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A RE-EVALUATION OF THE AESTHETICS OF
JEAN-BAPTISTE DUBOS AND GOTTHOLD EPHRAIM LESSING
IN LIGHT OF HISTORICAL CIRCUMSTANCES
OF THE UT PICTURA POESIS DEBATE

A THESIS
UNDER THE DIRECTION OF DR. HUGH WEST
PRESENTED TO
THE FACULTY OF THE DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY
THE UNIVERSITY OF RICHMOND

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE
HISTORY HONORS PROGRAM

BY
JOHN GRAYSON NICHOLS
1991

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I.

Horace did remark "ut pictura poesis," as in painting so poetry. But the rest of the pronouncement, rarely quoted, - "one work seizes your fancy if you stand close to it, another if you stand at a distance" - refers to how the arts can be viewed from similar angles, not that the arts are essentially created with the same purposes.¹ Yet, misreadings of that quotation began a history of debate over the qualities of painting and poetry. In particular the eighteenth century became a battleground over the ut pictura poesis formula. To the modern reader, this controversy may seem rather ridiculous. How could anyone believe that the visual aspects of painting resembled the abstract concepts of poetry? Yet this debate of over two hundred years ago created the foundation for various modern ways of thinking about art. This controversy set in motion a perpetual question over the limits, purposes, sources, and standards of artworks, and established a vocabulary to talk about these issues.

This thesis returns to that debate from a different perspective in hopes of revaluing certain ideas. Two texts from the early and latter points of the debate serve as the focus of the argument: Jean-Baptiste Dubos' Critical Reflections of Painting and Poetry (1719) and Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's Laocoon or On the Limits of Painting and Poetry (1766). What is significant about these works is that they begin with the same mimetic assumptions, and the same semiotic language, yet they

proceed to different evaluations of the arts: Dubos favors painting over poetry, Lessing just the opposite.

Most accounts of these two aesthetician's ideas privilege Lessing. Writing nearly fifty years later, he is given the praise of being more knowledgeable and thorough than Dubos. But this thesis argues that the merits of Dubos and Lessing are better understood by looking at not just their different aesthetic ideas, but also their personal and social circumstances. In that way, Dubos' contributions to aesthetics can be appreciated. And Lessing is freed from being merely a compiler of thought before him. Certainly, Lessing professes better knowledge of artistic creation and the limits on it. But Dubos is wiser in an area not touched by Lessing: the role of the public in the making and judging of art. This thesis returns to the ut pictura poesis debate not to study the progression of thought between Dubos and Lessing, but to show the uniqueness of their thought in relation to their historical context.

II.

Dubos and Lessing inherit a body of common assumptions and employ a common language when they grapple with the similarities and differences between painting and poetry. All art falls under the rules of mimesis in eighteenth century aesthetics. In mimetic theory, the nature and purpose of art is to imitate or represent reality. To achieve this imitation, art uses various signs - such as words or colors. Direct correspondence exists between the sign and that to which the sign refers, the

signified. Thus, imitation of reality in art is accomplished by the signs being able to directly represent reality. Semiotic theory, the theory of signs, was the language used in eighteenth century to understand how art represented reality. Dubos and Lessing readily subscribe to these notions of mimesis and semiotics in their evaluation of the arts.

Sign theory was not used exclusively in the eighteenth century to describe painting and poetry. Ever since Horace's words were taken out of context, various writers had used signs as a way of separating the two arts. Interestingly, in 105 A.D., Dion of Prusa arrives at many of the semiotic decisions made by writers in the eighteenth century. He points to the notion of the successive nature of poetic signs and the coexistent nature of painting's signs. Yet, the eighteenth century is unique for the widespread use of semiotic theory in the ut pictura poesis debate.² Based on those semiotic definitions, Dubos and Lessing conceive of a similar list of appropriate subject matter for each art form.

Lessing summarizes semiotics more concisely than Dubos. But Dubos was one of the first in the eighteenth century to use such terms and explain them.³ Thus, Dubos offers the better introduction of eighteenth century sign theory.

Concerning the art form of painting, Dubos remarks:

[Painting] does not employ artificial signs, as poetry but natural signs, by which it makes its imitations...⁴

And later he adds:

Painting makes uses of natural signs, the energy of which does not depend on education. They draw their force from the relation which nature herself has fixed between our organs and the external objects, in order to attend to our preservation.⁵

Dubos has painting being composed of natural signs, such as colors or figures. Natural signs are natural, Dubos explains, because they are not learned in society, but are inherently known by human beings, regardless of how uncivilized they are.

Painting's signs are the same as nature's. Color, perspective, shape, all exist in nature and are employed in painting. Looking at a painting's signs is like looking at nature's signs. Both affect the optical powers of humans, a defense mechanism created by nature. In poetry, however, the signs are arbitrary:

The most tender verses can affect us only by degrees, and by letting the several springs of our machine successively to work. Words must first excite those ideas, whereof they are only arbitrary signs. These ideas must be ranged afterwards in the imagination, and form pictures as move and engage us.⁶

Poetry's signs, or words, are symbols dependent on "education" in a civilized society to be understood. Moreover, the signs are not things we see in nature, but artificially constructed by culture. As a result, words and their meanings take a longer time to be recognized by the brain because they are learned. The colors in painting, however, register immediately in the brain because they are instinctively known through nature.

The meaning and images produced by words work successively. Words affect the reader not at once, but "by degrees." They must first excite ideas that then produce images in the brain.

Painting, on the other hand, produces images immediately. Signs in painting are coexistent, not successive. They appear all at once to the viewer of the canvas, or as Dubos puts it, the signs "make but one attack upon the soul."⁷

Lessing uses the same semiotic language as Dubos. "The symbols of poetry are not only successive but are also arbitrary," he states.⁸ And painting's signs are "figures and colors in space" or natural signs in coexistent relation.⁹ From this common point Dubos and Lessing conceive of a similar list of subjects that are appropriate for the imitations of art.

Both Dubos and Lessing see painting presenting some subjects better than poetry. Addressing the depiction of the human body in painting and poetry, Dubos says:

We can easily conceive, how a painter by the help of age, sex, country, profession, and temperament, varies the affliction of those who are present at the death of Germanicus [by Poussin]; but it is difficult to comprehend how an epic poet, for example, can embellish his poem with this variety, without loading it with descriptions, that must render his work heavy and disagreeable.¹⁰

Lessing makes the same point. In poetry, "the detailed depictions of physical objects...have always been recognized by the best critics as being pieces of pedantic trifling."¹¹ Complex descriptions of human figures, or bodies with visible qualities in Lessing's definition, are best depicted in painting. Painting, with its coexistent signs can present many of the elements at once without belaboring the viewer. Yet, if heavy description is attempted in poetry, needless and trifling detail results. The

successive signs of poetry drag out the description for the reader.

The differences between description in painting and poetry lead Lessing to announce quite succinctly in 1766:

I reason thus: if it is true that in its imitation painting uses completely different means or signs than does poetry, namely figures and colors in space rather than articulated sounds in time, and if these signs must indisputably bear a suitable relation to the thing signified, then signs existing in space can express only objects whose wholes or parts coexist, while signs that follow one another can express only objects whose wholes or parts are consecutive.¹²

Lessing makes clear that the nature of signs determines what those signs should imitate. Painting, with its co-existent signs in space, should show visible bodies which take up space. The successive signs of poetry, which occur over time, are suited for actions - events that take place over time.

In regard to actions, both Dubos and Lessing agree that painting expresses a single moment, while poetry can present a succession. Using a scene from the Iliad, Lessing states that:

The artist [painter] who executes this subject cannot make use of more than one single moment at one time: either the moment of accusation, or the examination of witnesses, of the passing of judgments...¹³

And the poet has:

The liberty to extend his description over that which preceded and that which followed the single moment represented in the work of art.¹⁴

Dubos announces the same thing: The picture when it "represents

an action, shows only an instant of its duration."¹⁵ Again, Dubos says what Lessing attributes to sign theory. The painting is limited to the moment because its signs are coexistent; the signs present themselves to the viewer in a single moment. Yet, the poem, Dubos says, "describes all the remarkable incidents of the action it treats of, and that which precedes..."¹⁶ The successive signs of poetry can show the various stages of events over time because the poetic signs are seen and understood in the mind over time and not in an instant.

III.

Dubos and Lessing sound very similar. How, then, can their eventual differences on painting and poetry be explained? One answer is the larger theoretical context in which they employ the semiotic language. Adopting other aesthetic criteria, Dubos and Lessing define more precisely their evaluation of painting and poetry. The concepts of beauty, imagination and audience response enter as their other theoretical considerations. These differences in approaching the ut pictura poesis debate explain their varying evaluations of painting and poetry. Dubos favors painting by appealing to audience concerns. Lessing prefers poetry while considering beauty and imagination. Yet, even after these differences, the two aestheticians arrive at a similarity in their evaluations. Both Dubos and Lessing eventually value theatre over both painting and poetry.

Dubos' aesthetic centers around the nature of the audience member. "The greatest of wants of man is to have his mind

incessantly occupied," Dubos states.¹⁷ Human beings search for pleasurable events that will excite their passions. Yet not all these experiences are good; most are rather harmful. Dubos wants art to allow people to experience pleasurable events without harmful side-effects:

Would it not be a noble attempt of art to endeavour to separate the dismal consequences of our passions from the bewitching pleasure we receive in indulging in them?¹⁸

Art can do this, Dubos reasons, by imitating events in reality that excite the passions, that give pleasure. He remarks:

In other terms, the copy of the object ought to stir up within us a copy of the passion which the object itself would have excited.¹⁹

The emotion aroused by art is not real, but a weaker copy of the real emotion that would result from the real object. Taking his cue from Aristotle, Dubos believes that all art is imitation. Just as an artwork imitates a real object, so do the aesthetic feelings aroused imitate the real emotions one would have. The imitations of art do not affect the mind or the reason. The mind is always aware that an imitation is being viewed. It is only the senses that are temporarily fooled, in order for them to be excited. Thus art offers an emotional outlet to the audience, a way to experience pleasure without the ill side-effects.

This principle - that the best art form is the one that excites the passions most often and most effectively - leads Dubos to declare painting better than poetry. The natural signs of painting, automatically known and coexistent, affect the audience quicker and more forcefully than the symbols of poetry,

which require education and render their effect over time. Poetic signs diminish in strength as the ideas are successively understood in the mind. But the immediacy of painting's natural signs make a stronger first impression on the viewer.

While Lessing accepts the principle that painting affects the mind quicker than poetic signs do, his evaluation of the arts does not favor painting. Unlike Dubos, he insists that a work of art must meet a standard of beauty. And, instead of a theory of sensual excitation, Lessing suggests a theory where the signs excite the imagination. These two principles give poetry the edge over painting.

Beauty enters Lessing's ideas through his analysis of Greek art. For the Greeks, attainment of the beautiful was the object of all the arts. Depiction of beautiful objects gave the most pleasure. In his own time, Lessing bewails the precedence truth and expression had taken over beauty in his time.²⁰ Dubos' doctrine, that art should express pleasurable events, gathered support as a greater purpose for art than beauty.²¹ Yet Lessing wishes to restore beauty to its proper place over truth and expression. In his discussion of the Laocoon group, Lessing praises the sculptor for containing the horror of the event, or the truth, in order to render the sculpture beautiful: "The demands of beauty could not be reconciled with the pain in all its disfiguring violence, so it had to be reduced."²² In the Greeks, Lessing found support for his standard of beauty.

The concept of beauty gives poetry more scope than painting.

By associating painting with the depiction of beautiful natural objects, especially human figures, Lessing limits the realm of subjects for the visual arts. A painter must depict "personified abstractions which must always retain the same characteristics if they are to be recognized."²³ Poets are free, however, from such limiting physical descriptions and may indulge in discussing the variety of moods and thoughts of their subjects. Discussing the depiction of Venus by sculptors and poets, Lessing remarks:

To the sculptor, Venus is simply Love; hence he must give her all the modest beauty and all the graceful charm which delight us in an object we love and which we therefore associate with our abstract conception of love. The slightest deviation from this ideal makes its form unrecognizable to us...To the poet, on the other hand, Venus is, to be sure, Love, but she is also the goddess of love who has...her own individual personality.²⁴

Sculptors are limited to showing the concept of "love" in a bodily form recognizable to people. Poets, however, are not limited by the physicality, but explore the various types of "love". Although, Dubos makes mention of this aspect of expression as well - "Poets can express several of our thoughts and sentiments, which a painter cannot represent..."²⁵ - it is not under the principles of beauty and imagination.

Dubos' ideas focus on art affecting the senses. Lessing wishes to stir the imagination: "...that which we find beautiful in a work of art is beautiful not to our eyes but to our imagination through our eyes."²⁶ For Dubos, the mind is never assaulted by the imitation. It is the "soul" that art affects,

the psychological state of mind in relation to the artwork. But for Lessing, the signs of the art are directly created in the mind of the viewer. While giving painting its due, this concept gives new scope to poetry: painting best depicts beautiful human figures to the imagination, but poetry best creates ideas in the imagination.

Although in the Laocoon Lessing spends more time describing the freedom of poetry over painting, nowhere does he announce that poetry excites the imagination more than poetry. Yet, in a letter written to his friend Nicolai in 1769 concerning the continuation of his ideas in the Laocoon, Lessing suggests just this. Lessing agrees with Dubos about the power of natural signs over arbitrary ones. What Lessing needs is a way for poetry to change its arbitrary signs to natural signs. That way, the liberty of poetry, because of its ability not to be limited by physical depiction as painting is, would be joined with the power of natural signs. Lessing suggests that one art form accomplishes this act of transformation:

The highest kind of poetry is one that turns the arbitrary signs wholly into natural signs. Now that is dramatic poetry, for in drama the words cease to be arbitrary signs, and become the natural signs of arbitrary things.²⁷

On the stage, the spoken word of the actors resembles the spoken word of real life conversation. Add to this such poetic conventions of metaphors, and onomatopoeia, and the imagination is aroused by the direct, natural clarity of ideas. Dramatic poetry surpasses painting as it is freed of physical description

and has the immediacy and force of natural signs.

Although Dubos makes similar statements about theatre, he does not arrive at the appraisal of drama from the same route as Lessing. Dubos' and Lessing's notions on theatre point to their essential differences in their analysis of the arts. Dubos' clearest exposition on theatre comes in a discussion of why painting never moves the viewer to cry, while tragedy usually does. In the theatre, the dramatic poet:

...presents us successively with fifty pictures, as it were, which lead us gradually to that excessive emotion, which commands our tears. Forty scenes therefore of a tragedy ought naturally to move us more, than one single scene drawn in a picture. A picture does not even represent more than one instant of a scene. Wherefore an entire poem affects us more than a picture; tho' the latter would move us more than a single scene representing the same event, were it to be detached from the rest and read without having seen any of the preceding scenes.²⁸

Dubos' theatre offers in reverse what Lessing states. For Lessing, poetic arbitrary signs convert to the naturalness of the signs that give painting its power. For Dubos, theatre presents a succession of paintings that can show the various actions of an event like poetry can do with its successive signs. Theatre affects the audience more than a single painting or single poem will do.

But Dubos arrives at this conclusion from a different set of concerns than Lessing. Lessing favors the poetry of the speeches in theatre, while Dubos leans towards the visual elements. Dubos' description of theatre is as a succession of pictures, not

a series of poetic verses as Lessing would suggest. Dubos' thoughts on the importance of poetic signs in theatre are vague, while the signs take precedence in Lessing. The arbitrary signs stay arbitrary signs in Dubos' description of theatre. Their power, joined with the visual aspects of theatre, create a new form of expression stronger than painting and poetry separately. In Lessing, the arbitrary signs of poetry convert in theatre to natural ones by means of being spoken, not necessarily joined to visual action. And that new form of poetry, dramatic poetry, surpasses the limits of painting and poetry.

IV.

So the different theoretical ideas about the nature and purpose of art produced a different evaluation of the arts for Dubos and Lessing. But a fair account of their ideas requires going beyond the differing theoretical points to an understanding of the historical context of each writer. The circumstances of when they wrote must be described and compared. Not to reduce Dubos and Lessing to the status of being products of their age, an account of their social context heightens the modern reader's understanding of the ut pictura poesis debate. Moreover, it aids in seeing art and theory as part of a historical process, and not removed from the concerns of the public and national culture.

Dubos' Critical Reflections were written at a time of expansion of who could write about art and how. The essay, which had served as the main form of written opinion, gave way to catalogues, reflections, treatises, discourses and histories, all

dealing with various aspects of art. Along with an expansion of possible forms came an increased population of writers. No longer were opinions of art restricted to scholars. Artists, critics, and learned gentlemen, like Dubos, flooded the market with their thoughts.

The Parisian public read as much as they could of these works. After all, these new forms were meant for them; they were "a public of amateurs and connoisseurs for whom pedantism, obscurity, and learned jargon were considered bad taste."²⁹ They were the sophisticates of Paris, the capital of a formidable political nation in Europe, a cosmopolitan city that offered a variety of entertainment in bookshops, galleries and theatres. And the various new styles put forth their ideas in ways acceptable to this type of Parisian reading public.

Dubos' Critical Reflections display these influences. The Reflections do not analyze perspective in paintings, or discuss various styles of acting. Dubos never systematically, like Lessing, addresses the various arts. Dubos rambles from historical painting to pantomime to Roman tragedy. Yet, he attracted a wide audience. His "ramblings" were reprinted five times, and translated into English in 1740. He also was inducted into the Academie Francaise in 1720, and made a perpetual secretary in 1721.³⁰ Voltaire said of the work that

All artists read with profit his [Dubos'] Reflections on poetry, painting and music. It is the most useful book on these matters which has ever been written in any of the European nations. What makes it a good work is that there are few errors and many true,

new, and profound thoughts. It is not a methodical book; but the author thinks and makes us think. Yet, he knew no music, was never capable of writing verses, and possessed not a single painting; but he had read, seen, heard, and thought much.³¹

Dubos was not an artist. He was a diplomat, and a historian of sorts. But primarily he was a man of taste. He had visited and stayed in the major European centers on his diplomatic journeys, and observed cultural life firsthand. Dubos' Critical Reflections contain his international observations as an audience member to be read by audience members. It is this public, not the critic nor the artist, who determines the importance of a work of art. As Dubos states, "The pit, without knowing the rules of dramatic poetry, forms as good a judgement of theatrical pieces, as those that belong to the profession."³² Art is meant for the audience and must direct its purposes to that group's pleasure. Dubos' rules of art are for the pleasure of those who see art, not those who create it.

Writing nearly fifty years later in Prussia, Lessing has concerns in mind much unlike Dubos'. Lessing wrote in Hamburg, Breslau and Wolfenbuttel, not exactly cities of the stature of Paris.³³ The German states had no such centralized system for the creation of entertainment as the capital of France had. Thus Lessing writes in an area without a public conscious of art and styles, or a political state that could fund large artistic ventures. Instead of the variety of writing styles that was available for Dubos' opinions, Lessing had really only one form, that of scholarly research. For though Lessing does acknowledge

the existence of an audience, it is only a vague, abstract term. Lessing did not write for a large body of sophisticates as Dubos did. Thus, while Dubos could turn his theory to the concerns of the public, Lessing had to find an alternative source of inspiration.

Lessing found this in the Greeks and in his own artistic skills as a playwright. Lessing turns to the Greeks not just because they have a theory of beauty attractive to him, but because the Greeks supply him with a vision of community and political stability that the German political culture lacked. Moreover, the Greek ideals offer Lessing the chance to overturn French theories that dominate artistic creation in the German states.³⁴ It is also not surprising that Lessing would eventually label dramatic poetry as the most direct means of stirring the imagination. Lessing is a playwright. He had studied dramatic composition in Leipzig. And, after the writing of the Laocoon he went on to Hamburg to write and review plays. Thus, the spectator experience of Dubos leads him to suggest a theory of art based on audience pleasure. Lessing, removed from the audience experience both as playwright and as a writer in smaller German cities than Paris, offers a theory based on more scholarly and personal artistic concerns, namely the influence of the Greeks and theatre.

V.

Putting the ideas of Dubos and Lessing in a historical context reveals something often brushed aside in general accounts

of the history of aesthetics: the unique achievements of Jean-Baptiste Dubos. His ideas of audience evaluation of art, or taste, show him to be not only an important observer of his own culture's views, but also a progressive thinker, relevant to modern critical thinking. Unlike Lessing who held that taste was universal, Dubos felt that judgment of art depends on certain historical circumstances. For the traveller of Europe and the inhabitant of the cosmopolitan Paris, a theory of cultural differences is not surprising for Dubos. Taste is intimately bound to time, culture and language. Even the audience member's age, education, and climate affect how art is judged. This theory of the relativity of taste not only surpasses the knowledge Lessing had on the subject, but allows the modern reader a common ground for understanding the issues of the ut pictura poesis in the eighteenth century. Dubos' eighteenth century views of taste resemble modern evaluations of art where cultural and personal influences, not universal standards, serve as fundamental concepts.

While it is important to study the theoretical assumptions of Dubos and Lessing on painting and poetry, the placing of these men in a historical context does not reveal a direct progression of thought, where Lessing proclaims truths that Dubos merely hinted at. Instead, the modern reader has the opportunity to see the richness of thought that both men have. And in regards to Dubos, the modern reader is given a view of an aesthetician who not only influenced the eighteenth century, but helped to lay the foundation for twentieth century thought on aesthetics.

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