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POETRY AND NATURE IN KANT'S  
AESTHETICS:  
ON WHY POETRY IS THE HIGHEST OF ALL  
THE ARTS

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*To my sister.*

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## **Abstract**

This dissertation will explore some of the reasons why poetry is ranked as the highest of all the arts in Kant's aesthetics and what is the relation between nature and poetry. The central thesis is that poetry is the most beautiful art because it is made of language. It will be shown that poetry possesses free beauty and that pure judgments of taste in poetry are possible. Besides, poetry is the only art that originates entirely from the genius, because it shares the same language of the understanding, which, alongside imagination, constitutes the genius. Finally, poetry is the only art in which aesthetic ideas are in full power and can be fully expressed. This happens because language is pushed to its limits and is freed from conceptual constraints.

**Keywords:** Kant, aesthetics, poetry, nature, language

## 1 INTRODUCTION

In this dissertation, I will consider Kant's hierarchy of the arts within his aesthetics and, especially, why poetry is ranked first among all arts. I will argue that poetry is the highest of all fine arts because it is made of language and this gives it a privileged relationship with the mind's faculties and with nature. In the first section, I will argue that poetry possesses free beauty, contrary to other representational arts, and therefore pure judgments of taste in poetry are possible. Next, I will analyse the relationship between poetry and the genius, by explaining why poetry is the only art that originates entirely from the genius. In the third and last section, I will consider the relationship between poetry and aesthetic ideas, and I will contend that these ideas are in full power in poetry because of its linguistic nature. First, however, I will briefly introduce some points of Kant's aesthetic theory, to clarify what will be treated in the next sections.

Kant's aesthetics is extensively exposed in the first part of the *Critique of Judgment* (from now on referred as *CJ*), though some references can also be found in his works on anthropology. In the *CJ*, Kant considers judgments of taste, which are judgments on beautiful objects and in which feelings of pleasure/displeasure play a central role. Works of fine art can be the object of these judgments because they are beautiful representations of objects. Fine arts, or beautiful arts, are defined by Kant with three contrasts<sup>1</sup>. First, art differs from nature in being the product of an intentional action; second, the production of a work of art requires some practical skills and, lastly, art is free in the sense that is not "handicraft", which is done for some external purposes, while art's aim is only its pure enjoyment. Despite his treatment of fine art, it should be noted that Kant is more concerned with beauty in nature rather than beauty in art. In fact, he thinks that to take an immediate interest in the beauty of nature is always a mark of a good soul; and that, where this interest is habitual, it is at least indicative of a temper of

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<sup>1</sup> I am here following Guyer's *Kant's Conception of fine art* for the reconstruction of Kant's argument

mind favourable to the moral feeling that it should readily associate itself with the contemplation of nature”<sup>2</sup>. Kant is interested in drawing connections between beauty and morality, therefore, the association between the appreciation of natural beauty and morality explains why he is more concerned with beauty in nature. On the other hand, he does not think that interest in the beautiful arts is a sign of a good soul.

Kant introduces his hierarchy of the arts in section 51 of the *CJ*. Here, he divides fine arts into the art of speech, formative art and the art of the play of sensations. The arts of speech are poetry and rhetoric, formative arts are plastic art (sculpture and architecture) and painting and, finally, the third art is music. The distinction is based on the analogy between arts and modes of expression, which are word, gesture and tone. In section 53 of the *CJ*, Kant gives a hierarchy of the arts, with poetry at the top, followed by rhetoric, formative arts and music. In *Lectures on Anthropology*, he divides fine arts into material (painting and music) and spiritual arts (oratory and poetry) but the hierarchy does not change.

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<sup>2</sup> Kant I, *CJ*, p. 128

## 2 POETRY AND FREE BEAUTY

### 2.1

This section aims to argue that poetry possesses free beauty and that, therefore, pure judgments of taste in poetry are possible, as opposed to some other arts. Kant introduces the distinction between free beauty (*pulchritudo vaga*) and adherent or dependent beauty (*pulchritudo adherens*) in section 16 of the *CJ*. Free beauty in an object means that we do not consider any concepts, purposes, functions when we judge that object. Especially, we do not consider any concept of how the object ought to be, that is, any concept of perfection. With dependent beauty, instead, we are distracted in our judgments by conceptual considerations of the object. This means that we have a concept of perfection for the object and therefore we search for elements of perfection in it instead of purely contemplating it. Here our judgments depend not only on the pure contemplation of the object, but also on concepts, on our previous knowledge of the functions and purposes, and therefore are not pure. Moreover, in previous sections 13, 14 and 15, Kant maintains that charms and emotions, concepts and perfection make the judgments of taste impure. In fact, “a judgment of taste, therefore, is only pure so far as its determining ground is commingled with no merely empirical delight”<sup>3</sup>. A pure judgment of taste is not only free from conceptual deliberations but it must also be free from empirical delight, that is satisfaction only coming from the senses. Charms and emotions are elements of empirical delight, according to Kant. Charms are mere sensations and they are only agreeable thus they cannot be considered beautiful. Similarly, emotions are defined as sensations produced by “a momentary check”<sup>4</sup>. Therefore, judgments of taste must be independent of charms and emotions because otherwise, their delight would not be universal, given that it comes only from the senses, but he has previously demonstrated, in section 9, that the beautiful is that which pleases universally. Examples of charms are for Kant colours and tones: they can be pure, and therefore regarded as beautiful, only if their “uniformity is not disturbed or

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<sup>3</sup> Kant, I., *CJ*, p. 55

<sup>4</sup> Kant, I., *CJ*, p. 57

broken by any foreign sensation”<sup>5</sup>. This means that, for instance, colours should not distract the mind from what is essential, the design in figurative arts. Instead, colours and tones are not pure when they are used to attract the mind to a further purpose than the pure representation of the object.

An example of dependent beauty, therefore, could be a royal palace. Here, charms (i.e. colours, decorations) and the concept of perfection prevent us from a purely aesthetical consideration of it. This means that our judgments are influenced, for instance, by our knowledge of the history of royal palaces or of architecture. The mind is distracted by the brilliance of colours or by the intricacy of decorations and this makes the judgments unfree and thus impure. Moreover, the beauty of the palace may become an instrument for the purpose of the palace (i.e. to underline the magnificence and richness of the royals) instead of being the object of our aesthetic judgment.

The distinction between free and dependent beauty can be very fluctuating. In fact, it is not easy to determine if there are concepts of perfection involved in our judgments of taste, while we are making them. The form in the representation of a beautiful object in itself does not give us any objective purposiveness (any concept of perfection) so everything depends on the subjective purposiveness in the mind of the observer. In section 15, Kant gives an example:

*“For instance, if in a forest I light upon a plot of grass, round which trees stand in a circle, and if I do not then form any representation of an end, such as that it is meant to be used, say, for country danced, then not the least hint of a concept of perfection is given by the mere form”<sup>6</sup>.*

So, the beauty of the clearing and the trees offers no concept of perfection in itself, but this depends on the observer. However, it can be argued that, for Kant, the beauty of nature is free beauty. In fact, his first example of free beauties is flowers. Beauty in nature is free

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<sup>5</sup> Kant, I., *CJ*, p. 55

<sup>6</sup> Kant, I., *CJ*, p. 58

because it involves no concept of perfection. As Kant underlines<sup>7</sup>, few people (i.e. botanists, ornithologists) know the true nature, in the sense of how they ought to be, of natural objects, say, flowers and birds. Even those people, when judging the beauty of flowers and birds, do not consider any end, any idea of perfection. Therefore, beauty in nature is free beauty.

## 2.2

It is more challenging to decide whether there can be free beauty in the arts. Indeed, it seems that there are concepts of perfection, at least in the creation of a work of art. The artist has rules and purposes while creating. However, in section 16 of the *CJ*, Kant includes among free beauties also "designs à la grecque, foliage for framework or on wall-papers"<sup>8</sup> and "what in music are called fantasias (without a theme), and, indeed, all music that is not set to words"<sup>9</sup>. Following these claims, it is usually accepted that there is free beauty in non-representational arts because there is no determinate concept to influence our judgment.

It can also be argued that beautiful poems can also be free beauties. First, there are no charms in poetry. In fact, there are no colours and no ornaments to appeal the eye. Charms appeal to the senses and distract the mind from the pure contemplation. Ornaments in poetry (e.g. rhetorical devices) appeal directly to the imagination and not to the senses and therefore involve no empirical delight. Nevertheless, it should be considered that, for Kant, music is essential to poetry. In section *Poesis as an art* in the *Lectures on Anthropology*, Kant states that "the art of poetry coincides with music. For it also considers a measured tempo"<sup>10</sup>. Therefore, it may seem that there are charms for the ear, even in poetry, because it is connected to music. However, music in poetry regards rhythm rather than sounds and tones. Moreover, Kant adds that the syllabic meter has the only aim of

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<sup>7</sup> Kant I., *CJ*, p. 60

<sup>8</sup> Kant I., *CJ*, p. 60

<sup>9</sup> Kant I., *CJ*, p. 60

<sup>10</sup> Kant I., *Lectures on Anthropology*, p. 266

keeping the power of imagination strong and in motion. Therefore, music in poetry has no external, additional purpose but its aim is solely internal to poetry and its pure enjoyment. Hence poetry only appeals to the imagination and not to the senses. Besides, Kant does not allow emotions in poetry<sup>11</sup>, in the sense that poetry cannot cause only emotions in the reader. That kind of poetry would be bad poetry, without any true beauty in it. In fact, emotions are mere sensations that distract the mind from the pure enjoyment. Therefore, if poetry only causes emotions, here intended as momentary sensations, it cannot possess free beauty. However, according to Kant, poetry is more than a play of sensations because it is the art that moves the imagination and the understanding more. Therefore, poetry may cause feelings (i.e. a poem about death may cause a feeling of fear or sadness in the reader) but these are different from emotions, in the sense that they do not merely cause a momentary sensation. In addition, good poetry never only causes a feeling but its first and principal aim is to arouse the imagination and the understanding, not through emotions or feelings, but through ideas. It is more difficult to argue that there are no concepts of perfection in poetry. Kant insists on poetry being a matter of imagination as if it were a serious business of the understanding. This indicates that, for Kant, there are no determinate concepts of a further end in poetry. Moreover, by appealing directly to the imagination, poetry pleases immediately without any further representation or end, and this is another requirement for free beauty.

One might object that poetry is a representational art and that therefore, it cannot possess free beauty. Descriptions in poetry, for example, can make it a representational art. Therefore, there would be a concept of perfection, a concept of how the object in poetry ought to be, that might influence our judgment on poetry, making it impure. First, it should be noted that Kant was somehow aware of the issue. In fact, in *Lectures on Anthropology*, he writes:

*“Why is the poet happier in fable than in truth? Because his aim is not to promote the understanding but he takes merely the imagination as his chief end. Truth sets limits for*

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<sup>11</sup> See Kant I., *Lectures on Anthropology*, p. 437

*him, and he does not love that at all [...], e.g. poets are not happy in describing life, or if that is suitable, they mix a lot of untruth with it.*"<sup>12</sup>

This means that, for Kant, the best poetry is not the poetry that describes the phenomenal world, of which we can have a concept of perfection, given that we see the original. So, for example, he would not like the accurate description of a specific town in a poem, because we can see the original town and compare the two. According to Kant, it would be better to mix false elements with the truth, so that fewer concepts of perfection are involved. Moreover, he prefers poetry that adds invented elements because this makes the poet freer to engage more the imagination. So, Kant seems to favour poetry without descriptions or a focus on nature, instead preferring morality as the object of poetry. This could be one way to respond to the objection of poetry being a representational art. Moreover, it seems that Kant is more willing to give concessions on the concept of perfection in free beauty rather than on charms and emotions. As Wenzel points out, Kant's primary interest is in drawing connections between beauty and morality and, because he sees elements of perfection in morality but not elements of charms or emotions, he is less concerned with the former. In conclusion, even if there are elements of representation in poetry, this does not mean that poetry cannot possess free beauty. In fact, when Kant talks of poetry as the highest art, he seems to refer to poetry that is not a truthful description of the phenomenal world. In this sense, poetry does not always represent something that we have already experienced and of which we already have a concept. Moreover, for Kant, there can be concepts of perfection in poetry, as long as charms and emotions are absent, because they are entirely foreign to morality, whereas the concepts of perfection are not.

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<sup>12</sup> Kant I., *Lectures on Anthropology*. p. 266

### 2.3

On the other hand, other arts are influenced by elements of charms and emotions and therefore do not possess free beauty. Formative arts and music are ranked below poetry because they possess elements of charms distracting the mind from the pure contemplation. In formative arts, colours are charms. In fact, as Kant states in section 14 of the *CJ*, the proper object of the judgment of taste in those arts is design. Therefore, colours are admitted only if their purpose is solely to ennoble the design. Otherwise, colours are distracting elements that appeal more to the senses (the eye) than to the imagination and that do not provide the mind with the sole contemplation of the object. So, for example, a composite, abundant group of colours in the depiction of a cape in a painting, provides an empirical delight for the eye but does not contribute to the beauty of the picture because it is not pure and not essential to the design. Moreover, when formative arts are representational, they, indeed, represent something. So, while judging them, we have a concept of how the object ought to be because we compare the represented object with the original one. Hence, our aesthetic judgments are influenced by other concepts and therefore are impure.

Turning to music, Kant clearly states in section 16 of *CJ* that music without theme or words possesses free beauty. However, there can be elements of charm in music and they are tones (sounds). Music does not possess free beauty because it is too connected to sensations and, for Kant, free beauty must not involve mere empirical delight. In fact, in section 51 of *CJ*, music is defined as the “beautiful play of sensations (sensations that arise from external stimulation)”<sup>13</sup>. Therefore, music appeals to the faculties of imagination and understanding but through sensations rather than representations. Perhaps there are no concepts of perfection in music, but it seems to be a too empirical enjoyment to possess free beauty. Moreover, Kant is not sure if music can be called a fine art or a merely agreeable one. Besides, in *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of view*, Kant gives a hierarchy of the senses:

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<sup>13</sup> Kant I., *CJ*, pp. 152-153

*“The sense of sight, even if it is not more indispensable than that of hearing, is still the noblest, because, among all the senses, it is furthest removed from the sense of touch [...]. Thus sight comes nearer to being a pure intuition (the immediate representation of the given object, without admixture of noticeable sensation)”<sup>14</sup>.*

This hierarchy, as Penny in *The highest of all arts: Kant and Poetry* underlines, could explain why poetry and pictorial arts are ranked above the music: because the sense of sight is nobler and higher than the sense of hearing. Moreover, it was said above that poetry appeals directly to the imagination and not to the senses. Of course, poetry is also received through senses, especially vision but perhaps also hearing. However, first, sight is the noblest sense, close to pure intuition, so this helps in explaining why poetry is the highest art. Moreover, it has already been shown that it has no charms for the senses and allows for no mere empirical delight. Poetry, in fact, does not cause mere sensations but it immediately appeals to the imagination. It has no charms for the eye or the ear because all its ornaments (i.e. rhetorical devices and so on) only aim to the enjoyment of the imagination.

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<sup>14</sup> Kant I., *Anthropology from a pragmatic point of view*. p. 48

### 3 POETRY AND THE GENIUS

#### 3.1

The second section considers why poetry is the art that comes directly from the genius and how this is related to nature. In the arts, there is a tension between rules and freedom in the sense that the work of art should appear free and lawless but the artist, as highlighted in the previous section, has rules and aims while creating. About this apparent contradiction, Kant writes that

*“A product of fine art must be recognised to be art and not nature. Nevertheless, the purposiveness in its form must appear just as free from the constraint of arbitrary rules as if it were a product of mere nature”, therefore, “we must be able to look upon fine art as nature, although we recognise it to be art”<sup>15</sup>.*

This means that art and nature are interrelated in the sense that art must look like nature, that is, look as free as nature is from any rules. However, art is inevitably the product of intentions, rules and skills. To solve this paradox, Kant introduces the notion of genius, in the next section (46). Genius is defined as “the innate mental aptitude (*ingenium*) through which nature gives the rules to art”<sup>16</sup>. First, it should be noted that the genius is an innate mental aptitude and this means it is a gift, an inborn talent that cannot be learned. So, the genius is an inspiration, not fully understood even by the subject who possesses it. This is why, for Kant, artists cannot explain in full the process of creation, where their ideas come from. Rules are given to art through genius so that every work of art is exemplary, in the sense that it exemplifies a new rule, and it is not the product of imitation or the mere following of rules. Kant says that it is *nature* that gives the rule to art through the genius. In this definition, nature is not intended as the nature surrounding us but is it something in the subject, the disposition of his/her faculties, in other words, it is the nature of the subject.

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<sup>15</sup> Kant I., *CJ*. p. 135

<sup>16</sup> Kant I. *CJ*, p. 136

Therefore, nature gives the rule to art in the sense that the faculties of the subject should be the only origin for works of art. The faculties involved in the genius are primarily the imagination and the understanding. Therefore, the genius as the source of fine arts means that fine arts are the product of the harmonious play of imagination and understanding.

Turning to the relationship between poetry and genius, Kant affirms that poetry is the most exemplary art and it is the art that comes directly from the genius: “poetry, which owes its origin almost entirely to genius and is least willing to be led by precepts or examples [...]”<sup>17</sup>. Moreover, he often talks of poets, more than any other artist, as prophets, as inspired people. For instance, in *Lectures on Anthropology*, Kant talks of poetical inspiration as an involuntary state of mind, which sometimes occurs in the mind of poets. In *Anthropology from a pragmatic point of view*, he writes that poets are considered as fortune-tellers because of their momentary inspiration. The reason why poetry is the art that almost entirely originates from genius lies in the intrinsic characteristics of poetry itself. In other words, poetry holds this privileged place among other arts because it is made of language. Because imagination and understanding ultimately constitute the genius, I shall investigate the relationship of poetry with these two faculties.

### 3.2

It has already been shown that poetry is the art least dependent on the senses. It is instead the art that appeals immediately to the imagination. Indeed, in section 53 of the *CJ*, Kant affirms that “it (poetry) expands the mind by giving freedom to the imagination [...]”<sup>18</sup>. Poetry, as well as other fine arts, free the imagination from cognitive constraints, in the sense that there cannot be a determinate concept of art. Moreover, poetical images are linguistic images that do not appeal to the senses but directly to the imagination. However, because they are linguistic images, they can also contain the “lawless freedom

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<sup>17</sup> Kant I., *CJ*, p. 155

<sup>18</sup> Kant I., *CJ*, p. 155

imagination”<sup>19</sup> that, according to Kant, only brings to nonsense. Being made of language, poetry immediately recalls the understanding, whose judgments are also made of language, and, even if no determinate concept is involved, this can somehow “guide” the imagination. However, poetry’s linguistic images also express something to which no verbal expression is completely adequate and this also frees the imagination from the cognitive restrictions, as seen above. In other words, poetry frees imagination from the laws of association (used in the empirical employment of imagination) in the sense that imagination can take the material from empirical experience, from “nature”, in accordance with the laws but then work freely upon that material.

Concerning the understanding, it should be first highlighted that poetry uses the same language of judgments of the understanding. This observation, which might look obvious, could nevertheless help in explaining why poetry only depends on the subject’s faculties and is not influenced by external elements. Poetry is the art “of conducting a free play of the imagination as if it were a serious business of the understanding”<sup>20</sup>. It is a serious business of the understanding because it shares the same language. This means that poetry can have the same content, can treat the same subjects of discursive reason. Indeed, Kant does not allow any mixture of philosophy and poetry<sup>21</sup> but this proximity can explain the high rank of poetry. Moreover, poetry can also have morality as its subject. In fact, this happens quite often, and this seems to be the kind of poetry preferred by Kant. However, in treating these subjects, poetry is free from the inflexibility of the judgments of the understanding, because it does not involve, being a fine, free art, any determinate concept. Poetry is a pure play of ideas so this means, of course, that it cannot provide a judgment under a concept but it can arouse the understanding more than other arts because it treats the same subjects, with the same language. Therefore, Kant can state about poetry that “its avowed pursuit is merely one of play, which, however, understanding may turn to good

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<sup>19</sup> Kant I., *CJ*, p. 148

<sup>20</sup> Kant I., *CJ*, p. 149

<sup>21</sup> For a full discussion of the relationship between poetry and philosophy in Kant, see Barfield R., *The ancient quarrel between Philosophy and Poetry*

account and employ for its own purpose”<sup>22</sup>. On the one hand, poetry comes directly from the genius, that is, from the harmony between imagination and understanding because both faculties are perfectly at ease, are perfectly harmonious with the content and methods of poetry. On the other hand, and because of that, poetry can look like a serious business of the understanding because, even without determinate concepts, it still treats the same subjects of the understanding and therefore can be extremely thought-provoking. It is thought-provoking in the sense that it arouses the understanding, it somehow gives material to it, even if no understanding’s judgments are involved.

Moreover, poetry is the most autonomous art, only coming from the nature of the subject, because its rules are entirely internal. Rules in poetry, regarding both rhythm and meter as well as the structure of a specific poetic form, generally come from tradition. Furthermore, poetry is also a play for play’s sake because it is aware of being a mere play and it declares it. This is also why, for Kant, poetry is not a deceptive art, contrary to rhetoric. Therefore, rules in poetry come from poetry itself, come from the nature of the subject, which is the only source of poetry. Instead, music, for example, takes its rules also from mathematics, not only from the genius. Formative arts, as well, take their rules from an external source: nature, for example, because they somehow imitate it. Poetry only takes its rules from its own tradition or from the genius, which is its only origin. Therefore, poetry is the only art that comes directly from the nature of the subject, that is, genius.

### 3.3

Given that also rhetoric is made of language, it should be explained why it is ranked below poetry. They both are, indeed, classified as arts of speech. However, rhetoric is defined as “the art of engaging a serious business of the understanding as if it were a free play of the imagination”<sup>23</sup>, which is the exact contrary of poetry’s definition. The orator promises a serious business of the understanding but then he/she conducts it as a mere play of ideas for

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<sup>22</sup> Kant I., *CJ*. p. 155

<sup>23</sup> Kant I., *CJ*. p. 149

the imagination. Thus, the rhetoric art is a deceptive art because its declared aim is not fulfilled. In fact, the orator promises a real engagement of the understanding but, being oratory a fine art, it cannot ultimately cause any understanding's judgments but only a mere play of ideas, which can never be fully expressed. Poetry, on the other hand, does not promise anything and yet gives life to the understanding's concepts through the imagination. Once again, because poetry declares its being a mere play, it does not distract the mind with any other end than the pure enjoyment. Rhetoric, instead, promises a further end, that of the serious involvement of the understanding, therefore it is less free than poetry. Moreover, poetry has no purpose other than the free play of imagination and understanding whereas rhetoric has the aim of convincing the listener. So, one of the reasons why rhetoric is ranked below poetry is that it is not as free as poetry.

Besides, the reason why rhetoric, despite its use of language, does not depend solely on the genius, is that it does not share a privileged relationship with the two faculties constituting the genius, namely, imagination and understanding. In fact, rhetoric uses linguistic images, as well as poetry, to charm the imagination with the purpose of convincing and deceive the understanding. It does not free the imagination from cognitive constraints because it aims to get to the understanding. On the other hand, it does recall determinate concepts in the understanding but charmed by the imagination. Moreover, because its aim is declared, namely to convince the listeners, the genius is not at its full powers because it still has some guidance, some constraints from rules and its own purpose. Instead, in poetry, the genius is utterly free from rules and aims. In conclusion, it seems that in rhetoric, the genius is not wholly free and powerful because the understanding is too much involved with its determined concepts, leaving little space for the imagination and its sensations.

## 4 POETRY AND AESTHETIC IDEAS

### 4.1

Kant defines an aesthetic idea as “the representation of the imagination which evokes much thought, yet without the possibility of any definite thought whatever, i.e. *concept*, being adequate to it, and which language, consequently, can never quite fully capture or render completely intelligible”<sup>24</sup>. Aesthetic ideas are therefore representations of the imagination and they are the counterpart of rational ideas in the sense that, as no intuition can be completely adequate to rational ideas, no concept can be fully adequate to aesthetic ideas. Aesthetic ideas also mediate between rational ideas, on the one side, and imagination and sensibility on the other, in the sense that the work of art can give sensible form to subjects of rational ideas thanks to aesthetic ideas, which are the way to express those subjects. Thus, rational ideas provide the subject to poetry while aesthetic ideas are the mean to express that subject. Aesthetic ideas are helped in the presentation of the subject by aesthetic attributes. Aesthetic attributes are attributes that pertain to the object and they support aesthetic ideas, in the sense that they make the idea more vivid in our mind. They show further representations or implications connected with the presented concept, without constituting a proper presentation of another concept. Their role is to animate the mind even further, by stimulating the imagination with more representations and therefore provoking more thoughts. Kant here presents the famous example of Jupiter’s eagle to explain the role of the attributes. Similarly, the eagle is used by Dante Alighieri in the first canto of *Paradise* in the *Divine Comedy*, with the line “*Aquila sì non gli s’affisse unquanco*”<sup>25</sup>. Here the eagle stands for Beatrice, Dante's guide in Paradise. An eagle is an empirical object, but it is also an aesthetic attribute because it gives a further representation to the aesthetic idea. According to the Catholic tradition, the eagle is the only animal that can stare directly into the sun and so can Beatrice, with the sun representing God. Here, the

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<sup>24</sup> Kant I., *CJ*. p. 142

<sup>25</sup> “*When Beatrice towards the left-hand side/ I saw turned round, and gazing at the sun;/ Never did eagle fasten so upon it!*”

aesthetic attribute not only clarifies the aesthetic idea (of the spiritual superiority of Beatrice) but it also adds representations and images (the sharpness of Beatrice' eye, the splendour of the sun/God), one after the other, so that the mind is stimulated to think more about the idea and about all the interrelated representations and concepts, even if they cannot be fully grasped. Kant affirms that aesthetic attributes play an essential role in poetry (and rhetoric) because they are associated with logical attributes, which are the attributes that satisfy the concept applied to the object. They are associated in the sense that, in the example above, they allow to integrate the eagle with Beatrice. Logical attributes of the eagle are, for instance, the sharpness of its eyes, which is a concept associated with the eagle. Aesthetic attributes permit to think about the sharpness of Beatrice's eyes not by reference to her but to the attributes of the eagle. In this way, Beatrice and the eagle are integrated, in the sense that the attribute of the eagle is transferred to Beatrice. Therefore, aesthetic attributes enliven the play between imagination and understanding by allowing the imagination to "bring more thought into play in the matter"<sup>26</sup> in a way that such thought can somehow be formulated in language, and therefore, more accessible to the understanding. To explain this rather difficult interplay, Kant introduces some examples of poetry by King Frederick II of Prussia and P.L. Withof. So, for instance, in the description "The sun arose, as out of virtue rises peace"<sup>27</sup>, the rising of the sun is compared to the rising of virtue out of peace, evoking many happy, restful thoughts, even if we cannot express them under definite concepts, and, therefore, in the understanding's judgments. The sensible (the dawn) is here used as an instrument for something that cannot be experienced by the senses (virtue and peace) and it helps us understanding better the super-sensible, also by giving much food (thoughts) to the understanding.

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<sup>26</sup> Kant I., *CJ*. p. 155

<sup>27</sup> Kant I., *CJ*. p. 145

## 4.2

In addition to the privileged role of aesthetic attributes in poetry, Kant also states that aesthetic ideas are in full power in poetry, in a twofold way. On the hand, Kant affirms that poetry can give a sensible form to invisible beings. On the other hand, poetry can also make us experience nature in a way that we do not experience empirically, by the senses. These two points will be now considered separately. Regarding the first point, Kant writes that

*“the poet essays the task of giving sensible form to the rational ideas of invisible beings, the kingdom of the blessed, hell, eternity, creation and so forth.”*<sup>28</sup>

As Wenzel points out, it is difficult to visualise objects (“invisible beings”) such as morality (i.e. virtues, vices), God, freedom and so on. It is difficult to find an image or some representation for those kinds of objects. In fact, they are given to us as intuitions to which concepts are never fully adequate and onto which, therefore, the understanding cannot elaborate a judgment. However, poetry, as well as other arts, though at a lower level, can represent these objects through aesthetic ideas and attributes. For instance, so does Leopardi in his poem *L’infinito*, where he attempts to somehow give sensible form to, indeed, the infinite. The infinite is not a concept we can fully comprehend but it is more of a rational idea, to which no intuition is completely adequate. The language of the poem is a continuous play between nouns that indicate empirical objects, “*spazi*”, “*silenzi*”, “*quiete*” and adjectives that point to something beyond empirical experience, “*interminati*”, “*sovrumani*”, “*profondissima*”. In this situation, where empirical objects evoke something beyond empirical experience, the poet can render the sensations, the feelings, the thoughts in front of the infinite. Therefore, even if perhaps we still cannot visualise the infinite, we have a grasp of how it would be like to visualise it.

The reason why poetry is the adequate art to permit the visualisation of such beings is, once again, that it is made of language. Indeed, in poetry, the imagination is free from

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<sup>28</sup> Kant I., *CJ*. p. 143

the constraints of the verbal expression and the aesthetic idea, which is a representation of the imagination, can be fully expressed. In fact, non-poetic language is not adequate to express those objects because it is conceptually determinate. In poetry, as some authors<sup>29</sup> commenting on this matter note, language is pushed to its limits and this is the only way to visualise those objects that involve no definite concept. Brodsky explains this matter by pointing to the fact that the use of language in poetry, even if it cannot represent an idea, because this is impossible within Kant's general doctrine, it can indicate "our ability to think ideas", in other words, to think about what we cannot represent in any language. Therefore, it is still language but pushed to its limits, to the maximum of its expression. For instance, in the poem by Leopardi examined above, there is an extreme tension in language, between empirical objects and super-sensible objects, as well as between the impossibility of thinking of the infinite and the poetic imagination that, through those empirical objects, allows us to have a grasp of the infinite. Moreover, Kant has already established that poetry, contrary to the rhetoric, is not deceptive because it is a manifest, pure play and its only aim is its enjoyment. Similarly, poetry is somehow aware of the inadequacy of its verbal expression, in the sense that poetry evokes so many thoughts which can never be fully grasped but can give occupations to the understanding. The awareness of the inadequacy of the verbal discourse, together with the fact that this is still the only way to somehow approximate to ideas, make poetry a pure play, a play of "illusions and appearances" that sets the imagination and understanding in perfect harmony.

### 4.3

Turning to the second point, that is how poetry makes us experience nature beyond what we experience empirically, Kant says in section 53 of the *CJ* that:

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<sup>29</sup> Penny L., *The highest of all the arts: Kant and Poetry* and Brodsky C., "Judgment" and the genesis of what we lack: "Schema", "Poetry" and the "Monogram of the Imagination" in Kant

*“it (poetry) invigorates the mind by letting it feel its faculty – free, spontaneous, and independent of determination by nature – of regarding and judging nature as phenomenon in the light of aspects which nature of itself does not afford us in experience, either for the senses or the understanding, and of employing it accordingly on behalf of, and as a sort of schema for, the supersensible”<sup>30</sup>.*

Poetry allows the mind to “regard” and “judge” nature of the unfree phenomenal world as if it were a schema for the supersensible, which is something beyond senses. Though we usually experience nature through senses, poetry allows us to get to aspects of nature beyond empirically-experienced nature. Elsewhere, Kant also affirms that the genius can create another nature, in the sense that it is a productive faculty. So, all of this means that the genius, through aesthetic ideas and, therefore, imagination, can use the material from nature and turn it into something new, which is new because elements from nature are combined in a new, unprecedented way. On the one hand, poetry allows the mind to treat nature as a phenomenon, which is quite straightforward, but in a way that we cannot experience empirically, through senses. On the other hand, nature serves as “a sort of schema for the supersensible”. Now a schema, in Kant’s theory, is a rule by which one of the understanding’s categories is associated with a sense-impression. Therefore, nature in poetry can mediate between sense-impressions and the supersensible and, in this way, we can get at aspects of the phenomenal world beyond what we can experience in nature itself. It is difficult to exactly explain how we can better understand nature by going beyond nature through poetry. Kant himself does not give much explanation on this. However, I shall try to explain how nature can act as a schema in poetry.

A schema is a rule that connects two realms that are not connected. Here nature connects the unfree phenomenal world and the free world of the supersensible, or of imagination as a productive faculty. This happens in poetry because poetry uses language in a free way. Poetry, in fact, uses the very same language that is usually conceptually determinate, therefore not free, without determinate concepts, therefore in a free way.

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<sup>30</sup> Kant I., *CJ*. p. 155

Poetry does not need specific concepts, because it can arouse the understanding but without its concepts. So, the art of poetry can freely talk about the unfree phenomenal world of nature because its own mean of expression, usually unfree, is here freed. In this way, the mind is free to expand the representations of nature itself through that very nature, whose expression is freed by poetic language. Nature in poetry, hence, serves as a schema for the supersensible because it is presented by language in a free way, meaning under no determinate concepts. Both language and nature, therefore, in poetry are freed: language is freed from conceptual determinations and animated by aesthetic attributes. Nature is free because it is not merely described but it stands for something else. So, in the examples above, the eagle (an object of nature) stands for Beatrice. In Leopardi's poem, the silence, which we can experience through senses, stands for the infinite, which we cannot empirically experience. Poetry, therefore, attempts to make us visualise the free realm of the supersensible through nature, which becomes an instrument (a schema), instead of being the mere object of poetry.

An example of a poem can help in further explaining this difficult issue. Take the last line of the *Paradise* by Dante Alighieri: *L'amor che move il sole e l'altre stelle*<sup>31</sup>. Here, there are the concepts of love, sun, stars, which all are part of the phenomenal world. However, love represents God. God, according to Kant, is an idea, because we can never have a fully adequate concept for it. Therefore, as exemplified above, the attributes of love are also transferred to God. Moreover, here the language is free because if we interpret this line as an understanding's judgments, meaning under definite concepts, it makes no sense because love cannot move the sun. Poetical language, freed from the inadequacy of verbal expression, allows us to understand what it is being said: God is essentially love and is the reason and grounding of everything. Therefore, here nature (love, sun, stars) stands for something else (the ideas of God and the whole world) and in this way, we understand something more about nature, that its foundation is God. Nature, in poetry, is thus a schema for the supersensible (here God), connecting the unfree phenomenal world with the

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<sup>31</sup> Alighieri D., "*Love that moves the sun and other stars*" in *Paradise*, XXXIII, line 145

realm of ideas. This example explains why poetry, being made of language, is the art that, more than any others, allows us to grasp something about nature, beyond what we can experience in nature itself.

#### 4.4

An objection to the centrality of language in the relationship between poetry and aesthetic ideas comes from Hlobil, in his article *Immanuel Kant on language and poetry: poetry without language*. His point is that there is no connection between schema and language. According to him, the language in Kant is strictly connected with concepts. Kant treats schema only as entities of consciousness (intuition and representation) and not of language. Poetry is obviously made of language but the language itself is not able to exhibit aesthetic ideas because these ideas do not correspond to any concept and thus poetry is not able either. The language of poetry is not able to exhibit aesthetic ideas, intended as the many representations related to a particular concept. In conclusion, poetry for Kant is not really an art of language because language is not able to exhibit aesthetic ideas. Given that poetry's purpose is to exhibit aesthetic ideas, then poetry must exceed language.

It is true that Kant's writings on the relationship between poetry, language and aesthetic ideas are sometimes ambiguous. Indeed, he maintains that language cannot "render completely intelligible" an aesthetic idea, because no concept is adequate to it. However, the aim of poetry is not to make the ideas completely intelligible, because its purpose is to give the understanding food, that is thoughts, and not a specific concept. Determinate concepts of the understanding allow it to produce a judgment, by placing the concept under a universal category. On the other hand, this is not the aim of art, which does not produce an understanding's judgments but produces the harmony between imagination and understanding, from which the judgment of taste originates. Moreover, Kant knows that conceptually determined language cannot be the language of poetry. The language of poetry is free in the sense that, indeed, it is not conceptually determined, because it is not made of the understanding's judgments, as it is, say, science, and it cannot be placed under

the categories because it would make no sense. For example, the eagle standing for Beatrice cannot be placed under any Kantian category of relation. Therefore, even if the eagle in the poem is a concept, it is not determined because it cannot be placed under a category and no understanding's judgments can be produced. Thus, poetry exceeds language only in the sense that poetic language itself exceeds conceptually determined expression. Poetry is an art of language, in fact, it is *the* art of language because it is the only art that can give so many thoughts to the understanding, by using its same, though freed, language.

Furthermore, the proximity of language with concepts makes us understand better why aesthetic ideas are in full power in poetry. In fact, aesthetic attributes work in poetry by recalling more and more representations to the mind. So does language, which, thanks to its connection with concepts, recalls concepts other than the one expressed but, being freed from the rules of discursive reason, it does not recall a determinate concept. Because the mechanism of language and aesthetic attributes in poetry is similar, though on different levels, language explains the power of poetry in recalling more and more representations and thoughts, even if it can never evoke a determinate concept for the understanding.

## 5 CONCLUSION

In this dissertation, I have tried to explain why poetry is ranked as the highest among all arts and what similarities beauty in poetry bears with beauty in nature. I showed that poetry, as well as nature, possesses free beauty, contrary to other arts. Poetry is, in fact, free from charms, emotions and, at least up to a certain point, from concepts of perfection. Given that Kant ranks natural beauty above beauty in the arts, because of its being a sign of a good soul, the fact that poetry possesses free beauty, just like nature, can explain why it is the highest art. Besides, poetry is the art that descends directly from the genius, meaning that it only originates from the harmonious play between imagination and understanding, in other words, from the nature of the subject. Here again, poetry takes its rules only from nature, whereas other disciplines or rules influence other arts. I contended that poetry comes directly from the genius because it is made of language, which appeals directly to the imagination, not to the senses, and which is the language of understanding. This helps us in understanding why poetry only comes from the harmony between the subject's faculties. Finally, I showed that poetry is the adequate art to express aesthetic ideas at their full power. This is possible because nature acts as a schema in poetry, in the sense that it connects the unfree phenomenal world with the free realm of the super-sensible, thanks to poetic language, which in turn is freed from its usual laws. Therefore, both nature and language, though they usually are unfree, are freed by poetry, and this allows poetry to express aesthetic ideas to their full power. In conclusion, poetry is the highest art because it is made of language and this makes the judgments of taste on poetry similar to the judgments on nature.

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