ALEXANDER GOTTLIEB BAUMGARTEN AND CURRENT REFLECTIONS ON HIS THOUGHTS CONCERNING AESTHETICS

Daniela BLAHUTKOVÁ

Abstract: In recent years, we have been witnessing a certain resurgence of interest in the work of A. G. Baumgarten, an eighteenth-century German philosopher and founder of aesthetics as a science of sensible cognition, whose work has been received with ambiguity. The current revival of interest in his thought has been aided by the 2007 publication of a German translation of Baumgarten’s Aesthetica, and in 2014 by events marking 300 years since Baumgarten’s birth. While trying to indicate the general direction of current interpretation of Baumgarten, the contribution offers a brief review of Baumgarten’s project of aesthetics and his legacy.

Keywords: A. G. Baumgarten, German enlightenment, aesthetics

When looking at European thinking about aesthetics and its traditions, within the context of philosophical aesthetics, the Enlightenment Era seems to occupy a prominent position. One of the interesting projects of this time was the proposal of aesthetics as a new science. Its author was A. G. Baumgarten, a German rationalist philosopher. Why should we revisit his thoughts here and now? Among other things because in the second half of the eighteenth century, aesthetics managed to establish itself at universities in Central Europe, and this took place at least to some extent thanks to Baumgarten.

While his project of aesthetics as a science of sensible cognition still features in all compendia on the subject of aesthetics, Baumgarten is viewed as one of the thinkers belonging to the transitory period between Leibniz and Kant. The tendency to classify Baumgarten as a philosopher of an older generation is partly due to the fact that he wrote his scholarly works in Latin, but other factors – which will be mentioned shortly – also played a role. The nineteenth century, little more than just the title was known about Baumgarten’s opus magnum; the Aesthetica, published in 1750/1758, was not read or translated into modern languages. Only in the second half of the twentieth century we can observe some renewal of interest in Baumgarten. In 2007, the Aesthetica was finally translated in full into Baumgarten’s native language, German, and a more intensive research into his aesthetic and philosophical thoughts and their place within the history of these disciplines followed. This resurgence of interest was in 2014 further aided by efforts to mark 300 years since his birth. This is especially the case in German-speaking lands, but it should be noted that the first modern language into which the Aesthetica was translated in full, already at the end of the twentieth century, was Italian.

1 The obstacles which prevented the spread of Baumgarten’s ideas are summarized for instance in Tomáš Hlobil’s review of Dagmar Mirbach’s Latin – German edition of the Aesthetica (Hlobil 2009, p. 106–107).
Aesthetics is thus still coming to terms with Baumgarten. When we open the 1998 edition of the Oxford Encyclopedia of Aesthetics, we find characteristically divergent views regarding the significance of Baumgarten’s contribution to this discipline. In the ‘Baumgarten’ entry, Paul Guyer speaks of ‘his creation of a paradigm for understanding art that was profoundly influential in his own time and has continued to be so, although indirectly, down to present’. (Kelly, 1998, p. 227) In the entry ‘Origins of Aesthetics’, on the other hand, Paul Oskar Kristeller remarks that while ‘Baumgarten is famous for having coined the term aesthetics, but opinions differ as to whether he must be considered the founder of that discipline or what place he occupies in its history and development’ (Kelly, 1998, p. 425), and Gita May in her entry on French Aesthetics even describes Baumgarten as ‘a fairly obscure German philosopher with little impact on the subsequent development of aesthetics’. (Kelly, 1998, p. 229) Both of the more detailed entries comment on Baumgarten’s broad definition of aesthetics and its ambition to be a science of sensible cognition and a theory of art. Kristeller critically remarks that ‘as a theory of art, Baumgarten’s aesthetics was developed in terms of poetry and eloquence and takes all examples from literature’, while Guyer and Melzer summarise his importance by stating that ‘Baumgarten is the founder of aesthetic insofar as he first conceived a general theory of the arts as a separate philosophical discipline with a distinctive and well-defined place in the system of philosophy’. In this sense, he is also included among the predecessors of Immanuel Kant. (Kelly, 1998, p. 425)

Despite the abovementioned differences in assessments, the Encyclopedia of Aesthetics offers information which came to represent a certain standard in discussing Baumgarten and his work. In recent years, however, a number of scholars ventured beyond this ‘received wisdom’: for instance Stefanie Buchenau with her book on The Founding of Aesthetics in the German Enlightenment (Buchenau, 2013) or authors who gathered around Baumgartian anthologies which appeared in Germany in connection with Baumgarten’s anniversary in 2014.² Yet although the editors of one of these works, the anthology Schönes Denken, claim that research into Baumgarten is an on-going project, current research into Baumgarten tends to focus on some particular issues and move within certain contexts: considerable attention is paid to epistemological motivation of his aesthetic theory and linking Baumgarten’s aesthetics to the rhetorical and poetological tradition he works with. (Allerkamp and Mirbach, 2016,

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What image of Baumgarten as a thinker is emerging in the current research? Without aiming at an exhaustive portrait, let us try and, based on reading of mainly German scholars, present an outline of answers that seems to be emerging.

Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten (1714–1762) is known as a representative of eighteenth-century German rationalist philosophy. He attended the Royal Prussian University in Halle and in 1740, he was appointed professor of ‘Weltweisheit’ (‘world wisdom’) at the university in Frankfurt an der Oder. He was an excellent logician and he gained renown among his contemporaries as author of textbooks of metaphysics and ethics. Although he is currently known mainly for his aesthetic project, that is partly due to our historical perspective. The Aesthetica (1750/1758), his late, central work, was not favourably received at the time (and it remained unfinished). On the other hand, even before the publication of the Aesthetica, the new science was popularised by Baumgarten’s student Georg Friedrich Meier (1718–1777). Based on his studies with the young Baumgarten, Meier apparently gave course on aesthetics in Halle already in the 1740s. (Hlobil, 2011, p. 50) Unlike his teacher, Meier wrote in German and his Anfangsgründe aller schönen Künste und Wissenschaften (1748–1750) became better known than Baumgarten’s inaccessible Aesthetica. Since 1760s, lectures in aesthetics are starting to feature in the curricula of Austrian universities (beginning with Prague in 1763) (Hlobil, 2011, p. 47); Baumgarten’s influence was in all likelihood very indirect. Among his German contemporaries Baumgarten attracted divers critique, e.g. Herder, Mendelssohn or Kant (who’s claim in the Critique of the Power of Judgment that judgements of beauty are nor cognitive or ‘logical’ was a polemic against Baumgartian aesthetics). Schiller’s proposal of aesthetic education bears clear traces of Baumgarten’s influence.

In nineteenth-century aesthetics, Baumgarten was overlooked or seen as one of Kant’s predecessors (for instance by Robert Zimmermann). At the beginning of the twentieth century, a new edition of Aesthetica and Meditationes was published in Italy (dedicated to Benedetto Croce) (Baumgarten and Mirbach 2007, p. XXIII) and in 1932, Ernst Cassirer placed Baumgarten’s aesthetics within the context of development of German Enlightenment. Also his

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3 Tomáš Hlobil’s Výuka dobrého vkusu jako státní zájem. Počátky pražské univerzitní estetiky ve středoevropských souvislostech (1763–1805) [Teaching Good Taste as State Interest. Origins of Prague University Aesthetics Within Central European Context] offers insights into the curricula and courses of selected Austrian and German universities in the second half of the eighteenth century (only in Austria were chairs of aesthetics established, with Prag in prominent position, as Hlobil shows). This profound study analyses the inaugural lectures of the first Prague aesthetics scholars and compares them with their German contemporaries. It seems to permit certain considerations about how and to what extent was Baumgarten’s theory incorporated.

4 Cf. Mary J. Gregor (1983, p. 357–358). Gregor also refers to the passage in the Critique of Pure Reason (A21n–B36n), where Kant mentions ‘the abortive attempt (…) to bring the critical treatment of the beautiful under rational principles and so to raise its rules to the rank of a science’.
other writings and Susanne Langer’s cognitive aesthetics bear traces of Baumgartian inspirations.\(^5\) In the second half of the twentieth century, there appeared reprints but also translations of and comments on Baumgarten’s texts (in Germany mainly thanks to the Olms publishing house, later Meiner Verlag). These publications include selections from *Aesthetica* and we start seeing a gradual revisiting Baumgarten (by this time, scholars who edited, translated and commented on Baumgarten included for instance Hans R. Schweitzer, Ursula Franke, Francesco Piselli or Heinz Petzold).

The theme shared by most interpretations of recent decades is an effort to reconstruct Baumgarten’s aesthetic theory within a broader context of Baumgarten’s thought in general. Dagmar Mirbach, the German translator of his work, speaks of Baumgarten’s aesthetics’ ‘fragmentarische Einheit’, its ‘fragmentary unity’. (Baumgarten and Mirbach 2007, p. XII) Prompted by strong intertextual links, she added to her translation of the *Aesthetica* references to passages in Baumgarten’s *Metaphysics* and *Ethica philosophica*, while Constanze Peres plans to include in her German translation of the *Aesthetica* an even broader selection of texts.\(^6\)

Peres had recently published a number of studies dedicated to epistemological aspects of Baumgarten’s thought. Following other Baumgartian interpreters, she points out that the starting point of Baumgarten’s aesthetic theory is the Leibnizian notion of levels of cognition with continuous transitions from one to the next. In his early work *Meditations on Knowledge, Truth, and Ideas* (1684), Leibniz states that ‘knowledge is either obscure or clear, and again, clear knowledge is either confused or distinct, and distinct knowledge either inadequate or adequate...’. (Leibniz, 1989, p. 23)

The region between obscure and clear is thought of as the area of pre-rational experience. For instance, we know what is red, but can we explain it? If I have healthy sight, I know what is red but even so, I cannot list the features that characterise it, I cannot define it. This is what Leibniz calls clear and confused knowledge. In our context, it is relevant to note that in this context, he mentions painters and other artists who, when judging a work of art, clearly see whether it is good or not, without being able to give reasons that led them to that judgement.

From a Leibnizian perspective, this area is within the cognitive continuum lower, deficient. Baumgarten defines aesthetics as a science of sensible cognition,\(^7\) whereby the central

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\(^5\) Cf. further Buchenau (2013, p. 235) or Peres (2011, p. 27) who point out that Baumgartian view of art also resonates in the work of authors such as Nelson Goodman.

\(^6\) Cf. Peres (2011, p. 2); and updated information on the website of Wilhelm Fink Verlag.

\(^7\) *Ae* (§ 1) defines that ‘Aesthetics (the theory of the liberal arts, inferior gnoseology, the art of thinking beautifully, the art of the analogue of reason) is the science of sensible cognition.’
concept of ‘sensible cognition’ is related to the level of Leibnizian ‘clear and confused’; but Baumgarten introduces his own term ‘extensively clear’. As he views it, a representation is extensively clear when it consists of a number of qualitatively sensible features which in their complexity make sense. The horizon of distinct (or ‘intensively clear’) cognition is, in Baumgarten’s view, complementary rather than superior to the abovementioned ‘lower’ level of cognition. As Peres notes, the status of this kind of experience is expressed by the poetic metaphor of dawn found in Paragraph 7 of the Aesthetica (exnocte per auroram meridies): dawn is not merely the dim light of early morning that is about to be dispelled by the bright light of the day. The first light has its own charm. This hints at a lower, transitory status of sensitive cognition, but also emphasises its qualitative uniqueness. (Peres, 2011, p. 8)

Also Steffen Gross points out that in this way, Baumgarten relates the aesthetical to clarity, intentionally linking it to rationality; and in effect, he pluralizes the concept of rationality. Gross even uses here terms such as scientific and aesthetical rationality. Baumgarten further linked this area – for which he still had to invent terms that would describe it – with the concept of analogon rationis (‘what is similar to reason’).8

It should be noted, however, that Baumgarten introduces almost all of the basic terms of his conception (sensitive cognition, extensive clarity, episteme aesthetike) in his dissertation on the nature of poems (Meditationes philosophicae de nonnulis ad poema pertinentibus, 1735). At the foundation of Baumgarten’s aesthetics we find gnoseologia inferior, a rationalist theory about lower cognition. But the subject of sensible cognition is right from the beginning connected with the idea of cultivation and perfection, with the image of guiding the lower cognitive powers, whereby the area where sensitivity is found in its refined, perfected form is art.

It has often been noted that Baumgarten defines aesthetics as a science that is parallel to logic: just like logic guides the higher cognitive powers (the ratio in the narrow sense of the word), aesthetics should be the means of guiding the lower ones, the analogon rationis. Baumgarten outlines this approach already in his Meditations, which deal with poetry. In his view, poetic speech is sensitive since its constituents are sensitive representations. It is a perfect sensitive discourse (oratio sensitiva perfecta). Stefanie Buchenau in her study The Founding of Aesthetics in the German Enlightenment (2013), which is an extraordinary achievement within Baumgartian scholarship of recent years, claims, that Baumgarten transfers here the abovementioned Leibnizian categories ‘from the level of the conceptual to the wider level of

thought and speech’ (extensive clarity qualifies primarily oratio). (Buchenau, 2013, p. 127) This concept is used also later, in the *Aesthetica*. Buchenau further argues that what we find at the very heart of Baumgarten’s project is in fact a *logic of invention*: Baumgarten reacts to an Early Modern ‘shift of the category of invention from rhetoric to logic’ and develops a parallel theme of an artistic, poetic ‘logic’ of invention in a dialogue with older rhetoric traditions.9 According to this view, Baumgarten already in his *Meditations* assumes that ‘the poet and the philosopher stem from the fact that they think and reason differently (the perfection of poetry consists ‘in the poem’s manifestation of extensive rather than intensive clarity, or in its suggestion of a wealth of striking but densely packed imagery and ideas’; philosophy strives for intensive clarity or greater distinctness).10 This is also reflected in a distinction between an analysis and enlightenment as ‘two different types of creative “resolution” of concepts. (…) The action that allows the attainment of some degree of distinction in a concept is its “analysis”; the action that allows the attainment of some degree of clarity is its “elucidation”. (…) [L]ike analysis, “enlightenment” produces some form of argument or demonstrative order of elements. (…) [G]enerally, an argument can be characterized by the fact that it comprises a unity and includes a sufficient reason or theme. (…) To elucidate or “enlighten” a theme, the poet can use various types of order listed in the *Meditationes.*’ (Buchenau, 2013, p. 132)

Various interpreters of Baumgarten’s thought agree that when Baumgarten in his *Meditations* speaks of the structure of poetic thought, the order of poems, and poetical expression, he draws on inspiration from Ciceronian rhetoric. Buchenau shows that the context and rhetoric inspiration of the *Meditations* can also help us to better understand the *Aesthetica* and the categories which Baumgarten introduces and then carefully describes in this work.

In *Aesthetica*, Baumgarten ‘illuminates the original idea of extensive clarity as the basis of artistic beauty by developing the categories aesthetic richness (*ubertas*), magnitude or gravity (*magnitudo*), truth (*veritas*), clarity (*claritas*), and certainty (*persuasio, certitudo)*.12 It should be noted that the *Aesthetica* was originally supposed to include a theoretical and a practical part.

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9 Buchenau (2013, p. 117), here especially in relation to Francis Bacon. Generally speaking, her study emphasises the Wolffian foundations of Baumgarten’s thoughts and terminology and describes the links between Baumgarten’s philosophical, philological, and linguistic inspirations, moreover with references to contemporaries such as Bodmer and Breitinger or Gottsched. Buchenau is critical of viewing Wolff and Baumgarten within a context of a linear evolution extending from Leibniz to Kant, Herder and Hegel.


12 Guyer (in Kelly 1998, p. 227) mentions also the planned sixth chapter about *vita cognitionis*. Buchenau (2013, p. 139ff) translates *abundance, magnitude, truth, light, persuasio* and *vita*. 

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The theoretical aesthetics was to be divided in heuristics, methodology, and semiotics (in the background again the rhetoric pattern). ( Baumgarten and Petzold 1983, p. XLIII) From the three-part plan of theoretical aesthetics, Baumgarten almost completed only the first part, the heuristic one, where he explained the nature and the subject of a new science, aesthetics, and introduced system of aesthetic categories. Buchenau interprets them again within a context of complementary forms of invention (poetry and philosophy, sensibility and ratio, and aesthetics as ‘sister’ of logic). For instance, *persuasio* is defined by Baumgarten as follows: ‘The distinct kind of consciousness of truth is conviction, the indistinct and sensible kind is persuasion.’ (Ae §832) To be convincing within a logical horizon presupposes something akin to scientific certainty; *persuasio aesthetica* means something rather like credibility or plausibility. Baumgarten ‘emphasises that persuasion is a condition for the ‘life’ or practical efficacy of the discourse.’ (Buchenau, 2013, p. 144–145)

Having said that Baumgarten thought of aesthetics as both a theoretical and a practical discipline, let us also consider whom he credits with the ability of perfecting a sensible experience. In other words, who is the Baumgartian *felix aestheticus*? To whom does Baumgarten’s idea of cultivation of the aesthetical mind pertain and how was this process supposed to proceed? Buchenau recalls Baumgarten’s pre-Kantian belief in a compatibility of the idea of exercise and method with genius. (Buchenau, 2013, p. 149) Her entire study presents Baumgarten as a philosopher who kept developing Wolffian themes and a contemporary of Bodmer, Breitinger, and Gottsched (Wolffians whose main focus was on literary criticism). In this context she interprets Baumgarten’s foundation of a new science as inspired by older traditions and yet modern: Baumgarten assumes as certain natural state of sensible cognition (*ingenium*), and the possibility of exercising it (*eruditio*, the habit of beautiful thinking) and methodically guiding it (*theoria*). In the end, however, ‘[s]ince the rules need to be deduced from a higher principle, they constitute (...) also a scientia, *mathesis aesthetica.*’ (Buchenau, 2013, p. 150)

While Dagmar Mirbach in the introduction to her German translation of the *Aesthetica* (2007) claims that Baumgarten’s theory is most coherent and systematic, Stefanie Buchenau’s

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13 (...) as ‘the particular components that compose general beauty’ (Buchenau 2013, p. 139); Gregor (1983, p. 371–372) characterises them as ‘the universal aspects of beauty’ and ‘the artist’s six concerns’ (in relation to Ae §14: ‘The end of aesthetics is the sensible perfection of a cognition in itself (...) which is beauty.’).

14 Also Guyer characterises Baumgarten as ‘a major transmitter of Wolffianism to subsequent generations, while through his two works to aesthetics (...) he was also the major revisionist in the Wolffian tradition’ (in Kelly 1998, vol. I, p. 227).
analysis brings further supporting evidence\textsuperscript{15} gathered within a broader context of a study of Enlightenment. Other Baumgartian interpretations that also emphasise what Buchenau calls Baumgarten’s ‘rhetorical shift’ are found in the contributions to the \textit{Schönes Denken} anthology (e.g. those by G. Raulet and A. Haverkamp). It seems therefore that this is the direction in which at least some Baumgartian interpretations is heading. Nevertheless, this anthology also follows the direction taken by classical interpretations which emphasise the metaphysical framework of Baumgarten’s theory of knowledge, beauty, and creativity (e.g. Hans Adler or Constanze Peres).\textsuperscript{16} Other contributions consider Baumgarten’s thoughts on ethics and theory of knowledge beyond their relation to aesthetics.\textsuperscript{17} In some instances, Baumgarten is interpreted even in other contexts: for instance Wolfgang Welsch, who does not argue for Baumgarten’s importance, when speaking of the modern process of ‘epistemological aesthetisation’ (initiated by Immanuel Kant) claims with reference to Baumgarten that the new discipline of aesthetics from the very outset aimed at an ‘aesthetic re-interpretation of knowledge’. (Welsch, 1996, p. 79–81)

Nevertheless, from a broader perspective, one could say that Baumgarten is nowadays seen as synonymous with the kind of aesthetics that is perceived as a hothouse flower of protected recesses of university halls, rather artificial and marginal in comparison with aesthetic theories that have no need of the protection of academic grounds.\textsuperscript{18} Even so, however, it remains one of the coordinates of today’s rather tangled and labyrinthine discipline of aesthetics.

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\textsuperscript{15}To the systematical and ‘acroamatic’ character of Baumgarten’s writings cf. also Peres (in Allerkamp and Mirbach 2016, p. 89–116, and other publications) who works with the links to Baumgarten’s Metaphysica but also Sciagraphia encyclopaedae philosophicae, Philosophia generalis, Acroasis logica and other less studied writings (in Allerkamp and Mirbach 2016 cf. esp. p. 89–95).

\textsuperscript{16}Cf. Adler: ‘Was ist die ästhetische Wahrheit?’ (2016). Like Adler, Peres (2016, p. 112) notes that the core of the \textit{Aesthetica} is in the subject of aesthetic truth. A classic example of this approach is represented already by Gregor (1983), but it is also quite prominent in Mirbach’s commentary on her Latin – German edition of the \textit{Aesthetica} (2007) and in others.

\textsuperscript{17}For more on Baumgartian ethics, see for instance Clemens Schwaiger (in \textit{Schönes Denken} and \textit{Baumgarten-Studien}) as well as Baumgartian publications by Alexander Aichele.

\textsuperscript{18}This is how Baumgarten is described for instance in K. Ebeling’s contribution in the anthology \textit{Permanenz des Ästhetischen} (2009, p. 163–166).
Bibliography:

Mgr. Daniela Blahutková, Ph.D.
University of West Bohemia, Pilsen, Faculty of Philosophy and Art
Czech Republic
d.blahutkova@email.cz