

THEORIES AND METHODOLOGIES

The Aestheticization of Persia from Kant to Hegel

ANAHID NERSESIAN AND MANU SAMRITI CHANDER

It would be hard to overestimate the significance of beauty as a concept and keyword in the philosophies of the Enlightenment. For Immanuel Kant, the beautiful is nothing less than the proving ground of our rational and our social capacities, the paradoxically noninstrumental means by which we come to know ourselves and others as reasoning creatures.¹ In his third *Critique*, Kant toggles uneasily between a commitment to the disinterestedness of aesthetic judgments, which, properly speaking, cannot be contaminated by any personal material or psychic investment in the object being judged, and an almost compulsive tendency to racialize bad or insufficient examples of the beautiful. Beauty, it seems, is at once a place where identity goes to die—or, rather, at whose door it must be relinquished—and yet a generality constantly defined against the threat of its overparticularization.

Kant is hardly alone among his contemporaries in formulating an ideal of beauty predicated on the notion of absence, whether it is the absence of interest or, as in the influential writing of Johann Joachim Winckelmann, the absence of color. “Since white is the color that reflects the most rays of light,” Winckelmann wrote in his *History of the Art of Antiquity*, “a beautiful body will be all the more beautiful the whiter it is” (195). These well-known claims are no less odious for being familiar. Still, the overt racism of so much of the eighteenth-century aesthetic tradition has perhaps led scholars to ignore the complexities of racialization within that discourse, particularly with regard to the development of racial and ethnic paradigms that would go on to become increasingly important to modern geopolitics.

The case of “the Persianate” and the role played in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century philosophy by the uncertain, even volatile racialization of Western and Central Asian cultures provide a particularly compelling set of lenses through which to assess the ideological assumptions and claims of Enlightenment aesthetics. The path from

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race to politics runs directly through the beautiful, which, for Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel as well as for Kant, was bound up with the future of the human species; this path crosses what we now call the Persianate world, which signifies at once a region spanning Eastern Europe to South Asia (and beyond) and a shifting set of fantasies about specific parts of the globe.

The racialization of diverse peoples across these geographic spaces is inconsistent in Enlightenment thought. The Scottish surgeon John Hunter classified Persians (*Persae*) as brown (*fusci*), lighter than the black (*nigri*), blackish (*subnigri*), coppery (*cuprei*), and red (*rubri*) peoples of Africa, South Asia, and America, but darker than the brownish (*subfusci*) and white (*albi*) peoples of Europe. The Persian, according to Hunter, shared a color with the Tartar, Arab, Mediterranean African (*Afri Mari Mediterraneo accolae*), and Chinese (366–67).² Johann Friedrich Blumenbach, however, classified Persians as Caucasian—“the most beautiful race of men”—and this designation would inform later race theorists, for whom the anthropological and the aesthetic were intimately related (269).

Like Blumenbach, Kant includes the Persian (*die Perser*) as part of the “white race” (*die Race der Weißen*), but he rhetorically distances the figure from those his audience—students in his lecture courses at the University of Königsberg—would immediately understand as white:

I think one is only compelled to assume *four* races of the human species in order to be able to derive from these all the easily distinguishable and self-perpetuating differences. They are 1) the race of the *whites*, 2) the *Negro race*, 3) the *Hunnish* (Mongolian or Kalmuckian) race, 4) the Hindu or *Hindustani* race. Among the first race, which is located primarily in Europe, I count also the Moors (Mauretanian from Africa), the Arabs (following Niebuhr), the Turkish-Tartaric ethnic tribe and the Persians, as well as all other peoples from Asia who are not explicitly excluded from it by the remaining divisions. (*Of the Different Races* 87)

Kant’s “I count also” (*rechne ich noch*) suggests that the position of the Persian is one of qualified

whiteness, neither brown according to Hunter’s taxonomy nor unequivocally white according to Blumenbach’s. In order to understand this position, and its ongoing place in Kant’s later discussions of cosmopolitanism, we thus need to situate *die Perser* within the broader discourse about cultural purity and beauty that runs through Kant’s ideas about racial difference.

In one of Kant’s lecture notes, Kant remarks that the world was fortunate that the Persian and Mongolian empires did not expand farther: “Glück für die Welt, das Perser und Mungalen nicht haben Posto fassen können” (“Lucky for the world, the Persians and Mongols were not able to establish a position”; *Gesammelte Schriften* 876; our trans.). Read next to his *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime* (1764), this note begins to explain why he held such a view. There, after noting the extreme beauty of Georgian and Circassian (that is, Caucasian) women, Kant writes that the Persians, along with the Turks and Arabs, must also have found these women attractive and sought to “beautify their populations with such fine blood” (*Observations* 47). The Persians alone, he claims, did so successfully.³

Kant was doubtlessly informed (as Blumenbach had been) by Jean Chardin (also known as John Chardin), whose multivolume *Sir John Chardin’s Travels in Persia* observed that “the Nobility of Persia had been the ugliest Men in the World” (184) before the “Mixture” with Georgians and Circassians, by consequence of which “the Persian blood is now grown clearer” (183):

Had it not been for the Alliance before mention’d, the Nobility of Persia had been the ugliest Men in the World; for they originally came from those Countries between China and the Caspian Sea, call’d Tartary; the Inhabitants whereof being the homeliest Men of Asia, are short and thick, have their Eyes and Nose like the Chinese, their Face flat and broad, and their Complexion yellow, mix’d with black. (184)

Thanks to *Verschönerung* (“beautification”), the Persians escaped ugliness and homeliness. It is

crucial to note that this was not, for Kant, a matter of race mixing or miscegenation, which, even as late as the 1798 edition of *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, Kant denounced as “not beneficial to the human race” (415). Because Persians were already deemed white—despite what Chardin had written about their Chinese features and “yellow, mix’d with black” skin—their beautification by means of “Alliance” with Georgians and Circassians was an acceptable form of “improvement,” one unavailable to the nonwhite races. *Verschönerung*, it might thus be said, is precisely what distinguishes Persians qua Caucasians from nonwhite Asians, such as “the *Hunnish*” and “*Hindustani*” races.

The potential to beautify available to Persians but denied to others across the Persianate world goes beyond appearance. In her recent study of Kant’s raciology, Huaping Lu-Adler notes that Kant, like many of his contemporaries, was engaged in debates about whether the beginnings of philosophy were to be found in the Orient or in Greece. To answer this question, Kant assumed a set of basic capacities necessary to philosophical cognition, including the capacity for speculative, abstract reasoning. For Kant, this capacity was demonstrable in the Greeks but not in non-Caucasian Asians. As for the qualified Caucasians, including the Persians, they “admittedly made ‘some speculative use of reason,’ but they borrowed the rules for this use from Aristotle” (Lu-Adler 315). Their (qualified) capacity for speculative reasoning meant that Persians were able to develop moral character, which depended on the capacity to act in accordance with abstract concepts. They may not have invented the rules for speculative reasoning, but Persians at least had access to moral development.

As goes moral development, so too goes achievement in the arts: where the Indians and Chinese are limited by their taste for the grotesque, the Persians, Kant writes in *Observations*, are “good poets, courtly and of a rather fine taste.” They are, he tells us, “the Frenchmen of Asia” (59), which would suggest, if we follow Kant’s earlier account of the French, that they “ha[ve] a feeling for the morally beautiful” and are “refined, courteous, and

complaisant” (54). Kant’s description of the Persian character strongly echoes that of Chardin, who, in the section immediately following the one about physical features quoted above, similarly calls attention to the virtues of courtliness, civility, and complaisance (184). These are the very characteristics that Mana Kia associates with *adab*—“poetry, aesthetic sense, and above all its proper forms in perceiving, speaking, and acting” (3)—a sensibility that Chardin would have witnessed firsthand in his travels and that Kant, from his perch in Königsberg, would have then taken as fact. This French-like capacity for comportment is denied to Indians and Chinese, who have no European corollary.

Lu-Adler notes Kant’s “unrelenting determination to expunge what he took to be the ‘Oriental’ way of thinking from the Occidental cultural landscape altogether” and writes that “this absolutist exclusionary tendency . . . is deeply entangled with some of his treasured philosophical ideas, including ‘spirit’ and ‘genius’ above all” (318). If this absolutism certainly applies to nonwhite Persianate peoples, the qualified Caucasians of the Persianate world inhabit a perhaps more ambiguous position near, if not firmly situated on, “the Occidental cultural landscape.”

Which is to say that the Persian, at least potentially, has a place in history. For *Verschönerung*, as a capacity for physical, moral, and aesthetic improvement, is future oriented. It is about man’s ability to fulfill nature’s purpose for humanity as such, even as some humans are constitutionally incapable of participating in that fulfillment. It is not that Kant believes that non-Caucasian races will cease to exist (although nothing would preclude that possibility), but that only the Caucasian, by means of self-improvement, contributes meaningfully to the progress of history. While non-Caucasian Persianate peoples lack this capacity, Persians, with their limited use of speculative reason and their achievements in courtly poetry, might yet prove useful to the destiny of the species. By the time we get to Hegel, we find an even more explicit impulse to regard different civilizations as more or less available to the movement of history, and thus more or

less capable of achieving fulfillment as civilizations: Hegel's sorting of cultures into piles is also a sorting of human beings into those who are and are not able to perfect what he calls their *Gattungsprozeß*, or species process.⁴

Hegel's emphasis on development—which is to say, on change over time—is the defining feature of his theory of history and his most important contribution to Western philosophy. It is also, by extension, a defining feature of his aesthetics. Without an account of how one form of art evolves from another, there can be no account of the history of art; without an account of the history of art, aesthetics cannot be folded into the discipline of philosophy, whose object is to explain the nature and principles of reality, given that “reality” is always historically contingent and continually in process.

As Hamid Dabashi points out, the same Romantic-era fad for Persian literature that inspired Johann Wolfgang von Goethe to write his *West-östlicher Divan* inspired Hegel “to turn Persians themselves, not just their language, into Europeans” (91). Here is a crucial passage from Hegel's *Philosophy of History*:

With the Persian Empire we first enter on continuous History. The Persians are the first Historical People; Persia was the first Empire that passed away. While China and India remain stationary, and perpetuate a natural vegetative existence even to the present time, this land has been subject to those developments and revolutions, which alone manifest a historical condition. The Chinese and the Indian Empire assert a place in the historical series only on their own account and for us (not for neighbors and successors). (173)

In other words, East and South Asia are not folded into the progress of human civilization but are interesting anomalies in its general narrative. Even if Hegel moves away from Kant's emphasis on physical appearance and moral and aesthetic capacity, he nonetheless sees the non-Caucasian Asian as ancillary to his philosophy.

The Persian, however, remains, as in Kant, privileged among “Orientals.” Hegel continues:

But here in Persia first arises that light which shines itself, and illuminates what is around; for Zoroaster's “Light” belongs to the World of Consciousness—to Spirit as a relation to something distinct from itself. We see in the Persian World a pure exalted Unity, as the essence which leaves the special existences that inhere in it, free;—as the Light, which only manifests what bodies are in themselves;—a Unity which governs individuals only to excite them to become powerful for themselves—to develop and assert their individuality. . . . The principle of development begins with the history of Persia. This therefore constitutes strictly the beginning of World-History; for the grand interest of Spirit in History, is to attain an unlimited immanence of subjectivity—by an absolute antithesis to attain complete harmony. (173–74)

Note how closely Hegel's language resembles that of Winckelmann, who proposed that whiteness, as the ability to reflect light, was a marker of aesthetic excellence. Describing Zoroastrianism as a religion whose first principle is a commitment to the “Light,” Hegel argues that the special theological character of Zoroastrian practice allows individuals—described here, almost in art-historical terms, as “bodies”—to become manifest to themselves, to become, in other words, self-conscious. Hegel was famously influenced by Winckelmann, whom he described as “one of those men who, in the field of art, knew how to open up a new organ for spirit and an entirely new way of observing” (*Hegel's Aesthetics* 1: 63). In the passage from *Philosophy of History* above, history itself seems to become a kind of museum or gallery, in which subjects, if rightly disposed by their native culture, are able to appreciate themselves as objects—and not just any object, but an object understood in distinctly visual and indeed sculptural terms as an illuminated body.

This same kind of language and logic appears in Hegel's lectures on aesthetics, delivered in Berlin throughout the 1820s. The lectures set out to describe three distinct stages in the emergence and refinement of art and artistic production: the symbolic, the classical, and the romantic. The classical and the romantic stages correspond, respectively, to the cultures of ancient Greece and Christian

Europe. The symbolic is keyed both to ancient Zoroastrian culture and to the “Persian Mohammedan Poetry” of later centuries, though in both cases the identification is not quite perfect. Zoroastrianism, as Hegel explains, is actually barely symbolic, for if the symbolic requires “a detachment of a universal meaning from what is immediately present in nature” (*Hegel’s Aesthetics* 1: 323), this is not quite a fitting description of a theology and an iconography in which Light simply *is* good, not a name or a picture for it. As for Persian poetry, it privileges the abstract and universal over the particular, therefore inching a bit closer, in its “freedom and mysticism,” to the protocols of romantic art than one might otherwise have expected (1: 364).

As Hegel puts it, “the Mohammedan Persians . . . openly and cheerfully sacrifice their entire selves to God and to everything praiseworthy, yet in this sacrifice they do precisely retain the free substantiality which they can preserve even in relation to the surrounding world” (1: 369). What Hegel is trying to describe here is an anticipation or preapprehension of a *Gattungsprozess* only available, in its true form, to Western Europeans, but nonetheless available in glimmers in the poetry of Hafez and others. The dialectical movement from which freedom is produced through self-subjugation to that which is outside the subject is the essential protocol of Hegel’s theory of history and thus of the development of the species. “Free substantiality,” or the capacity to know oneself as an autonomous being who is both free and constrained by material circumstances—whose freedom emerges through the confrontation with and transformation of the material world, which consists not simply of the contingencies of nature but also of other people themselves—turns out to be a phenomenon that is not universal but that, like culture itself, evolves over time. To put it in stronger terms, if the ancient and medieval Persians rehearse or approximate elements of modern European consciousness, it is precisely because they rehearse or approximate elements of modern European aesthetics.

The structure of Hegel’s discussion bears this out. No sooner has Hegel praised “the whole poetry”

of Persia for operating like a “candle . . . [that] through the flame . . . laughs in cheerful splendour, while at the same time it melts away in hot tears” and “in its burning . . . spreads” joy and laughter (*Hegel’s Aesthetics* 1: 369), then he instantly pivots to Goethe and his *West-östlicher Divan*: “inspired by the breath of the East, and with his soul filled with boundless bliss, [Goethe] turns in the poetic fervour of his heart to this freedom of feeling, a freedom that even in polemics keeps the most beautiful tranquillity” (1: 370). Even though Goethe’s *West-östlicher Divan* is openly inspired by his reading of Persian poets, in Hegel’s narrative it becomes a kind of culminating point for the development of an aesthetic that models, as well as enacts, a philosophy of history in which ever-increasing degrees of human self-consciousness produce ever-increasing degrees of human freedom. To say that Goethe is influenced by Hafez is to put the matter too lightly for Hegel; it is rather that Hafez becomes Goethe and that Goethe represents an advancement—both culturally and at the level of the species itself—on Hafez.

In his *Aesthetic Theory*, Theodor Adorno famously remarks that Kant and Hegel “were able to write major aesthetics without understanding anything about art” (334). Kant’s third *Critique* is almost comically devoid of examples, and while Hegel, in his lectures on aesthetics, spares more time for actually existing cultural artifacts he joins Kant in essentially subordinating aesthetic problems to those that seem more pressingly philosophical. In other words, where Kant uses aesthetics as an occasion to evolve a theory of cognition and subjectivity, Hegel uses aesthetics as an occasion to bolster his philosophy of history. For both of these thinkers, Persians are exceptional among non-Europeans for their contributions to the progress of aesthetics that is increasingly understood as the progress of the species. This Persian exceptionalism comes at the expense of other Persianate peoples deemed ugly, irrational, immoral, or, to recall Hegel’s term, “vegetative.”

By taking a cue from those scholars who see in the concept of the Persianate an alternative way of organizing the world, those of us who work on Enlightenment and Romantic Europe are positioned

to provincialize narratives of human progress that pit Kant's and Hegel's racial others against one another. This is not, to be clear, a matter of idealizing the Persianate world as a space free of the racial hierarchizations that structure Kant's and Hegel's thought. Rather, the project we envision would ask what happens when we situate Kant and Hegel in discursive as well as historical contiguity to those across the Persianate world. If we intend to, as Nile Green suggests, "trace the mobility of texts and text producers as far away as the British Isles and China" (1), what happens when we include Kant's Königsberg and Hegel's Berlin as sites of Persianate cultural production—that is, as sites where a version of Persianness is produced? In other words, rather than sift for evidence—of which there is plenty—that the European variant of "Enlightenment" found its way to South, Central, and East Asia, and thereby conclude that such places and cultures are worthy of a spot in the pantheon of *Weltliteratur*, why don't we shift our emphases and flip our assumptions on their heads? Why don't we ask about the influence of the Persianate—and, with it, Asian, African, Pacific, circum-Atlantic, and other cultures—on Europe, not as our chief point of interest but as one formation among many? By "we" we designate not only scholars working on the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries but also those who do that work at a distance (whether analytic, personal, or both) from its Anglo-European perimeter. Although Kant would not think so, such a gesture would be true to his project, at once tribute and critique from the sort of minds he was unable to imagine.

NOTES

1. See Arendt: "The topics of the *Critique of Judgment*—the particular, whether a fact of nature or an event in history; the faculty of judgment as the faculty of man's mind to deal with it; sociability of men as the condition of the functioning of this faculty, that is, the insight that men are dependent on their fellow men not only because of their having a body but precisely for their

mental faculties—these topics . . . [were] of eminent political significance—that is, important for the political" (14).

2. Hunter's *Disputatio inauguralis* was translated from Latin to English by Thomas Bendyshe and published alongside Johann Friedrich Blumenbach's *On the Natural Variety of Mankind* in 1865.

3. We wish to thank Werner Stark for his assistance in helping us decipher Kant's puzzling note about *das Perser und Mungalen*. In a personal correspondence, Stark clarified that, according to student notes, Kant clearly had in mind the ugliness of Persians and Mongols when he noted that the world was fortunate they did not take over completely.

4. In a longer paper, we might pause to consider how some of the most important critiques leveled at Marxism by postcolonial thinkers are grounded in the fact that Marx, following Hegel, sometimes seems to suggest that not all cultures are cut out for the developmental program that will lead, ultimately, to the emancipation of the species.

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