

## BOOK REVIEW

### **The British Aesthetic Tradition: From Shaftesbury to Wittgenstein, by Timothy M. Costelloe**

Cambridge University Press, 2013. x + 350 pp. \$34.99 paperback.

Reviewed by Kathrine Cuccuru

At a time when Anglo-American analytic philosophy is holding a microscope over the complex issues of aesthetics, it is refreshing to find Timothy M. Costelloe's telescope taking in the expanse of the intellectual history that has brought the field to its current point. In *The British Aesthetic Tradition: From Shaftesbury to Wittgenstein*, Costelloe strives not simply to gaze upon long dead stars, but to pull into focus a continuity across these seemingly distant, individual lights, in order to reflect what he considers to be 'a coherent and unified view of the tradition of British "philosophical aesthetics"' (p. ix).

Costelloe aims to trace a theoretical lineage across 'original and noteworthy' contributions to the field of aesthetics, which he defines as, the 'identifiable subdiscipline of philosophy concerned with the nature and expression of beauty and the fine arts' (p. 1). Significantly, he proposes that we delineate a distinctive 'tradition' originating in 18th-century Britain and suitably termed 'British'. This is no mean feat. Costelloe's history encompasses three eventful centuries of intellectual development, and by including Wittgenstein and concluding in America, his broad sense of Britishness—not unwisely—goes beyond the strictly Anglophone or merely geographical. To give the headlines: he brings together weighty and diverse discussions on the aes-

thetic categories of beauty, sublimity, and the (now mostly ignored) picturesque, along with heated and involved debates on the standard of taste, the paradox of tragedy, genius, criticism, art and morality, and the definition of art; while throughout making clear the important developmental links between theoretical extremes and oppositions.

This ambitious task is underpinned by Costelloe's intelligent organisation. The book's main parts correspond with three defining ages: 'The Age of Taste', 'The Age of Romanticism', and 'The Age of Analysis', which approximate the 18th-, 19th-, and 20th-centuries, respectively. Its eight chapters are divided thematically, with their sub-divisions focusing on individual thinkers in relation to recurring themes and ideas, and with judicious emphasis on thematic ordering over a strict chronology of thinkers—giving the book the advantage of being productively readable either narratively or piecemeal.

Moreover, Costelloe's selection of individual thinkers is a largely discerning mix of philosophers and non-philosophers, both expected and unexpected, known and lesser-known, or forgotten. Of course, the well-known names from philosophy include Hutcheson, Hume, Burke, and Collingwood, to name a few. But also rightly included are philosophers not usually associated with the history of aesthetics, such as John Stuart Mill, along with the lesser-known but important Alexander Gerard, Archibald Alison, and Richard Payne Knight. Most valuably, non-professional philosophers, general people of letters, critics and practitioners of the arts receive respectful attention. These, among others, include: poets Wordsworth, and Coleridge; artists William Hogarth, and Sir Joshua Reynolds; and even landscape gardener Humphrey Repton.

This is just a taste of the 'original and noteworthy' included, but unfortunately nowhere does this 'British tradition' extend to include any women thinkers. Although often lost to historical obscurity or assumed irrelevant, women writers, critics, and artists made significant contributions to the debates Costelloe discusses, and influenced the male thinkers he mentions. For instance, Mary Wollstonecraft was a major commentator on Burke's political aesthetics, and Ann Radcliffe's gothic novels and literary criticism shine a final light on the

18th-century concept of the sublime, whilst igniting an initial spark for the picturesque and the romantic poets. This is a disappointing—if not misleading—omission, and a missed opportunity, especially since Costelloe seeks to broaden the accepted narrative of this developmental story.

However, the real success of *The British Aesthetic Tradition* is its accessibility. It offers the student or newcomer a highly readable overview of philosophical aesthetics by invigorating its often over-abstracted, isolated questions with a living, human history. For the philosopher or historian of aesthetics it does much to fill historical gaps, in particular that of nineteenth-century Britain, and brings to light the significance of non-philosophers to understanding this history. Costelloe's vignettes of individual thinkers appear to give fairly conventional readings, but, as is his intention, he brings fresh insight to an identifiable line of intellectual influence, adaptation, revision, and even rejection of aesthetic ideas.

Nevertheless, the question lingers as to what essentially marks out the described aesthetic lineage as a distinctly 'British tradition'. Rightly, Costelloe does not wish to be reductive about the marks of this 'tradition', but neither does he appear to bring the notion into full focus. He succeeds in illuminating a conversation with a British focal point; however, his emphasis on the term 'tradition' implies that he wants to offer something more—possibly he means to establish something like a distinct, perhaps unique, British, intellectual movement, distinguishable from, say, a French, German, or pan-European one. If so, there is certainly much to be gained from bringing any distinguishing marks to light.

The greater misfortune, though, is the missed opportunity to make serious comment on the state of philosophical aesthetics. Costelloe excels at raising general interest in an intellectual history, and he skilfully describes his material. Yet he only hints at the lessons to be learnt from his account of the development of aesthetics, and holds back from demanding any important self-reflection on the part of the field itself. To extend the initial metaphor: Costelloe seems to implicitly suggest that there is a present need for philosophical aesthetics to dust

off its intellectual telescope. Perhaps he may agree that gazing upon the constellation of aesthetics' forebears offers a re-illumination of the significance of focusing philosophical microscopes on its stardust.

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**ABOUT THE REVIEWER** Kathrine Cuccuru is a doctoral candidate in philosophy at University College, London. Her current research is on early eighteenth-century British accounts of the sublime; other research has focused on literary interpretation, Hume, and Kant. She is generally interested in history of philosophy and aesthetics.