a genealogy of heterodoxy, aesthetics, and orthodoxy (of both church and state) shared by Addison, a pillar of Whig orthodoxy, a severe critic of freethinkers, and an upholder of “faith.”9 But Addison, in his most significant statement in the Spectator on religion, based his “faith” on the creed of a rationalist. This essay (in No. 465) could easily pass for deist, especially in its proof of God’s existence in nature and its conclusion with Addison’s hymn “The Spacious Firmament on High.”10 Although the words of the hymn (“birth,”
“tidings,” and “truth”) invoke Christ, the reference is entirely to nature created by a transcendent god (“the Works of such a Being as we define God to be”). The essay series “Pleasures of the Imagination,” which defines the parameters of aesthetic discourse for the century, is in this sense his response to the question of rationalist Christianity.

While not many historians would any longer equate art and divine providence, they do focus their attention on Shaftesbury, taste, and politeness, which comprise the orthodoxy of aesthetics—of so-called high art, aristocratic patronage, and various forms of idealization. This is also by and large true of historians of the Sublime. Before either Addison or Burke, “sublime” was an honorific adjective used to denote “high art.”

However, an equally interesting aesthetics came into being, deriving from less respectable (less aristocratic) forms of deism. The philosophical progenitors in this case were Toland, Anthony Collins, and Thomas Woolston, whose critical deism, discrediting the Scriptures and the miracles of Christ, constituted an oppositional tradition, or countertradition, one that left its traces on art and literature. Most immediately it showed William Hogarth, the engraver’s apprentice who was trying in the 1720s to adapt to the traditional assumptions of art academies, ways to counter Shaftesburian taste—a taste that was contingent upon the “disinterestedness” of the gentleman of property—with an aesthetics of the “common man.”

Beginning with his Harlot’s Progress (1732), deism was one source of the new graphic form Hogarth invented, which he called the “modern moral subject.” When he came to formulate his practice in The Analysis of Beauty (1753), in a paradigmatic act of aestheticizing, he revised the Christian symbol of the Trinity, a triangle inscribed with the Name of God, replacing the Name of God with his own Line of Beauty. He then made the triangle three-dimensional, changing a figure of the mind into one of the sensible world (figs. 21, 22). He retained the Shaftesburian monolith of the Beautiful (vs. the Ugly) but redefined its perception in the terms Addison used for his middle ground, the Novel (curiosity, surprise, discovery). He employed the Novel as an epistemology of Addisonian spectatorship in order to focus on the beautiful object, which was for him (in nature) the living, contemporary woman and (in art) the useful, everyday items of London life.
Accounts of aesthetics almost never mention, except in passing, *The Analysis of Beauty*, and Hogarth himself has been seen either as "idiosyncratic," a maverick and eccentric, or as a simple, uneducated bloke, the "Cockney's Mirror" and man of the London street. But in league with a few contemporary writers he created a realist aesthetics of the Novel, in his own case to correct Shaftesbury's idealist system; and in his engraved images he developed an alternative to the academic theory of painting, on which Shaftesbury had largely drawn in his writings. This sense of the Novel preempts the Beautiful and Great in the most forward-looking literature and art (as opposed, perhaps, to theory) of the period.

One example is the emergent form of prose fiction known as the novel (with a lower-case n). The proto-genre, which defined itself against romance, epic, tragedy, and other forms of "high" art, had roots not only in forms of journalism (novel/news) but also in the forms of rationalism which contributed to critical deism and its *deus absconditus*. As Irving Howe wrote in an essay called "History and the Novel":

> It was deism that taught us to accept the pain of historicity. By granting God powers of initiation and then putting him to sleep forever, deism freed the mind from the puzzle of origins and cleared the way for historical consciousness. Without such a tacit premise, the novel could not have gotten very far, since it really has no room for a will superior to natural law.

Deism is a phenomenon that is not ordinarily related to the origins of the novel. Howe is probably remembering Georg Lukács's formula that the novel is what has become of the epic in a world without gods. Without an immanent deity, religion is replaced by manners and customs; the reality of Christ's miracles, the Last Supper, and the Trinity by stories of remarkable coincidences, cathected suppers, and romantic triangles. What makes these parodic is the strain of critical deism that filters through Hogarth to Fielding and others, even the "orthodox" clergyman Sterne—though of course with the usual mixed results of filtering. In Hogarth's satiric fables of art (1737–41) and the theory of the *Analysis* a decade later, as well as in Henry Fielding's preface to *Joseph Andrews* (1742) and his introductory chapters in *Tom Jones* (1749), an aesthetics of the Novel/novel begins to emerge, which in
turn has its effect a decade later on Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* (1759–67).

In fits and starts in a number of books, I have gradually developed the idea of the Novel/Beautiful as a proto-Picturesque focused on human nature rather than on landscape. I argued the case for Hogarth’s role most fully in my biography *Hogarth* (1991–93), especially in volume 3, which laid out his theory of aesthetics. In the present study I outline a broader, less narrativized explanation, not limited to Hogarth. It has seemed necessary not only to spell out what I wrote there but to reformulate it in terms of its roots and its flowers, the novelists as well as the painters who developed its implications.

The central figure is Fielding, whose theory of the “comic epic in prose” mediated between Shaftesbury’s “Divine Example” (the Platonic Idea) and Hogarth’s theory of the Beautiful/Novel in the *Analysis*. Fielding’s ties to heterodoxy have been denied by Battestin, his most recent biographer, but they cry out everywhere in his work for revaluation. My discussion necessarily contests the views of Battestin, Aubrey Williams, and J. Paul Hunter, who see the writers I deal with as still orthodox Church of Englanders immersed in sermons, devotional works, and belief in divine providence (which Melvyn New, after Smollett’s Win Jenkins, has more accurately called the “grease of God”). I am suggesting that the tradition of the novel which Fielding founded—and which attempted to correct the Richardson version—was based partly at least on heterodox assumptions and a heterodox aesthetics.

Not only the “novel” but also, homologous with it, other innovative forms emerge in the wake of, and share the assumptions of, this neglected strand of aesthetics. The Picturesque is one immediate offshoot (to make something picturesque is to aestheticize it), and Addison’s other term, “the Strange,” is only the far end of the Novel, New, or Uncommon. Addison uses “the Strange” to refer to those areas further off the map of the Beautiful and Great than the Novel; the Strange raises the stakes of all the claims that were first proposed by the Novel. For when the Novel turns Strange it only continues to perpetuate the counterdiscourse in another key. For example, *Tristram Shandy* produces an over-the-edge parody of civic humanist masculinity, *The Vicar of Wakefield* of equal providence, and the “children’s book” *The History of Little Goody Two-Shoes* of the whole orthodox enterprise.
In the decades after 1750 we witness the simultaneous advent of sophisticated forms of erotica and of children’s literature, which invent fantasy substitutes for (eroticized or childish versions of) inexplicable doctrines such as the Athanasian Trinity (in Fanny Hill, Charles, and her clients; in Two-Shoes, her animal familiars, and her children). The Vicar of Wakefield juxtaposes the childlike Primroses with Lovelace-like seducers, popular ballads, and the “sublime” Old Testament story of Job, recently reexamined in the biblical studies of Robert Lowth and others. And the contemporary Goody Two-Shoes rewrites the characters of the Vicar as literal children and its story as that of a child Redeemer (also incorporating the Job story). The Happy Valley as nursery, coinciding with the androgynous status of Uncle Toby, Tristram, and Yorick (and pointing to Harley in Mackenzie’s Man of Feeling of 1771), also raises the question of whether it is a feminizing that takes place, or rather an infantilizing. The development of aesthetics in this period remains closely related to the demystifying of the Christian deity to a man, a woman—and now a child.

We might say that the Strange is an extension of the epistemology of the Novel into the range of the Sublime, but (in fact offering an alternative) without the awe and respect tendered the sublime object. After Joseph Warton and William Collins in the 1740s inaugurated the movement whereby the Sublime became the central aesthetic category of the later eighteenth century, Hogarth and others accommodated themselves to this initiative insofar as they worked to establish an alternative to the Sublime in the Strange, which might yet be true to the basic principles of the Addisonian Novel.

The Picturesque, however, as a term of aesthetics, gardening, and landscape painting, was named and theorized; whereas the Strange, like the Novel and Uncommon, had no theory to sustain it after Hogarth’s absorption of it into his Analysis of Beauty. The works I categorize under the Novel and the Strange were given other names by their authors, working terms that corresponded to practical rather than aesthetic categories (e.g., “modern moral subject,” “comic history-painting,” “comic epic in prose”). These terms were outside (or beneath) aesthetic consideration. We may suppose that Hogarth appropriated the name Beautiful for the aesthetic dimension of works that in fact operated under the term Novel, works that no theorist after
Addison considered dignified enough to describe. The generic term "novel" applied to the form written by Fielding and Sterne, as well as Richardson, did not have more than occasional usage until the 1770s. So far as I know it has never been used in the way I use it to join Addison's aesthetics, Hogarth's theory, and the emerging forms of prose fiction.

The aesthetic tradition of the Novel can be more precisely situated by returning to its origin for Hogarth in the antiacademic discourse with which he reacted against art instruction as a young man. The "English School" of painting, which emerged from the conflicts within the St. Martin's Lane Academy (essentially an artists' club with a life class attached, which Hogarth founded in 1735), can be roughly divided into those who followed academic precepts (drawing based on canonical sculptures), often slavishly but sometimes imaginatively, and those whose paintings aimed at being antiacademic, "modern," and native "English." The first group included Joshua Reynolds, Richard Wilson, James Barry, and Benjamin West. In the second, Hogarth was followed by Johan Zoffany, Joseph Wright of Derby, George Stubbs, Thomas Gainsborough, and Thomas Rowlandson. I examined the latter group in *Emblem and Expression: Meaning in English Art of the Eighteenth Century* (1975), regarding the period from Hogarth's point of view. A decade later John Barrell, in *The Political Theory of Painting from Reynolds to Hazlitt* (1986), recovered Reynolds's point of view, laid out in the *Discourses* he delivered as first president of the Royal Academy, arguing that antiacademic painters were merely academics manqués. Barrell, without mentioning the possibility of two traditions of painting, presented a tradition of academic theory—from Shaftesbury to Reynolds and beyond—which hypothesized an idealizing, heroic painting based on public spirit. Drawing on the work of J.G.A. Pocock, he called it civic humanist; and drawing on Michel Foucault's concept of "discourse," he argued that civic humanism was the discourse—artists could not think or conceive outside its terms. In Barrell's account the discourse of civic humanism suppressed all others, whether religious (Anglican, Dissenter, or deist), literary (satiric, pastoral, or georgic), aesthetic, or simply anti-civic humanist.

Andrew Hemingway's review of *The Political Theory of Painting* (in *Art History*) criticized it for being "The Political Theory of Painting
Barrell idealized civic humanism, ignoring the politics of rule by a Whig oligarchy. My own review (in the *New Republic*) criticized it for omitting the painting, that is, any reference to the relationship between the theory and the works of art it was written to project. The reason for the omission was partly that Barrell was writing a history of theory, and partly that the paintings did not correspond to the theory, in most cases grotesquely so.

Barrell also failed to distinguish between treatises written for the artist (such as Shaftesbury’s *Judgment of Hercules* or Reynolds’s *Discourses*) and treatises of taste or aesthetics written for the perceiver of works of art (such as Shaftesbury’s *Characteristicks*, Addison’s “Pleasures,” Francis Hutcheson’s *Inquiry*, Jonathan Richardson’s various works on connoisseurship, or George Turnbull’s *Treatise on Ancient Painting*); nor did he distinguish between the genres of philosophy and journalism as the purveyors of theory. He posited a monist discourse, overlooking the possibility of both a strong directly contrary discourse and a host of other contending discourses that helped to shape the practice or theory of an artist or connoisseur. Foucault’s model, which is monological and authoritarian, is less apposite than Bakhtin’s for a period in which art—perhaps all experience—was notably “dialogical.” Foucault’s “discourse” provides a parody of what Pocock himself refers to as “tunnel history”—“selecting a single theme and pushing it through until it emerges in the daylight of a new country”—which does “not and cannot claim to have told all there is to tell.” One reason civic humanism has gotten far too much play in recent years is that Pocock empowered a rather precisely delimited tradition of conservative republicanism to include and to signify all expressions of political, social, ethical, and gender conviction with which it had any commonality. I emphasize Barrell’s *Political Theory of Painting* because in the decade since its publication it has dominated art historical writing in the eighteenth century, which has idealized theory and the academic tradition as the English School of painting. None of this writing acknowledges the possibility of a countertradition.

The civic humanist version of the English School of painting depends upon a confusion of tradition with canon, of countertradition with noncanonical works. A tradition (e.g., the one passed down from Hogarth to Zoffany, Wright, and the others) is a series of linked artists...
and their works held together by a kind of conscious filiation. Whereas a tradition involves choice from the inside by the artists themselves, a canon is established by outsiders, a community of readers or spectators who operate (by which we mean theorize) within an institutional setting. Insiders, however, can attempt to pass off their tradition as a canon, especially if, as was the case with the Royal Academy, they operate within the institutional setting of both school and academy.\textsuperscript{25} It was Reynolds’s purpose to create a canon of English art, and specifically one that was assimilated to the great canon of Continental art deriving from Italy. He declared noncanonical the art of Venice, the Netherlands, and Germany, and, in England, the art of painters such as Hogarth and Gainsborough.

Barrell and his followers reflect the present discourse of British art (and to some extent literary) history at its most sophisticated, but this should be recognized for what it is: Reynolds redux, a revival of the academic discourse of the later eighteenth century which raised the standing of Reynolds and marginalized Hogarth and the others in his tradition. It was specifically the discourse of Samuel Johnson, passed on to Reynolds because Johnson loved this young man who could paint and at the same time emulate the Johnsonian ethos.\textsuperscript{26} This was a case of discourse, or theory, predominating over works of art in the words of someone who had little or no interest in paintings themselves. And while Hogarth consciously placed himself within a tradition of literary discourse, it was not the discourse of theory but of practice—of satire, of painting, and of politics. That discourse of theory, which Hogarth spent his career contesting and which was long ago succeeded in English art history by a discourse of taste, connoisseurship, and cataloging, has now returned with the credentials of both “theory” and (oddly, given its elitist subtext) “political correctness.” And this discourse inherits from both academicians and cultural materialists a critical canon that studiously excludes not only other discourses but other explanations, other narratives, and the scholarly works that proposed those narratives.

When I criticize this hegemonic and monistic history and argue for a countertradition, I mean to suggest not that there were only two traditions; but rather that, as opposed to the hegemonic idea of one tradition, there were several others, intertwined in complex ways, that
shared certain characteristics—and, indeed, spoke the language of several different discourses, only one of which was specifically antiacademic and/or anti–civic humanist. Fielding, for example, while deviating sharply from Shaftesbury in certain particulars, and owing a strong allegiance to Hogarth, was primarily influenced by Shaftesbury, and certainly never deviated from an image of himself as an aristocrat. The antiacademic discourse is only one of several—one he probably picked up from Hogarth, while in important particulars retaining the stance of the civic humanist justice of the peace who was his father and eventually himself.

I do, however, mean to show that these particular discourses began by defining themselves against another discourse: deism against the authority of clergy, divine text, and other forms of mystification; aesthetics against religious belief, especially in its central doctrine of rewards/punishments; Addisonian tripartite aesthetics against the monolith of Shaftesbury’s Beautiful; and, most particularly, the Hogarthian program against academic doctrines of painting.

In summary, the aim of the present study is to disclose at the moment of its origin a way of conceiving the modern category of the aesthetic which had strong support during the eighteenth century but has been obscured both by a more dominant contemporary discourse and by current trends in art and literary history. The official tradition was that which issued in the writings of Shaftesbury on taste and which flowered in the elaborate theorizing of the Sublime at the end of the century. The countertradition developed Addison’s interest in the Beautiful, the Novel, and the Strange, and found its chief exponent in the practice of Hogarth. The Shaftesbury tradition inspired the academic discourse that was presided over by Reynolds and championed history painting as its supreme expression. Hogarth consistently articulated an antiacademic discourse that championed his graphic “modern moral subject.” But it is a central feature of this argument that the two traditions comprised not only painterly but also literary theory and practice, and much of this study is dedicated to retrieving the literary innovations that followed and complemented Hogarth’s practice in the visual arts.

It will appear that the unique power of visual images (what W. J. T. Mitchell, referring to this period, has called “the tyranny of the
picture”) was the stimulus that prompted a countertradition to the stolidly literary discourse of the academy. To be more precise, I should add: popular (concrete, particular, as distinct from idealizing) visual images. These images helped to define the limits and limitations of the theoretical discourse in the period. In fact, however, although Hogarth gathered together the mixed threads, he took them from the writings of Locke and Addison, Shaftesbury and Mandeville, Toland and Woolston, Swift and Gay; and, with the particular authority of his visual images, he passed them on—primarily, it would have to be admitted, though by no means exclusively, to writers.

With these images Hogarth reached the same audience—in size and composition—as did the writers, whether Addison or, later, Fielding and Sterne, and this audience was very different from that of any other contemporary painter. The discrepancy was summed up in the case of the tickets for the 1761 Society of Artists exhibition: It was precisely the large audience attracted by Hogarth’s satiric etchings on the ticket (rather than the artists’ paintings) which the artists wished to exclude, and did exclude the next year, as not prospective buyers of their paintings.

In short, this study attempts to conceive aesthetics as many contemporaries did—not as theory but as a poetics of practice; to show that the most popular of modern literary forms had a crucial relevance to those who contributed to the high-cultural pursuit of philosophical goals; and so both to coordinate the Novel and the novel and to distinguish one from the other.

It does, of course, represent only one history of the origin of aesthetics. Of necessity, the extrapolation from the art-historical context (and from the retrospective reduction of that context by modern scholars) to the more general history makes that history appear more polarized than it really was. Although the battle between two ideologically determinate opponents is, I believe, the approach called for in opening up the Hogarthian strain of aesthetics, it is my hope that this study will be followed by other treatments of the origin of aesthetics as a variegated field of possibility.