§ “We have now not only traveled throughout the land of pure understanding and carefully inspected its every part, but have also surveyed it throughout, determining for each thing in this land its proper place. This land, however, is an island, and is enclosed by nature itself within unchangeable bounds. It is the land of truth (a charming name), and is surrounded by a vast and stormy ocean, where illusion properly resides and many fog banks and much fast-melting ice feign newfound lands. This sea incessantly deludes the seafarer with empty hopes as he roves through his discoveries, and thus entangles him in adventures that he can never relinquish, nor ever bring to an end.”

§ Before all else there is beauty


*The teleology of the Universe is directed to the production of Beauty.* That’s the text’s opening line, its first thesis. It’s also a quotation—a quotation and provocation from the late work of Alfred North Whitehead, one that sets the stage for everything to follow. And yet, Oglesby is measured. She immediately acknowledges that Steven Shaviro—another guiding light of the study—“doubtless speaks for many” when he calls Whitehead’s claim “outrageously hyperbolic.” That does not stop her, however, from going on, still in the very first section, to cite and answer Michael Austin’s question, from the

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inaugural issue of *Speculations*, “Why does anything happen at all?”54 “In a word,” our author avers, “kallogenesis”: from the Greek *kalós* (beauty) and *genesis* (creation).55

Let’s back up a moment. Some context might help (especially considering the fact that Oglesby doesn’t bother). The work’s title comes from one of the stars of Speculative Realism, and the founding figure of its most prominent subfield, Object-Oriented Ontology, Graham Harman. That aesthetics is first philosophy may be the most striking of Harman’s many startling claims, and it gets at the heart of what he’s up to.56 Since Harman’s well known and

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widely summarized, I’ll be brief. Examples work best. And one of Harman’s favorites is fire and cotton. Fire burns cotton. Full stop. That’s the only way fire encounters cotton. Cotton’s softness, its color, and scent—its price, and where it’s harvested: all this (and more) is lost on fire. Fire burns cotton but it does not exhaust it. It never gets to its depths. And, more to the point, it can’t. Nothing gets to anything else’s depths, ever. Each object always exceeds what it is to other objects, and to the extent that an object encounters another object, it does so by “alluding” to it—that is, by a kind of *translation*:


fire reduces cotton to its flammability. Flame translates cotton into its tongue.

And that’s also how to begin to get a handle on Harman’s fascinating claim: Aesthetics is first philosophy. First philosophy is (more commonly known as) metaphysics. Metaphysics, according to Wilfrid Sellars’ famous definition, is how things, in the broadest possible sense of the term, hang together, in the broadest possible sense of the term. How things hang together—the ways in which objects translate one another, in other words—can be said to characterize aesthetics, in the broadest possible sense of that term. So aesthetics is first philosophy.

That’s what Oglesby doesn’t tell you. What she also doesn’t tell you—not explicitly—is how beauty fits into the picture.

In her account of beauty, Oglesby follows Shaviro in closely following Kant. The terms here are largely those of the “Analytic of the Beautiful.” Disinterestedness? Check. Non-cognitive? Indeed: “Beauty,” in Shaviro’s paraphrase, “cannot be subsumed under any concept. An aesthetic judgment is therefore singular and ungrounded.”


cites Alexander Nehamas by way of clarification. “Kant was right that the judgment of taste is not governed by concepts. That was not because the concept of the beautiful or the nature of the judgment is peculiar, but because, I want to suggest to you,

the judgment of taste is simply not a conclusion we draw from interacting with, describing, or interpreting works of art.

I want to turn our common picture around. The judgment of beauty is not the result of a mysterious inference on the basis of features of a work of art which we already know. It is a guess, a suspicion, a dim awareness that there is more in the work that it would be valuable to learn. […] But a guess is just that: unlike a conclusion, it obeys no principles; it is not governed by concepts. It goes beyond all the evidence, which cannot therefore justify it, and points to the future.60

It’s in attempting to extend the scope of that insight that the argument’s at its most tenuous. It “goes beyond all the evidence”: Beauty for Oglesby is the paradigm of aesthetics as first philosophy insofar as

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the status of aesthetic judgment as it applies to art, specifically, is generalized to stand for the (apparently, problematically) “singular and ungrounded” way in which things or objects or whatever—actual entities, to adapt Whitehead’s parlance—hang together.

That’s Oglesby’s gamble, anyway. The bulk of the work attempts to read the Whitehead-inflected treatment of Kant in the crucial first chapter of Shaviro’s *Without Criteria*—a draft of which can be found online—61—with Ruth Lorand’s *Aesthetic Order*, where beauty is theorized as a type of “lawless order.”62

So there you have it: a vision of a kind of order—on the order of the universe—without criteria and without law. As to its success or failure, I refer the interested reader to the text itself. The details don’t much matter here. As Whitehead says, that’s not where the action is.63 What I’d like to do instead, in

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63 What he actually says is, “It has been remarked that a system of philosophy is never refuted; it is only abandoned. The reason is that logical contradictions, except as temporary slips of the mind—plentiful, though temporary—are the most gratuitous of errors; and usually they are trivial. Thus, after criticism, systems do not exhibit mere illogicalities”: Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and
the space I have left, is briefly touch on a line of inquiry that concerns the project’s strong Kantian inheritance, and whose modification may affect its plausibility.

Specifically, I’d like to raise the issue of disinterestedness—as Nietzsche did, and with his very words: Kant, “instead of envisaging the aesthetic problem

from the point of view of the artist (the creator), considered art and the beautiful purely from that of the ‘spectator,’ and unconsciously introduced the ‘spectator’ into the concept ‘beautiful.’ It would not have been so bad if this ‘spectator’ had at least been sufficiently familiar to the philosophers of beauty—namely, as a great personal fact and experience, as an abundance of vivid authentic experiences, desires, surprises, and delights in the realm of the beautiful! But I fear the reverse has always been the case; and so they have offered us, from the beginning, definitions in which, as in Kant’s famous definition of the beautiful, a lack of any refined first-hand experience reposes in the shape of a fat worm of error. ‘That is beautiful,’ said Kant, ‘which gives us pleasure without interest.’ Without interest! Compare with this definition one framed by a genuine

‘spectator’ and artist—Stendhal, who once called the beautiful *une promesse de bonheur*. At any rate he rejected and repudiated the one point about the aesthetic condition which Kant had stressed: *le désintéressement*. Who is right, Kant or Stendhal?[^64]

Yet more than the fate of aesthetics hangs in the balance. Because as Gilles Deleuze has pointedly noted,[^65] since Kant, aesthetics has named a “wrenching” division: As Daniel W. Smith has aptly (and concisely) put it, “Aesthetics since Kant

has been haunted by a seemingly intractable dualism. On the one hand, aesthetics designates the theory of sensibility as the form of possible experience; on the other hand, it designates the theory of art as a reflection on real experience. The first is the objective element of sensation, which is conditioned by the *a priori* forms of space and time (the ‘Transcendental Aesthetic’ of the *Critique of Pure Reason*); the second is the subjec-


tive element of sensation, which is expressed in the feeling of pleasure and pain (the ‘Critique of Aesthetic Judgment’ in the Critique of Judgment). Deleuze argues that these two aspects of the theory of sensation (aesthetics) can be reunited only at the price of a radical recasting of the transcendental project as formulated by Kant, pushing it in the direction of what Schelling once called a ‘superior empiricism’; it is only when the conditions of experience in general become the genetic conditions of real experience that they can be reunited with the structures of works of art.66

Oglesby is close to Deleuze here, and so is her wager: aesthetics in the—truly—broadest possible sense of the term.

Aesthetics as first philosophy is a beautiful thing.

§ “The interior of the exterior”—that’s Michel Foucault’s beautiful phrase for the place of the madman aboard the ship of fools, “a prisoner in the midst of what is the freest, the openest of routes.”67 The interior of the exterior, or the outside: farther away than any external world, closer—nearer—than any internal world, as Deleuze says.68 “The inside as an operation of the outside,”69 “an inside which is merely the fold of the outside, as if the ship were a folding of the sea.”70

68 Deleuze, *Foucault*, 118.
69 Deleuze, *Foucault*, 97.
70 Deleuze, *Foucault*, 97.