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The Beautiful Soul: Aesthetic Morality in the Eighteenth Century. By ROBERT E. NORTON. Ithaca, NY, and London: Cornell University Press. 1995. xi + 314 pp. £27.50.

This is a very useful book. In examining one of the key concepts of the eighteenth-century European world of discourse, it is exemplary of the kind of interdisciplinary and intercultural scholarship that is now needed. Informed by current cultural issues, it investigates in considerable analytical detail matters of abiding importance to us at the end of the millennium, without any narrow, historicist tendency to lose sight of the ultimate context of 'European culture for as long as our collective memory can recall' (Preface, p. ix).

In his own words, Robert E. Norton 'tells a story', one that is only partially familiar, at least from his very broad perspective. The conception of the Beautiful Soul (a product of the European Enlightenment as a whole, though most distinct and compelling in German) is traced in three major phases of its development: the (mainly British) philosophizing about 'moral beauty'; the (mainly German) insistence on a link between religion and morals; the Hellenic ideal of *kalokagathia*, particularly in its latter-day German appropriation. Modern ethical debate is seen as arising to defend Christianity against Hobbes's egoistic argumentation, and Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* of 1690 is seen as decisive in undermining the ethical religionists in insisting on the necessity of a rational basis to morality. Locke's *Essay* was, indeed, momentous in proclaiming ethics to be the single most essential concern of humanity, a claim that was to become central to the Enlightenment, which considered (despite Locke's own distaste for the notion) 'the beauty of virtue' the solution to the problems Locke had raised. Shaftesbury's vision of the Good and the Beautiful as symbiotically interrelated, like his emphasis on the logical necessity of separating religion and morality, was systematically presented by Francis Hutcheson (who made much of 'moral sense', a term used only once by Shaftesbury himself) and, in this form, became immensely influential. Shaftesbury and Hutcheson, for whom Virtue was 'a lovely Form', conceived of Beauty as an abstract, non-physical, neo-Platonic mode, but, as time passed, and 'moral beauty' remained at the centre of debate until the end of the century, it began to acquire more and more a sensuous aspect.

In Germany this process was quickened by the pervasiveness of the later Pietistic idea, derived from traditional mysticism, of the rebirth-transformation of the soul 'shining forth for others to see as well'. Despite Spener's pragmatic ethics (his *Pia Desideria* of 1675 never mentions 'beauty of soul') the influence of his own teachers (Arndt and Lütkeermann) ensured that the concept became central to the attainment of personal divinity. And at Halle, seat of both Pietism and the then-fashionable Wolffian philosophy, a remarkable cross-fertilization seems to have taken place. Leibniz's contention that 'Beauty awakens Love' (like his self-conscious congruence with Shaftesbury) tended to tinge Wolff's would-be wholly rationalistic ethics, issuing clearly in such writers as Baumgarten and Moses Mendelssohn, for whom 'moral beauty had become a kind of categorical imperative' (p. 92). While Edmund Burke stood out against the 'confusion' of Beauty and Virtue, the pre-critical Kant accepted the identity of the two as humanity's greatest goal, a commitment that coloured even his post-critical writings.

The late eighteenth-century desire to be reborn as Greeks, especially in Germany, likewise entailed becoming beautiful human beings. Wieland seems to have been the first to introduce the term *kalokagathia* (in 1758) to cover this phenomenon, drawing on Plotinus's revival of the aesthetic overtones of the 'moral beauty' transferred from social to ethical nobility in the fifth century BC. By mid-century the

abstraction was being replaced by the more concrete, and more personal, 'Beautiful Soul', and two works, Wieland's *Agathon* and Rousseau's *Nouvelle Héloïse*, were crucial in consolidating the various strands of the Beautiful Soul tradition, in which Rousseau revealed some fatal flaws. *Agathon* was simply the personification of *kalokagathia*, in seeking to unify emotion and reason (p. 157); Rousseau's novel, by contrast, is seen, following Starobinski, as illustrating how 'the belle âme has become a hypocrite' (p. 172). A much cruder development is the extraordinary European success of Lavater's *Physiognomic Fragments* of 1775. For him, beautiful souls reside in beautiful bodies, or, at least, have pretty faces (a faith shared by the then-influential philosopher of art, J. G. Sulzer). Lichtenberg's (and Mendelssohn's) powerful criticisms of Lavater's claims did not, however, exclude the possibility of the beautiful expression of inner harmony, only the simplistic correlation of inner virtue with the configuration of bodily features.

By the 1780s the Beautiful Soul was taken for granted as a valid conception of reality by laymen and learned alike, and had become the guiding ethical ideal of the Enlightenment, promising the Good Life and Happiness. The vehemence with which Kant attacked the idea in his 1785 *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals* reveals (p. 217) his inability to do without it, for all the much-vaunted rationality of his ethics: the concept of moral beauty, despite being repressed, returns to haunt his theory of morality in the guise of the 'moral feeling' of *Achtung* (respect). Indeed, in the *Critique of Judgement*, we find Kant arguing, albeit reluctantly, that interest in the beauty of Nature (as distinct from Art) is a genuine mark of moral distinction (p. 221): the lover of Nature's beauty is, quite simply, a Beautiful Soul for Kant. Schiller, who, unlike Kant, enthusiastically embraced the age-old notion of a deep connection between the ethical and the aesthetic (p. ix), was the first to theorise the concept of the Beautiful Soul seriously. In Norton's view, fatefully reliant on assertion rather than argumentation, Schiller failed to prove the link, despite the persuasiveness of his magnificent rhetoric. And Goethe, in an interpolated biographical story from *Wilhelm Meister* ('the Confessions of a Beautiful Soul') made quite clear 'a latent negativity' in the concept (p. 260) by portraying his Pietistic recluse, a woman devoted to her invisible Friend, Jesus, as a self-indulgent and sterile ascetic. A negative conclusion, then, at the end of the century, to the career of a once-dominant and lively idea, a negativity exceeded only by Hegel's devastating critique of the Beautiful Soul in his *Phenomenology* of 1807: beauty of soul is inherently suicidal, surrendering existence to maintain its self (p. 275).

The conceptualization of the Beautiful Soul in the cultural theory of Weimar Classicism is more differentiated than Norton's account suggests. He attacks Schiller's 'hazy logic' (p. 236) in the private letters to Körner and in the foxingly dialectical essay, *On Grace and Dignity* (both of 1793). In respect of the former he follows John Ellis in treating what was an incomplete draft as if it were a finished thesis, and in respect of the latter (following Kate Hamburger's forty-year old contributions), he leaves entirely out of account Schiller's stated strategy of uncovering the inadequacy of the (traditional) concept of the 'Beautiful Soul', in order to argue for the need to supplement it with the moral category of the sublime (*Nationalausgabe*, 21, 294). Moreover, Norton pays hardly any attention to what he concedes is Schiller's 'major philosophical work', *The Aesthetic Letters* (p. 244), where (particularly in Letters xxiii, xxiv, and xxv), besides telling us precisely (*pace* Norton) what the sensible attributes of beauty are (Letter iv), the aesthetic is strenuously argued for as the necessary though not sufficient condition of both the birth and the continuance of ethical behaviour. *In nuce*, Schiller argues that grace is

impossible to feign, and that hypocrisy is thus inimical to the truly Beautiful Soul, by virtue of the fact that aesthetic behaviour is a 'sincere seeming' (*aufrichtiger Schein* (Letter xxvi)). Thus Norton's book, because of this surprising *lacuna* (not to mention his neglect of Schiller's late dramas in which the conventional idea of the Beautiful Soul is mercilessly pilloried), tantalizingly leaves undiscussed the true eighteenth-century culmination of the tradition he traces with such skill. In general Norton's power of synthesis finally invites the question whether the purely inward Beautiful Soul of the early Pietistic tradition did not also sustain a life distinct from, say, the Hellenic conception of moral beauty; and whether, crucially, Goethe and Hegel are not attacking this neo-platonic abstraction rather than the aesthetic conception (as Nietzsche's differentiated critique was to do, on Norton's own account (pp. 283–84)). In a word, is the 'Love' advocated by Hegel as reconciling Particular and Universal really different in kind from that urged by Schiller in his down-to-earth injunction to the Poets (*Tabulae Votivae*, 42) to use their sensuous medium to effect unity in much the same way 'as lovers use their bodies'?

None the less, Norton's book is to be commended for casting fresh and invigorating light on the living relevance of eighteenth-century intellectual problems to one of the central preoccupations of such modern thinkers as Wittgenstein, Foucault, and Richard Rorty (pp. 1–4).

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