

The Experience of Beauty in the Middle Ages

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The work of Mary Carruthers is well known to students of medieval culture. Her *Book of Memory* charted discussions of memory from antiquity to the late Middle Ages, treading in the footsteps of Frances Yates in arguing that memory was not just another concept in the minds of medieval writers, but a conceptual motor for the organisation and motivation of thought. In her later work, *The Craft of Thought*, Carruthers applied her thesis to monastic writing from late antiquity and the early Middle Ages, while also expanding her conclusions to touch on the composition of visual as well as literary culture. It is this expansion which brought her to the attention of historians of medieval art, a field in which discussions of memory and rhetoric are now, due to Carruthers' influence, increasingly common. This move from the literary to the visual in general has been supported by a collection of essays, edited by Carruthers, which takes her analysis of rhetoric and applies it successively to music, architecture, sculpture, and so on, with each chapter under the aegis of an appropriate expert.⁽¹⁾ This new book, however, essentially comprises several good essays on philology disappointingly bound together by conservative polemic and confused statements on aesthetics.

The book contains a brief introduction and six interrelated essays. The first argues that medieval art was a site of intellectually productive 'play', in opposition to an arguably dominant view that medieval art was merely dogmatic and descriptive. The second attempts to outline a medieval theory of style, arguing that the terms of stylistic description were taken from the Roman discussion of rhetoric. The third and fourth chapters focus on the concept of taste, first in terms of the sensory aspects of bitterness and sweetness, and how these terms could be variously interpreted, and then attempting to follow through the literalness of 'taste' into the concept of taste in relation to style. The penultimate essay uses a similar approach to

emphasise the importance of variety (*varietas*) in early Christian art, and the last essay finally rests on the concept of beauty, arguing that the medieval notion of beauty was much more specific than the modern, focussing as it did on ideas of surface and stylistic opposition.

Carruthers has a talent for shedding new light on old texts, ones that seem so familiar as to warrant no further inspection. The better, more historical and interesting observations are of the kind she makes of the noun *honestus*, a word which she shows cannot be translated simply as 'honest', but is more like 'decorum', a word which communicates a visual suitability: 'Honestus' is an instance of a word that starts out as a social and ethical category, and is then extended additionally to style. It travelled an opposite path to 'sweetness' and to many other common antique and medieval words to stylistic effect' (p. 118). Similarly, Carruthers' close readings of the writings of Bernard of Clairvaux – of his invective against monstrous sculpture (pp. 146–50), and of his sermon on the Song of Songs (especially p. 91) – are diligent and historical. She shows that knowledge of classical rhetoric, its techniques and its discourse, was amply drawn on by the elite writers of the 12th century.

My criticism of this book, however, is political. Carruthers, for the most part, attempts to describe how a selection of medieval and antique writers understood their own reactions to human artefacts. The theory she outlines is Aristotelian and, by the standards of today, elitist and reactionary. It is entirely understandable that a historian would want to remain uncritical of writers dead for a millennium – but this is not Carruthers' position. Instead, she weaves her own assent with this aesthetic understanding into the description of its medieval expression. This is a problem in so far as that by allying her intellectual position with the thinkers she is studying, she neglects not only to properly understand the positions of the other scholars, but also the full historical meaning of the texts themselves.

Carruthers attempts to situate herself as the wise moderate in an academic world gone wrong, aiming her bow in turn at modernists, Marxists, romantics and post-modernists. Searching for Aristotelian moderacy, she seems to place on one side those who have interpreted medieval art as constrictive and unfree, on the other those who have been too free with their interpretation, and thus driven interpretation itself into extinction. Thus on the one side, as she states quite clearly in her opening, are the Christian right, which she illustrates using the example of the Catholic League of America's reaction to Chris Ofili's Brooklyn Museum exhibition in 1999. As part of a larger web of what she argues are overly theologised interpretations, she associates the intellectual historian Eduard de Bruyne – 'and his disciple, Umberto Eco' (p. 8) – with the popular moralism of the League. She argues that De Bruyne and others have popularised a false perception of medieval art, which emphasises it as 'offering specific moral lessons or models for moral behaviour' (p. 201). She accurately describes them as the moralists who have influenced popular interpretations of medieval art as simply an instrument of the church.

This is not a new interpretation of the historiography, but nonetheless Carruthers objects to those who have attempted to provide a different path. Thus Carruthers describes Bakhtin's analysis of as an 'essentially Romantic (as well as Marxist) idea' (p. 28). For Carruthers, Romanticism means the primacy of authorial intention, and the Marxist version of this is to believe in the lower classes' ability for expression. The Marxist 'supposes a wall of separation' between the serious world of the cleric and the playful world of artisans, thus banishing expression from the elite world. Suffocated under the Marxists' accusation that they are mere propagandists, Carruthers implies that the elite have also been constricted.⁽²⁾

Having conflated moralists and Marxists, Carruthers turns on modernists and post-modernists. In a surprising piece of polemic near the end, she takes aim first at Romanticism for over emphasising authorial intention, then at New Criticism for banishing the author, and then against an un-named body of scholars who have declared the artefact 'mute', 'so, with both author and artefact deprived of their own aesthetic intention, the critic reigned supreme. The other two participants in the old rhetorical triad were silenced' (p. 171). The author and her work have been disregarded completely.⁽³⁾

The result of all this rejection of interpreters of texts has unfortunate consequences, exemplified in Carruthers' gloss on a letter by St Augustine. In the early fifth century, the peasantry of North Africa

attempted to throw off the yoke of Imperial, Christian rule.⁽⁴⁾ Seeing the rioters in the streets, tearing at the fabric of his polity, the Imperial governor wrote to the bishop of the diocese, requesting that the bishop appeal to the Emperor for a dispensation for the town, so that the people be allowed to practice their own religion. The bishop was St Augustine, who not only refused the request, but took the time to write a long, barbed and sarcastic response to the governor. Carruthers comes to the defence of the reverend bishop, praising the ‘verbal plays of a master of his craft’, the style in which he refused to pardon the ‘arsonous, murderous mob’ (p. 66). These are her own words – and in the spirit of play, no doubt. But it ignores the power relations between Augustine’s text, its intended audience, and those it was targeting – relations which remain at play, as it were, throughout the world. Carruthers describes Augustine’s invective as a ‘virtuoso performance’; her glossing of the Latin lexicon is virtuosic at points as well. But it is perhaps worth remembering Adorno’s observation on virtuosity in music. ‘The virtuoso slaughters the piece of music in the name of the spellbound community as an act of atonement [...] in a concert, as in our dreams, the actors in the rites may exchange their roles. Frequently we may no longer know who is being sacrificed: the work, the virtuoso or ourselves.’⁽⁵⁾

This is what happens in the pages immediately following her praise of Augustine’s imperial wit, where Carruthers discusses ‘blackness’ (pp. 67–8). The Biblical line being parsed is ‘*nigra sum, sed formosa*’ – ‘I am black, but beautiful/shapely’, from the Song of Songs, and along with this text Carruthers also discusses Bernard of Clairvaux’s famous 12th-century commentary. In a comment typical of medieval attitudes to race, Bernard states that beautiful skin cannot be black, but instead blackness can only be beautiful in relation to white skin. When Bernard attempts to understand skin as a purely metaphorical, ‘blackened by the stain of human hardship’, Carruthers glosses his text: ‘that is how she is black and beautiful, which is the paradox of all human existence.’ Not once does Carruthers note that Bernard’s commentary is racialised, or that the Hebrew composer of the Song of Songs in all likelihood had skin which today would be considered black. There is not even a footnote for the reader concerned that there might be something racist about Carruthers’ omission of this discussion. If Carruthers has a readership who are concerned about racism, then it is the audience who she sacrifices here in her virtuosity.

Strangely, the best way I know to describe the error Carruthers displays is to remind her of the *performative* nature of speech acts, something which elsewhere in the book she claims to be not only aware of, but arguing for a greater understanding of. She describes a performative artwork as one that ‘seeks to persuade those it pleases to believe with confidence and trust’. Performance here seems to be a synonym for rhetoric in general, but this is not how the term is generally used. John Langshaw Austin coined the phrase ‘performative speech acts’ in his lectures, published in 1962, to classify those acts of speaking which perform the action they describe; this is the intellectual history of the term in English faculties.⁽⁶⁾ And this is what Carruthers does with the political context of the book: she performs the actions of exclusion and elitism merely by describing them uncritically.

The best example of this lack of awareness of performativity is in an anecdote in which Carruthers relates how she tried to get her students to perform a mock trial, but one student objected. Carruthers defends the intellectual game of the trial on the grounds that play is a useful site of free thought. But though Carruthers’ student may have been a spoil-sport (in that they interrupted the game), they were perhaps one with a better understanding of performative speech acts than that of the tutor, for a mock trial still announces a trial of some kind; it cannot help but bring the rule of law a little closer, to enact that which it purports simply to describe. I assume that Carruthers’ student objected to the act of having to defend incitement to riot, but Carruthers’ defence could easily swing the other way, justifying the training of students to ‘pretend’ that they are quelling the rioters. Indeed, a recent examination question from Eton College performed exactly that act.⁽⁷⁾ It is in a similar manner that Carruthers’ sycophantic description of St Augustine’s mocking of Nectarius and the North African rebels does not merely describe a situation, but itself mocks the underdogs. The silent assent which Carruthers gives to Bernard’s racism is equally performative, and partial.

Perhaps I will be accused of being a spoil-sport here, or for taking light hearted things too seriously. But the intellectual effects of this lack of reflexivity run deep. This becomes clearer, perhaps, in her attack on the ‘queer’. In a polemic again against overly-Christian, theological, moralising criticism – this time at the pen of

Emile Male rather than Eduard de Bruyne – Carruthers claims that the effects of ‘affective piety’ have remained with medievalists, even while the theologising itself has been left behind: ‘The explanations for medieval ‘emotionalism’ that are prevalent now remain insistently focused on the individual, oriented this time towards the psychology of the liminal and strange, the excessive, peculiar, and queer. In other words, to an even greater emphasis on individual affect and personal taste’ (p. 99). Carruthers’ rhetorical analysis, however, she claims to be more social, ‘for rhetoric is essentially social as sensory affect is individual’. This is simply confused. First, while a criticism could be levelled at some queer theorists that there is an undue focus on individual acts of performance, this certainly cannot be taken as a criticism of the field in its entirety. Indeed, queer studies emerged from a radical movement for the inclusion of a marginalised *social* group, not for the examination of individual characteristics. The term ‘queer’ itself does indeed stem from a social scientific psychologising, but one which queer studies has (successfully) reclaimed.

More importantly however, there is a confusion here between margins and minorities. Michael Camille’s *Image on the Edge*, the book which has still done the most to intervene with queerness into the history of medieval art, turned its readers’ attention to the margins of the books and the sexual and scatological images therein. Like Carruthers, Camille emphasised the prosaic and rhetorical, not the moralising and theological. But where they differ is that Camille understood that to be marginal is not the same as being in a minority. To focus on queer, feminine, black and ‘othered’ people is to refocus attention on the *majority* of experience. This is important, for understanding what happened in the Middle Ages requires understanding experience in its totality. To neglect – or worse, reject – experiences which do not conform to a dominant model is to also reject the possibility of understanding past experiences.

But Mary Carruthers’ topic is *not* the experience of beauty in the Middle Ages, but the experience of beauty as it was understood by an elite.⁽⁸⁾ This is perhaps self-evident, given the source material, but it is worth stating. I am not opposed to the study of Peter of Celle, Thomas Aquinas or Bernard of Clairvaux, or of Carruthers’ more esoteric sources, such as Bene of Florence. But the truth of these writings must be understood alongside their full context. Their experience is not ‘medieval experience’ in its totality.

Only once does Carruthers explicitly recognise that aesthetic judgements relate to social class. For most of the book, the question of ‘taste’ is subordinated to, and made concomitant with, the question of ‘style’. ‘Style’ is said by Carruthers to be equivalent to ‘persuasion’, the way in which an audience (an audience of ‘judges’, as she is keen to repeat) is brought to a ‘confident belief’ (pp. 13–15 and *passim*). Elsewhere however, she writes that ‘style’ is at heart about aptness, utility and decorum; it has a class character: ‘in this process of coming to a confident belief, it would be hard to overstate the role of class outlook, based in shared conventions, experiences, education, and habit’ (p. 119). So confident belief is itself part of a social environment, influenced by ideas of that which is apt and fitting. But what is the judge meant to be brought to a confident belief *in*? The only place where I can find an answer to this question is near to the end of the book, where a *tromp l’oeil* effect in the church of Saint-Savin is explained as being there ‘to persuade us to believe with confidence in the architectural suitability of this place, confirmed by the use of expected conventional tropes’ (p. 190). But she has already stated that persuasion happens through aptness, through conventions. Thus, bizarrely, for Carruthers style is the way an object persuades us that it is the kind of object which can persuade us.

Carruthers’ argument on style is, thus, ultimately an argument about style as something you might *have*, rather than the distinction between styles. She does not examine how the differentiation of styles operates, or developed. The argument concerning ‘variety’ (*varietas*), for this reason, falls flat – for the very taste describing objects as having *varietas*, in Carruthers’ view was, in the main, the ecumenical nature of the early Christian church – but this variety is then trumped by the singular dominance of ‘rhetoric’, of *appropriateness*, in the minds of the Carruthers’ elected writers. I cannot help but wonder what the non-Christian rebels of North Africa would have thought of their masters’ panegyrics to ‘variety’.

Why does Carruthers make this argument? Why argue that the Christian Middle Ages was a time of sweetness, moderacy and rhetoric? Carruthers highlights this aspect of the world because it matches her own: a well spoken, non-religious (but not irreligious) academy, where an elite (believe they) speak well

because they live well. Despite constantly flitting between her description of medieval texts and her own truisms, it is clear that the Aristotelian ‘virtue based ethics’ of her favourite medieval writers is also the system of ethics to which she holds (p. 57, n. 17).

‘Virtue ethics’ is the name used by contemporary philosophers (such as Elizabeth Anscombe, Phillipa Foot and John McDowell) for a broadly Aristotelian approach to ethics. In contrast to Kantian and utilitarian ethics, where the focus is on the transcendental rationality of action, and on the relative goodness of states of affairs, respectively, ‘virtue ethics’ asks what it is for human beings to flourish, to fulfil their human nature. However, ‘nature’ is not conceived as brutally given, in opposition to the cultural, social, or political. Rather, it is argued that it is in the nature of humans to acquire, in the course of their upbringing and socialisation, something which becomes ‘second nature’ to them, a conceptual framework which allows them to see reasons for acting beyond the merely ‘animal’ needs of survival. The correct upbringing can create the virtuous person, who by his nature sees and responds to the correct reasons for acting in the world.

The obvious criticism of Aristotle himself – to which any Aristotelian must respond – is that the virtuous human was, for him, a man, and a man of a particular class, acting on the values of that class. For instance, Aristotle claims that it would be wrong to treat a woman or slave as a free citizen of Athens. The necessity for the historical situation of an ethos to be recognised and reflected on was a central component of Hegel’s modification of Aristotle’s approach.

Carruthers does claim that there is a class outlook to virtue ethics – but only as a way of describing the upbringing (*habitus*, perhaps) which creates the ‘second nature’ of the virtuous. But Carruthers does not answer the criticism that virtue ethics – in its complacent Aristotelian form – is nothing but the mind spreading itself on the world, the virtuous person (or a virtuous class) seeing reasons everywhere which they themselves have put there. Thus she implicitly admits that ethics comes from a particular class – with rhetoric as its expression – without any critique of the way in which that class has successfully created the world in its own image.

It is not just the elitism of this argument which bothers me; it also fails to address properly the situation and aesthetics of medieval writers, including the elite writers Carruthers favours. For the very philosophy which prevented Aquinas from being able to comment on the totality of experiences in his own time is the same philosophy which prevents Carruthers from describing medieval experience in its totality – including Aquinas’ experience of the world. In other words, the living philosophical basis to Carruthers’ historical writing, hidden behind the historical philosophy of the authors she cites, cannot truthfully reflect even on those authors themselves.

Notes

1. M. Carruthers, *The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture* (Cambridge, 1990); M. Carruthers, *The Craft of Thought: Meditation, Rhetoric, and the Making of Images, 400–1200* (Cambridge, 2000); *Rhetoric beyond Words: Delight and Persuasion in the Arts of the Middle Ages*, ed. M. Carruthers (Cambridge, 2010). [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. It is worth noting that this is the same trick as played by Karl Popper, whereby the Marxists are accused of having perpetrated the same sin as those they oppose. [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. I stress this distinction between freedom and unfreedom – something which Carruthers does not herself express – because I think it again signals the influence of Popper. Ernst Gombrich was of course the art historian who managed to turn Popper’s politics into an aesthetics, deployed against the world of critical theory which surrounded him. Carruthers, too, I feel, has attempted to write a book on aesthetic theory without any interest in that other side of the Warburgian tradition, that which is closer to what became the Frankfurt School. She does not repudiate the aesthetic theories of the critical theorists – she simply ignores them. [Back to \(3\)](#)
4. N. Wood, ‘African peasant terrorism and Augustine’s political thought’, in *History from Below: Studies in Popular Protest and Popular Ideology in Honour of George Rude*

- , ed. Frederick Krantz (Montreal, 1985), pp. 279–99, especially p. 289: ‘An examination of [Augustine’s] life and political thought attests that he was a leading intellectual agent of class hegemony’.[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. Adorno, 'The natural history of the theatre', in *Quasi Una Fantasia: Essays on Modern Music* (1963), p. 66.[Back to \(5\)](#)
 6. J. L. Austen, *How To Do Things With Words* (Oxford, 1962). Judith Butler's important and influential appropriation of this term in the 1990s related the construction of speech to the construction of gender and identity in general. J. Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (Abingdon, 1990), especially p. 173.[Back to \(6\)](#)
 7. General Paper 1, 2011, Question 1 (c): ‘The year is 2040. There have been riots in the streets of London [...] the Government has deployed the Army to curb the protest [...] You are the Prime Minister. Write the script for a speech to be broadcast to the nation in which you explain why employing the Army against violent protesters was the only option available to you and one which was both *necessary* and *moral*’. <<http://www.etoncollege.com/KSpapers.aspx> [2]> [accessed 8 July 2013].[Back to \(7\)](#)
 8. Echoing the preamble to the *Oxford-Warburg Studies*: ‘The emphasis of the series is on elite rather than popular culture’. p. i.[Back to \(8\)](#)
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