

KANT, ARTISTIC PROFUNDITY AND AESTHETIC IDEAS

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Abstract. *The article deals with the problem of whether Kant's conception of fine art, as it is presented in the Critique of the Power of Judgment (1790), can account for what many art lovers consider one of the highest virtue of artworks, i.e., profundity. According to this framework, a crucial mark of artistic profundity is the impossibility of fully capturing the content of a work of art, or our response to it, conceptually. Kant's description of our response to works of art, or more precisely to works of genius, strikes a very similar note. The possibility of a Kantian version of artistic profundity should not be taken for granted, however. In fact, we tend to think that in profound art we are offered a deep understanding or deep treatment of a topic, and we tend to assume that depth and truth are related. But it is disputable whether notions such as 'understanding' and 'truth' can find a place in a theory of art such as Kant's, which sets a use of the reflecting power of judgment that is not cognitive as a standard of artistic success and which furthermore puts at the heart of artistic experience a class of intuitions – aesthetic ideas – that, not being fully captured by conceptual description, are not truth-apt. This seems to affect the very possibility of a Kantian account of profundity, but it will be shown that this difficulty can be overcome.*

Keywords. *Kant; artistic profundity; aesthetic ideas; genius; aesthetic non-conceptualism*

0. Introduction

In this paper, I will deal with the problem of whether Kant's conception of fine art, as it is presented in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (1790), can account for what many art lovers consider one of the highest virtue of artworks, i.e., profundity¹. At first

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¹ Kant's work will be cited infratextually in parentheses, using the standard abbreviation of the German title, followed by section number and the

sight, a positive answer seems possible. According to the conception I subscribe to in this paper, a crucial mark of artistic profundity, with other conditions in place, is the impossibility of fully capturing the content of a work of art, or our response to it, conceptually. Kant's description of our response to works of art, or more precisely to works of genius, strikes a very similar note. According to him, there is more to our experience of beautiful art, as expressive of aesthetic ideas, than can be captured conceptually. The possibility of a Kantian version of artistic profundity should not be taken for granted, however. In fact, we tend to think that in profound art we are offered a deep understanding or deep treatment of a topic, and we tend to assume that depth and truth are linked. But it is disputable whether notions such as 'understanding' and 'truth' can find a place in a theory of art such as Kant's, which sets a use of the reflecting power of judgment that is not cognitive as a standard of artistic success and which furthermore puts at the heart of artistic experience a class of intuitions – aesthetic ideas – that, not being fully captured by conceptual description, are not truth apt. This seems to affect the very possibility of a Kantian account of profundity, but I hope to show that this difficulty can be overcome.

The structure of the paper is as follows. In the first section, I sketch a notion of artistic profundity; in the second section, I then briefly present Kant's conception of genius and aesthetic ideas. The latter notion, together with that of spirit, will emerge as the central elements of a Kantian explanation of what can provide art with profundity. Kantian profundity is the theme of the third section of the paper, in which I also deal with the above-stated problem of the possible place of epistemic notions

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such as truth and understanding in Kant's theory of art. In a fourth and concluding section, I add something on the relationship between aesthetic ideas and ideas of reason, on the one hand, and between beauty and profundity, on the other.

1. *On profundity in art*

In a paper that returns to a topic explored in the last chapter of his 1990 book *Music Alone*, namely whether pure instrumental music can rightly be called 'profound' (a possibility on which he casts doubt), Peter Kivy offers a nice formulation of the notion of profundity in art². Looking to literature for a paradigm of profundity, he characterizes the notion as follows:

For a work of art to be profound [...] it must (1) have a profound subject matter and (2) treat this profound subject matter in a way adequate to its profundity – which is to say, (a) say profound things about this subject matter and (b) do it at a very high level of artistic or aesthetic excellence³.

He then explains that a profound subject matter is a subject matter that goes to the moral heart of the human condition, namely to fundamental questions such as what makes life worthwhile, the extent of our freedom, the limitedness of life, guilt and redemption, etc⁴.

² Cf. P. Kivy, *Music Alone. Philosophical Reflections on the Purely Musical Experience*, Ithaca (NY), Cornell University Press, 1990, pp. 202-218.

³ Id., *Another Go at Musical Profundity: Stephen Davies and the Game of Chess*, «British Journal of Aesthetics», XLIII, 2003, pp. 401-411, p. 402.

⁴ Being a subject matter of profundity involves more than being of great concern or interest to a large number of people, for in that case activities such as football or caring about one's look or social media profile would be profound. Profundity seems to require that something be not only of great concern but worthy of it.

Although Kivy's conception as sketched in this passage seems plausible and I largely agree with it, I think that a specification and a modification should be added to it, even if, as we will see, there can be tension between them. To Kivy's conception it should be added that part of what makes a treatment adequate to a profound subject matter is its connection to truth. It is unlikely that we will consider what a work 'says' about a subject matter profound if we consider it false. As for the modification, it is needed because Kivy's conception can be misleading in a crucial respect, namely in its claim that profound works must say profound things about their profound subject matters. The verb 'say' takes that-clause complements. Whether one assumes that a work 'directly' expresses something profound or that it 'indirectly' expresses – namely implicates, suggests, or intimates – something profound, the idea is that its profundity consists in propositional content⁵. Against this view, however, it might be argued that many of the most profound works of art are not profound because of what they state or imply, and it might be claimed, following Julian Dodd, that we can respond to something in a profound manner «without expressing a proposition about it»⁶. If this is correct, as I think it is, the addition of a connection to truth might appear puzzling, as propositions are the primary bearers of truth values.

A recurring example of profound art is provided by Rembrandt's later self-portraits. Although they do not express propositions, they nonetheless depict their subjects in ways that strike many as profound. No matter how we interpret them – as

⁵ Kivy's strategy of looking to literature for a paradigm of profundity is disputable, as it inevitably has sceptical consequences with regard to pure instrumental music. In fact, the characterization of profundity that follows from that move requires that whatever is profound be capable of both (semantic) reference and sense, or must both denote something profound and express profound propositions about it. Pure instrumental music seems incapable of either, as do all non-verbal art forms, presumably. On this cf. R.A. Sharpe, *Sounding the Depths*, «British Journal of Aesthetics», XL, 2000, pp. 64-72.

⁶ J. Dodd, *The Possibility of Profound Music*, «British Journal of Aesthetics», LIV, 2014, pp. 299-322.

exercises in self-examination or, as more recent scholarship is inclined to think, as works prompted by the great demand for images of a famous artist⁷ – they are moving images of the painter himself, in which we are confronted with the artist's moods and thoughts. Even if they were painted for commercial gain, Rembrandt reveals an increasing concern for mortality, ageing and vulnerability. His brushstrokes describe, as an art critic writes, «untold nuances from dignity to foolishness, fear, endurance and loss»⁸. These aspects of the human condition are presented in a way that enables the observer to see herself and her world as a human being in those existential conditions. We tend to consider these self-portraits profound because they display a deep understanding of Rembrandt's subjective view of himself and the world, and the understanding they display, while apparently highly particularized, is of unrestricted scope⁹.

Music lovers can probably think of similar examples in their fields – cases in point might be Beethoven's *Eroica*, his late quartets or Mahler's *Sixth Symphony* – but it can also be argued that even the profundity of a literary work consists more in its providing a searching, thought-provoking response to its (profound) theme than in expressing profound propositions

⁷ As beguiling as the notion of the artist's self-examination might be, it may also be an anachronistic explanation of the purpose of such paintings. In Rembrandt's day, personality was viewed primarily as being bound to types discussed in classical sources. On the other hand, contrary to the myth that Rembrandt was ignored and forgotten in later life, the fame he achieved at an early age stayed with him to the end. Recalling a view set forth by Ernst Van de Wetering, Susan Fegley Osmond points out that one consequence of this fame was the public's desire to acquire an image of the artist. In general, it was a consequence of an artist's fame that the public desired an image of him. The more famous the artist, the greater the demand for such images. An artist's self-portrait had the added attraction of providing both his likeness and an example of his technique (cf. S.F. Osmond, *Rembrandt's Self-Portrait*, (http://www.rembrandtpainting.net/rembrandt_self_portraits.htm).

⁸ L. Cumming, *Rembrandt: The Late Works Review – Dark, Impassioned, Magnificently Defiant*, «The Guardian», 19.10.2014.

⁹ My considerations here are inspired by A. Savile, *The Test of Time. An Essay in Philosophical Aesthetic*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1982, pp. 141-142.

about it¹⁰. This means that the locus of literary profundity is not so much a message conveyed by the text but, as Julian Dodd suggests, the author's use of literary means to portray matters of significance to us or aspects of our human condition in a way that provides the sensitive reader with deeper insight into them, bringing her to appreciate them more deeply or more fully¹¹.

In line with this suggestion, it seems to me that a more plausible way to conceive of artistic profundity is to say that works of art are profound by virtue of possessing a *response-dependent property* of the type sketched above. Dodd describes this as a disposition to elicit, in the understanding appreciator, the experience of coming to a deeper, more insightful vision of the work's theme or a fuller grasp of its significance¹².

As I noted commenting on the Rembrandt case, a work might elicit this kind of experience, and count as deep or profound, when the particular case that it displays is of an important typical sort or is «salient among the varieties of form that experience can take», so that other particular instances cluster around it¹³. In fact, only if it is of an important typical sort will a particular case, be it a character, a course of action, a human condition, etc., prompt the understanding audience to appreciate

¹⁰ On Shakespeare's *King Lear*, which many consider one of the more profound works of literature, R.A. Sharpe observes that its profundity does not lie in what is stated in it. He supports his claim by recalling the closing lines of the play, where Lear, with Cordelia dead in his arms, asks: «Why should a dog, a horse, a rat have life, and thou no breath at all?». Lear, Sharpe comments, «says nothing which is other than commonplace, and it is partly the audacity of such simplicity which is astonishing. But what is commonplace here is deeply affecting» (Sharpe, *Sounding the Depths*, p. 65). Profound art might be art that moves people profoundly.

¹¹ Cf. Dodd, *The Possibility of Profound Music*, pp. 316, 317.

¹² Ivi, pp. 304, 312.

¹³ Savile, *The Test of Time*, p. 143.

aspects of fundamental import, aspects we might otherwise overlook¹⁴.

If these considerations are on the right track, then the touchstone of profundity throughout the arts is *thought-provokingness* on a matter of deep significance to us¹⁵, bearing in mind that this is a feature that works also possess in virtue of how the artistic means of the art form to which they belong are used. Furthermore, since for an artwork to be thought-provoking is also for it to be an inexhaustible source of reflection and fresh insight into its (profound) subject matter, it seems that we should consider as a mark of profundity our inability to grasp the meaning or the point of the artwork in question fully – to completely express, in propositions, what it reveals¹⁶. This inability is the other side of the ability of the work to ‘prompt’, as it were, a limitless process of thought, namely of its disposition to induce (by means of what it says and implicates in the case of literature or, in the case of other art forms, by means of the manifest properties it has) the response that is distinctive of profound experience. This, incidentally, is a type of response that is *called for*: it is rationally, not causally, constrained – that is, extracted from us as «the kind of response that the work *demand*s» given its point, its purpose in having the properties it has¹⁷.

To summarize: For profundity to obtain, at least two conditions must be met. First, a work of art must have a profound subject; it must deal with something worthy of great

¹⁴ As Savile notes, it is when we know the type that we are able to see in the instances we come across features that we might otherwise easily neglect (ivi, pp. 142-143).

¹⁵ Dodd, *The Possibility of Profound Music*, p. 316. Dodd recalls that this is also how Kivy himself describes profundity.

¹⁶ Assuming that interpretation is the revelation of meaning, this view could also be expressed by claiming that what a profound work of art reveals is indefinitely re-interpretable: there is no end to the task of interpreting it (on this, cf. M. Morris, *How Can There Be Works of Art*, «Postgraduate Journal of Aesthetics», V, 2008, pp. 1-18).

¹⁷ Dodds, *The Possibility of Profound Music*, p. 317.

concern, namely, to use Kivy's examples, topics such as «death, crime and punishment, the problem of evil, human loss, sorrow and discontent, the human condition, freedom of the will, human weakness»¹⁸. Second, the work must touch on a topic of this kind in a way that is adequate to its profundity, that is, by presenting it to us in such a way that, as we interpret its meaning, the point of its unfolding as it does, we gain fuller or deeper insight into the topic.

According to the conception of profundity subscribed to here, depth of insight need not standardly be expressed in propositional form¹⁹. If we agree that profundity lies more in the nature of the response elicited by a work than in its conveying allegedly profound thoughts, then, as I have also assumed that profound artworks bring us to appreciate a truth of some kind, we should accept the further assumption that a work may not necessarily bring us to appreciate that truth by expressing it.

The idea that profound works of art have a *thought-provoking* character closely recalls Kant's view that works of genius set into motion a limitless process of thought in the audience, a crucial feature of which is that it does not result in conceptual knowledge. What is at the heart of our experience of works of genius or beautiful art on Kant's view? Is this experience really describable as an experience of profundity? In order to answer these questions, I will first sketch Kant's conception of genius.

¹⁸ Kivy, *Music Alone*, p. 204; cf. also p. 217.

¹⁹ It is worth recalling that in Adorno's view it never is. Even when its medium is linguistic, what an artwork says is not what its words say. «No art – he writes – can be pinned down as to what it says, and yet it speaks» (T.W. Adorno, *Quasi una fantasia: essays on modern music*, London, Verso, 1992, p. 1). Adorno holds that all artworks, and not just those whose medium is language, possess a 'language-character', which he links with truth-content. I thank Andy Hamilton for having pointed this out to me.

2. *Art, genius and aesthetic ideas*

Kant introduces genius in his conception of art mainly to account for our apprehension of artistic beauty²⁰. In fact, with regard to this, his theory faces a problem that can roughly be stated as follows: The fine or beautiful arts belong to the class of intentional activities; their products are artefacts of human origin, grounded in rational considerations (cf. KU § 43); skill, learning practical rules, and practice are important in them²¹; and the experience of artworks takes place against the background of rules, expectations with regard to artists' aims, stylistic tendencies, etc., namely against the background of a complex conceptual network. However, Kant emphasizes that artistic evaluation cannot be derived from «any sort of rule that has [...] as its ground» a concept of how art objects are possible (KU § 46; AA 05: 307; cf. also KU § 48; AA 05: 312). According to him, even if with a work of art one must be aware of its status as an artefact, «yet the purposiveness in its form must still seem to be as free from all constraint by arbitrary rules as if it were a mere product

²⁰ For a similar view, cf. R.J.M. Neal, *Kant's Ideality of Genius*, «Kant-Studien», CIII, 2012, pp. 351-360, p. 352.

²¹ Every art form, Kant claims, «presupposes rules which first lay the foundation by means of which a product that is to be called artistic is first represented as possible» (KU § 46; AA 05: 307). Paintings, sculptures, poems, etc., are no exception. Not unlike chairs and tables, paintings and poems, just because they are artistic productions, are created on the basis of a «determinate concept» of them as ends (KU § 49; AA 05: 317). Artists are guided by intentions, hence by concepts in a broad sense. Such intentions, alongside the categorical ones, concern the theme of the work and how to approach it, the expressive means to be used, etc. Some of them may change as they engage with the material of their art. There are also plenty of rules that artists follow when creating their products – rules such as those that govern perspective, or the use of colours, or the rules collected in or deducible from essays on poetry and treatises on architecture or on musical composition, etc. (cf. KU § 47; AA 05: 310). Artists often also comply with the standards they acquire, guided by established authorities or current fashion. On artistic apprenticeship, cf. KU § 47; AA 05: 308-309.

of nature» (KU § 45; AA 05: 306)²², and this because the ‘standard’ of fine art is not the concept of the sort of thing the object is supposed to be or the rules that ground its possibility but rather «the reflecting power of judgment» (KU § 44; AA 05: 306)²³.

In Kant’s view, genius, conceived of as the «talent (natural gift)» or «the inborn predisposition of the mind (*ingenium*) through which nature gives the rule to art» (KU § 46; AA 05: 307), is what makes it possible to combine that standard with the rule-governed, intentional character of fine art. As for how genius gives the rule to art, Kant will later specify that art «acquires its rule through aesthetic ideas» (KU § 58; AA 05: 350-351), thereby hinting at aesthetic ideas as a key element in his conception of genius and fine art. Actually, this notion is introduced in a section devoted to the faculties of the mind that constitute genius (§ 49), where Kant presents aesthetic ideas as the material «which purposively sets the mental powers into motion, i.e., into a play that is selfmaintaining and even strengthens the powers to that end» (KU § 49; AA 05: 313). The wording here is telling as it closely recalls his description of the state of mind on which the satisfaction in the beautiful rests (cf. e.g. KU §§ 9, 12). This suggests that aesthetic ideas play a crucial role in accounting for the possibility of viewing an object that is dependent on an intentional and rule-following activity as unconstrained by rules and as a possible object of aesthetic appreciation. But what are

²² As Robert Neal points out, Kant’s claim that art «can only be called beautiful if we are aware that it is art and yet it looks to us like nature» (KU § 45; AA 05: 306) recalls a commonplace of neoclassical criticism, according to which art should conceal its necessarily studied and deliberate design beneath a seemingly unstudied style of execution (cf. Neal, *Kant’s Ideality of Genius*, p. 351).

²³ Or, to make the point in other (Kantian) words, «the subjective purposiveness of representations in the mind of the beholder», «an ease in apprehending a given form in the imagination» (KU § 15; AA 05: 227). To set the reflecting power of judgment as a standard of artistic success is precisely to hold that there is no concept (of an end) under which a work and our response to it is to be subsumed. According to Kant, reflective judgment first involves looking for a concept (cf. KU Introduction IV; AA 05: 179).

aesthetic ideas, and why can they play this role? On this, the following passage is emblematic:

In a word, the aesthetic idea is a representation of the imagination associated with a given concept, which is combined with such a manifold of partial representations in the free use of the imagination that no expression designating a determinate concept can be found for it (KU § 49; AA 05: 316).

If we interpret what Kant calls «a given concept» as the concept of the artist's aim, or aspects of it, the first part of the passage might suggest that aesthetic ideas are representations of the imagination through which an artist presents a particular subject or realizes it in an artistic medium. The second part describes what will turn out to be a crucial feature of aesthetic ideas, namely their resistance to conceptualization. Kant also expresses this point by saying that an aesthetic idea occasions «much thinking though without it being possible for any determinate thought, i.e., *concept*, to be adequate to it». The «manifold of partial representations in the free use of the imagination» of the text quoted above is this time expressed in terms of a fullness of thought that cannot be conceptualized and that therefore 'no language' can make fully intelligible (KU § 49; AA 05: 314). The suggestion is that an artist, presenting a concept through an aesthetic idea, stimulates «so much thinking that it can never be grasped in a determinate concept» (KU § 49; AA 05: 315). Concepts of the understanding are typically determinable by means of sensible intuition: the object that corresponds to them can be given in intuition, and they thereby give rise to cognitions. In the case of the artistic realization of a concept, the intuition associated with it, though belonging to its presentation, seems to exceed and lift the limits of conceptual determination – or so it is received by the audience²⁴.

²⁴ Using the term 'to expound' as shorthand for «bring[ing] a representation of the imagination to concepts», Kant captures this feature of aesthetic ideas,

Kant's words in these quotes clearly recall two key aspects of artistic profundity as I described it in the first section, namely thought-provokingness and the impossibility of completely capturing in words the profundity embodied in a work. However, for a work to express an aesthetic idea is for it to be beautiful, as Kant makes clear, opening his sketch of a system of the beautiful arts with the claim that «beauty (whether it be beauty of nature or of art) can in general be called the expression of aesthetic ideas» (KU § 51; AA 05: 320)²⁵. Therefore, the apparently counterintuitive conclusion that a work of art is profound just because it is beautiful seems difficult to avoid. We incline to think that profundity is eminently compatible with beauty but does not arise from it. However, I wonder whether this view depends on our idea of beauty. I will say something on this in the conclusion of the paper; first, however, I would like to introduce other aspects of Kant's discourse on aesthetic ideas.

2.1 Aesthetic attributes and the expression of aesthetic ideas

It is worth considering in further detail what aesthetic ideas are and in what sense they are a product of the imagination. Kant points out that they are «inner intuitions» (KU § 49; AA 05: 314) resulting from the imagination's creative transformation of the material that (internal and external) nature gives to it. According to him, our imagination has the power to create out of that material «as it were, another nature», or to transform it «into something entirely different», which «steps beyond nature» (KU § 49; AA 05: 314). This is possible because the imagination, Kant

namely their being thought-provoking inner intuitions that we cannot completely capture in concepts, by describing them as 'inexplicable' (KU § 57 Remark I; AA 05: 342).

²⁵ He then adds the clarification: «only in beautiful art this idea must be occasioned by a concept of the object»; as for beautiful nature, he somehow mysteriously claims that «the mere reflection on a given intuition, without a concept of what the object ought to be, is sufficient for arousing and communicating the idea of which that object is considered as the expression» (KU § 51; AA 05: 320).

explains, acts «no doubt always in accordance with analogous laws» and «the law of association», which applies to its empirical use, but also «in accordance with principles that lie higher in reason» and which are, he claims, no less natural to us as those laws (KU § 49; AA 05: 314).

More than an activity of imagination that results in a reproductive imitation of reality, Kant seems to be thinking of an activity akin to that level of mimesis which consists in a reconfiguration of reality on an ideal dimension. And with regard to this activity, it is important to consider, first, that in artistic creation the imagination is exercised in the presentation of a given concept, and second, that Kant describes what the artist does to offer such a presentation as a forging of ‘aesthetic attributes’, namely, in Kant’s words, «supplementary representations of the imagination» which «express only the implications connected» with the concept «and its affinity (*Verwandtschaft*) with others» (KU § 49; AA 05: 315).

The word ‘affinity’ (*Verwandtschaft*) is intriguing; it may suggest a common familial origin, but also, referring to the chemistry of the time, a kind of *affinitas aggregationis*, or an *attractio electiva*²⁶. While logical attributes are part of the content of a concept, aesthetic attributes seem to express something that, although not part of the intension of a concept, is nevertheless connected to it by way of some kind of implication or familial affinity. In this sense, they are representations of the imagination that are ‘supplementary’ with regard to the presentation of the concept and are freely added to it by the artist on that basis. Their qualification as aesthetic might also be meant to suggest this subjective status.

Aesthetic attributes might be things like images, memories, metaphorical descriptions, colours, aspects of plots, etc²⁷. Kant

²⁶ Cf. J. und W. Grimm, *Deutsches Wörterbuch*, München, dtv-Verlag, 1984, Bd. 25, Sp. 2132.

²⁷ I take these examples, partly inferable from KU § 49; AA 05: 316, from S. Matherne, *The Inclusive Interpretation of Kant’s Aesthetic Ideas*, «British Journal of Aesthetics», LIII, 2013, pp. 21-39, p. 25.

claims that, stimulated by things of this kind, the imagination spreads itself «over a multitude of related representations, which let one think more than one can express in a concept determined by words», yielding «an aesthetic idea» (KU § 49; AA 05: 315). So Kant seems to think of the creation of a work of art as a process that moves from the artist's concept, roughly the content that she intends to present, to aesthetic attributes or the suitable material for the 'exhibition' of the concept, to the aesthetic idea. The aesthetic idea is actually yielded by the aesthetic attributes connected to the concept at stake, as they prompt a multiplicity of related representations, or that thinking to which, as Kant says, «no linguistic expression is fully adequate» (KU § 49; AA 05: 314).

Although Kant claims that artistic talent or genius displays itself primarily in «the exposition or the expression of aesthetic ideas» (KU 49; AA 05: 317), it seems that at the heart of the creative process lies the aesthetic attributes, as aesthetic attributes are what yield, in both the artist and the audience, the aesthetic idea of which the work is then «regarded as the expression»²⁸. In fact, an aesthetic idea is expressed in a work not by making it part of the content of the work²⁹ but rather, as Kant maintains, by making «universally communicable, whether the expression consist in language, or painting, or in plastic art», via the presentation of a given concept, «what is unnameable in the mental state in the case of a certain representation» (KU § 49; AA 05: 317), that is, the multitude of related representations which allow one to think more than can be captured in concepts.

If this is correct, then to express an aesthetic idea is to elicit in the audience's mind a 'subjective disposition' akin to that originally raised in the artist's mind by finding the idea for the concept she aimed to present³⁰. Interestingly, that the expression

²⁸ Neal, *Kant's Ideality of Genius*, p. 357.

²⁹ A similar point is made by Neal, *ivi*, p. 359.

³⁰ This reading fits in with Kant's claim that genius displays itself in finding, for the aesthetic idea associated with a concept, the expression «through which the subjective disposition of the mind» that is thereby produced «as an

of an aesthetic idea is not meant to be a matter of content – of the idea’s being part of the content of the artwork – is also suggested by Kant’s reference to the Pauline distinction between letter and spirit. I shall briefly review this distinction, as it will also help me to make a point about profundity.

2.2 Kant’s spirit and the Pauline distinction

A reference to the Pauline contrast between spirit and letter is invoked by Kant’s introduction of the notion of spirit «in an aesthetic significance». Tellingly, he deals with this notion after having recognized that one way in which a work of art can be flawed is by being «without *spirit*» (KU § 49; AA 05: 313). Although in this occurrence ‘spirit’ seems to refer to a quality of a work – it is probably a metonymic use of the word – the term mainly refers to a quality of the artist, of the creative mind³¹. Kant describes it as «the faculty for the presentation (*Darstellung*) of aesthetic ideas», or, given that aesthetic ideas are the ‘material’ through which spirit animates the mind, as «the animating principle in the mind» (KU § 49; AA 05: 313-314).

Against this backdrop, the Pauline contrast is initially evoked by a remark by Kant on Johann Philipp Lorenz Withof’s verse: «The sun streamed forth, as tranquility streams from virtue». Quoting these words, which are part of a description of a beautiful morning, Kant notes that here «an intellectual concept can serve as the attribute of a representation of sense, and so animate (*beleben*) the latter by means of the idea of the supersensible». Kant seems to ascribe to an idea of reason a power akin to that of spirit, which, according to St. Paul, gives life (cf. e.g. 2 Cor 3, 6). Penetrating the vision of a beautiful morning, the intellectual concept puts life in a sensible representation. What Kant

accompaniment» of the concept «can be communicated to others» (KU § 49; AA 05: 317).

³¹ Not by chance, Kant also calls works of art «products of spirit» (KU § 49; AA 05: 318). In another passage, he equates that which is genius in a work with that which «constitutes the spirit of the work» (KU § 49; AA 05: 318).

immediately adds is important. He points out that this animation can take place only insofar as what is used to this end is «the aesthetic, which is subjectively attached to the consciousness» of the rational idea (KU § 49; AA 05: 316), namely, the aesthetic that can count as an approximation to a presentation of it. This aesthetic element, as we will see, is precisely the aesthetic idea. Therefore, what really animates is spirit, the faculty for the presentation of aesthetic ideas: it enlivens by creating space, through the presentation of an aesthetic idea, for the rational in the sensible, that is, for an idea, which at the same time subtracts itself from the ‘body’ to which it is connected³². And just as spirit cannot be captured in a manifest form, so the ‘material’ through which the aesthetic spirit animates a work, namely an aesthetic idea, cannot be reached by the ‘letter’: it cannot be reduced to propositional content. In fact, Kant claims, it is precisely the feeling that results from the addition «to a concept of much that is unnameable», namely an aesthetic idea, which «animates the cognitive faculties and combines spirit with the mere letter of language» (KU § 49; AA 05: 316).

In the line just quoted, the reference to the Pauline image is more explicit, and it is worth noting that, while in the passage quoted above an idea of reason is said to animate a representation of sense, in this latter passage concepts are at stake, just as they are in a remark on poetry that comes later in the text, in which Kant claims that the poet gives ‘life’ to the concepts of the understanding «through the imagination» (KU § 51; AA 05: 321). Like Pauline spirit, Kantian poetic imagination gives ‘life’. This is an intriguing image. Life is given to something that is dead – like the Pauline letter, that is, a merely external law in comparison to the internal law of love – and when life is infused in something that is dead, it does not simply become revived but becomes other. I suggest that we can understand the ‘dead’ concept’s reviving and becoming other in terms of what Kant describes as

³² Cf. J. Völker, *Kant and the ‘Spirit as an Enlivening Principle’*, «Filozofski vestnik», XXX, 2009, pp. 61-80, p. 70.

its «aesthetic enlargement in an unbounded way». The term ‘enlargement’ suggests that the concept is made richer by the overflow of intuitive content of the aesthetic idea that is added to it, or that its ‘parts’ somehow increase³³. According to Kant, the enlargement in question has an aesthetic nature; however, we should not rule out the possibility that it results in an improvement of our understanding of the content of the concept – if not in the sense of an analytical clarification, then in the sense of a better understanding of its marks, or of aspects of its content. It is not uncommon for us to come to acknowledge, through metaphorical description in a painting or a poem, that something is not what it previously appeared to be, or for us to come to see the matter in question from a different perspective, thereby deepening our understanding of it. On the other hand, that the aesthetic enlargement of a concept is in a certain sense a cognitive improvement is suggested by Kant himself when he claims that the intuitive content associated with the concept sets into motion «the faculty of intellectual ideas (reason)» (KU § 49; AA 05: 315): «at the instigation of a representation», where there is more to think about «than can be grasped and made distinct in it», reason, he writes, is set «into motion»³⁴.

This reference to reason provides me with the occasion to recall a crucial observation made by Kant in his account of the use of the word ‘idea’ in the expression ‘aesthetic idea’. I will then move to the question of profundity.

³³ That the Kantian idea of an aesthetic enlargement of the concept is a transformation of Baumgarten’s concept of extensive clarity is shown by C. La Rocca, *Das Schöne und das Schattene. Dunkle Vorstellungen und ästhetische Erfahrung zwischen Baumgarten und Kant*, in H.F. Klemme, M. Pauen, M.-L. Raters (eds.), *Im Schatten des Schönen. Die Ästhetik des Häßlichen in historischen Ansätzen und Aktuellen Debatten*, Bielefeld, Aisthesis Verlag, 2006, pp. 19–64.

³⁴ The expression ‘made distinct’ recalls Baumgarten’s (or Leibniz’s) thought. By using it, Kant presumably wants to emphasize the impossibility of any concept’s making an aesthetic idea fully intelligible or of translating the richness of the ‘partial representations’ that give it definitively in a determinate thought.

2.3 An *analogon* of reason in the sensible

Imagining the predictable disappointment of the reader at the use of the term ‘idea’ for a kind of representations of the imagination, Kant gives two reasons for his choice. He explains that these representations are called ‘ideas’ on the one hand because they «at least strive toward something lying beyond the bounds of experience, and thus seek to approximate a presentation of concepts of reason (of intellectual ideas)» (KU § 49; AA 05: 314); on the other hand, «and indeed principally, [they are called ideas] because no concept can be fully adequate to them, as inner intuitions»³⁵. Taking poetry as paradigmatic – a form of art in which, in his view, «the faculty of aesthetic ideas can reveal itself in its full measure» (KU § 49; AA 05: 314), Kant illustrates the point as follows:

The poet ventures to make sensible rational ideas of invisible beings, the kingdom of the blessed, the kingdom of hell, eternity, creation, etc., as well as to make that of which there are examples in experience, e.g., death, envy, and all sorts of vices, as well as love, fame, etc., sensible beyond the limits of experience, with a completeness that goes beyond anything of which there is an example in nature (KU § 49; AA 05: 314).

³⁵ Kant points out that an aesthetic idea is the «counterpart (*Gegenstück*) (*pendant*)» (KU § 49; AA 05: 314) of an idea of reason, since the former is an intuition (of the imagination) for which a concept can never be adequate, while the latter is a concept to which no intuition can be adequate, and therefore neither, even if for opposite reasons, can become a cognition (cf. KU § 57 Remark I; AA 05: 342). The Grimm dictionary (recording the use of the German *Gegenstück* to indicate, in art, two figures arranged as if to look at each other, and recalling the French word *pendant*) quotes Kant’s passage on aesthetic ideas as an example of figurative sense (cf. Grimm und Grimm, *Deutsches Wörterbuch*, Bd. 5, Sp. 2271). By elucidating the German *Gegenstück* through the French word *pendant*, Kant is presumably hinting at a complementary relation between the two kinds of ideas, suggesting that they match each other symmetrically or are in the same relation, such as that which holds between something and its mirror image.

Kant's examples suggest that when he claims, speaking in rather abstract terms, that artists associate aesthetic ideas with a given concept, we should take the word 'concept' in a broad sense, as encompassing both empirical concepts and concepts of reason. Aesthetic ideas can be involved in the artist's attempt both to give (e.g. in a painting or a poem) at least a partial representation of rational ideas (eternity, the highest good, moral freedom, etc.), which in Kant's view are concepts that no intuition can completely represent, and to offer a representation characterized by a fullness that goes beyond the limits of ordinary experience, of things such as love, friendship, death, etc., of which there are examples in experience.

These are profound subject matters, and works that present them through aesthetic ideas might aspire to be considered both beautiful and profound. I will now try to show how beauty and profundity can be connected, without committing Kant's theory of art to the counterintuitive view that a beautiful work, just because it is beautiful, namely expressive of aesthetic ideas, is also profound. I will have something else to say on (Kantian) beauty and profundity in the conclusion of this paper.

3. Toward a Kantian conception of profundity

To begin with, it is important to note that Kant seems to allow for a distinction within the class of works of art between works that we praise but do not consider profound and works that we feel it is appropriate to judge profound. My suggestion is that this distinction can be made in terms of spirit, namely between works that are more and works that are less inspired or animated by spirit.

Before considering art, it may be helpful to look at two of the Kantian examples of lack of spirit: a woman, of whom «one may well say that she is pretty, talkative and charming, but without spirit»; and a conversation that, while not being «without entertainment, [...] is still without spirit» (KU § 49; AA 05: 313).

What is lacking in these cases is probably, to put the point in Kantian terms, a capacity to animate the mental states of the partner (in the case of the person) or the participants (in the case of the conversation), that is, in both cases, to set the people's mental power into self-maintaining play, or, we could say, to engage them, to interest them while charming or entertaining them. The conversation case is enlightening. What is missing in entertaining conversations that only temporarily satisfy the participants is engaging content, an exchange of ideas that share qualities akin to those attributed by Kant to the ideas of genius, namely being «fantastic and yet at the same time rich in thought» (KU § 47; AA 05: 309).

Presumably, as in conversations in works of art, the capacity to engage comes in degrees, and the degree of engagement depends, in Kantian terms, on the spirit that animates them. Granted, the distinction between works that have more and works that have less spirit may be elusive and difficult to trace. One possibility is to consider the enlivening activity of the spirit in terms of the free correspondence of the imagination to the lawfulness of the understanding as the basic level. Kant is clear about the fact that a necessary condition for beautiful art is that it display taste, as he thinks that it is 'only' in regard to taste that a work of art deserves to be called 'beautiful'; by contrast, in regard to genius, a work «deserves to be called inspired» (KU § 50; AA 05: 319). Thus, it seems that the tasteful and the beautiful share an identity that does not hold between being inspired and being beautiful³⁶. However, this claim should not be overemphasized. At least if being inspired means being endowed with spirit, it seems that a work of art cannot be beautiful while being un-inspired. A flatly un-inspired work would be a work in which no aesthetic idea is expressed, a would-be work of beautiful art in which one perceives «taste without genius» (KU § 48; AA 05: 313); it would presumably be a merely tasteful work – perhaps, as Kant says of a poem, «quite pretty and elegant» (KU § 49; AA 05:

³⁶ Cf. Neal, *Kant's Ideality of Genius*, p. 354.

313) – devoid of beauty, given that beauty is the expression of aesthetic ideas. Works of this kind meet a necessary condition for being judged beautiful but nevertheless lack something that is also necessary, namely rich and original ideas (cf. KU § 50; AA 05: 320).

One might be tempted to emphasize the role of taste in light of Kant's claims that beauty «should properly concern merely form» (KU § 13; AA 05: 223). However, this claim should be read together with his further statement that form «is only the vehicle of communication and as it were a manner of exposition» (KU § 49; AA 05: 313)³⁷. Finding a pleasing form for the presentation and communication of a concept is surely a first requirement for fine art; however, the pleasure of fine art is not connected solely to form. A work with a pleasing form but with poor content is like a charming person who lacks spirit.

If it is granted that inspiration is a matter of degree, one can assume that to higher degrees of inspiration corresponds a deeper engagement of reason via the overflow of the intuitive content of the aesthetic idea, which aesthetically enlarges the concept to which it is added. In other words, the richer the aesthetic idea expressed in a work, the greater the involvement of reason, and the more the work moves toward the pole of profundity³⁸.

This suggests that for profundity to be attained, the artist's imagination, if she is engaged in presenting empirical objects or states of affairs, must somehow emulate «the precedent of reason

³⁷ As I will hint at in the conclusion, Kant's view is far richer than the quote from § 13 might suggest, seemingly restricting aesthetic appreciation to a purely formal feature of perception (cf. also KU §§ 14 and 16, or the claim in § 45 that artistic and natural beauty must be responded to in exactly the same way).

³⁸ As a matter of fact, the issue of profundity leads us to make room for a distinction between true works of genius, of which Kant is, after all, speaking, and merely tasteful and/or entertaining art. Assumed that there is a connection between profundity and truth, this distinction matches the one suggested by Andy Hamilton between high art, which aims at truth, and art that aims merely to please (cf. A. Hamilton, *Artistic Truth*, «Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement», LXXI, 2013, pp. 229-261).

in attaining to a maximum», namely it must try to portray them with a completeness «that goes beyond anything of which there is an example in nature» (KU § 49; AA 05: 314). Conceiving of what an artist does in her effort to offer a maximal characterization of a concept through aesthetic attributes (thereby forming an aesthetic idea) as somehow mirroring our formation of ideas of reason in an effort to reach a complete explanation of something actually suggests a sense of how profundity is attained and what it consists in³⁹.

In fact, it might be argued that the step beyond nature is attained when, e.g., characters and events in a novel or a drama that deals with a profound subject matter are presented in a light that enables the reader to discern from appearances the forces that drive or determine them – to understand why they are as they are and, in the case of characters, how they see the world, what they believe about it, how they feel about it, and what they desire to achieve in it⁴⁰. The completeness Kant is hinting at may result in accuracy in the presentation of the particular, on the basis of which we acquire the vision of the typical, which, as Antony Savile suggests, is crucial if a work that displays depth of understanding of its subject matter is to count as a profound work of art⁴¹.

If these considerations are on the right track, then we can quell the doubt concerning a possible Kantian account of profundity, instilled by what appears as a counterintuitive identification of beauty and profundity. As a matter of fact,

³⁹ Matherne, *The Inclusive Interpretation*, p. 25. It might also give an idea of the sense in which we sometime qualify profound works as visionary.

⁴⁰ Cf. Savile, *The Test of Time*, pp. 134-140.

⁴¹ According to Savile, on whose account of depth my observations strongly depend, it is a condition of a work's counting as profound that the understanding evinced in it be of a «suitably important typical sort», such that what we see happening in the particular case also shows us something that can be extended beyond itself (ivi, pp. 142-143). In other words, the work can supply the audience with a (conceptual) framework for their own experience that they lack, it might help them make sense of it (cf. Hamilton, *Artistic Truth*, p. 247).

Kant's conception of art allows for distinctions, within the class of works of art, between those works that merit being considered profound, the merely tasteful or entertaining, and those that presumably situate themselves between these two poles of artistic value⁴². However, it should also be pointed out that the identification of beauty and profundity as defined here, which might appear counterintuitive to us, would probably have appeared quite natural to Kant. I will return to this in the conclusion of the paper. At this point, I want to say something on a more awkward question that, as I mentioned at the beginning of this paper, seems to stand in the way of a Kantian account of profundity. The issue is that while it seems natural to assume that profundity and truth are closely linked, as we have seen, aesthetic ideas resist complete conceptualization, and the thinking that they prompt does not result in cognition. Therefore, a doubt arises as to whether the kind of thinking triggered by the artistic presentation of topics of fundamental import, as conceived of by Kant, can preserve a relationship with truth, and therefore whether Kant can really account for the embodiment of profundity in works of art.

3.1 Kantian profundity and truth

It seems that a connection to some kind of truth is essential to artistic profundity, but it is far from clear whether this link can be preserved in Kant's conception. What I have to offer with regard to this question is merely a suggestion. As we have seen, according to Kant, the overflow of the intuitive content of an aesthetic idea 'enlarges' the concept to which it is added. Suppose that the concept in question is that of romantic love.

In the case of literature and the other representative arts, the intuitive content added to it is presumably constituted by an accurate description of, e.g., a character or a situation, including,

⁴² The latter is presumably the case of many of Mozart's lighter works, which are probably unprofound, but nevertheless animated by spirit.

as Samantha Mathern suggests, «things like subjective connections and aesthetic feels». An example could be the detailed literary representation of a love affair as in, say, *Anna Karenina*. Although this representation may have «a completeness that goes beyond anything of which there is an example in nature», Kant thinks that it does not broaden the logical content of our concept of ‘romantic love’, namely the content that grounds cognition. Nevertheless, in a sense it ‘enlarges’ the concept, namely aesthetically, as «in an aesthetic respect [...] the imagination is free to provide», beyond the concord with the concept that is required for cognition, «unsought extensive undeveloped material for the understanding». Presumably Kant is thinking of an intuitive content that is not functional to cognition, but in the same time is not cognitively inert. In fact, he writes that of that ‘material’ the intellect takes «no regard in its concept»: it applies it «not so much objectively», namely for cognition, «as subjectively, for the animation of the cognitive powers, and thus also indirectly to cognitions» (KU § 49; AA 05: 317).

Let us go back to *Anna Karenina*. The suggestion is that having romantic love as one of its themes and presenting it as it does, the novel makes that concept vivid or lively, capable of arousing our attention to aspects of ordinary situations, feelings and relationships that, although they are related to ‘romantic love’, we might not have noticed before. Furthermore, it can evoke subjective connections and memories. In working out all of this, we might enrich and nourish our understanding of romantic love, of its consequences and delusions – the Kantian idea of an aesthetic enlargement of a concept includes things of this kind; thus, even if the novel does not bring about knowledge, it nevertheless enriches our comprehension of something of significance about ourselves. Is this enough to preserve the connection to truth that is essential to profundity?

I think so, at least if we refrain from identifying truth with propositional truth and agree to describe the truth about things that profound art can show us in terms of a ‘bringing to light’, through the particular case that a work displays, of features that

we might otherwise easily neglect, or «the richness of experience we too often overlook in the exigencies of everyday life»⁴³. This results from what Kant describes as a completeness in the presentation of the particular «that goes beyond anything of which there is an example in nature». The mimetic dimension realized through this kind of ideal reconfiguration of reality, though it does not reflect reality in a strict sense, may nevertheless shed light on aspects of it⁴⁴.

There is a further element that I would like to consider. In a passage in which he speaks of the spirit that animates (*belebt*) works of fine art, Kant claims that these works derive such spirit «solely from the aesthetic attributes of objects, which go alongside the logical ones, and give the imagination an impetus to think more, although in an undeveloped way, than can be comprehended in a concept» (KU § 49; AA 05: 315). The passage strikes a note often heard in Kant's discourse on genius and art. However, it adds an element of novelty: aesthetic attributes give the imagination an impetus to think. It is not clear to me whether Kant is here hinting at a kind of thought with intuitional but not conceptual content – something for which it is difficult to find a place in his *Stufenleiter*, his scheme of representations (cf. KrV, B 376-377) – or suggesting that art can provide us with imaginative models for thinking about aspects of the world. The point is intriguing, but it is a topic for another occasion. I shall limit myself to an observation. The passage describes imaginative thinking as undeveloped. This means that we, the audience of a work of art, have to work it out – first, I assume, against the detail of the individual case represented. Kant's point could be rephrased as the claim that art is paradigmatically interpretable.

⁴³ Matherne, *The Inclusive Interpretation*, p. 30. We might also add that art gives us the distance to investigate an emotion 'off-line', namely without the complications that come with real-life emotional experience, and that this might help us to reach a better understanding of it, of the subtleties that it might involve, of other people, and of ourselves.

⁴⁴ Cf. J.A. Gosetti-Ferencei, *The Mimetic Dimension: Literature between Neuroscience and Phenomenology*, «British Journal of Aesthetics», LIV, 2014, pp. 425-448.

This holds in particular for profound art. Profundity or depth in the arts often requires, as Sharpe writes, «deep interpretation, the bringing to the surface of what we would not otherwise see»⁴⁵. I suggest that the thought-provoking character of aesthetic ideas, which makes them ‘inexplicable’, is the Kantian way of expressing the correlation that we tend to assume between depth and the potentiality for a multiplicity of interpretations⁴⁶.

Thematic interpretation in particular seems to be the place where that ‘undeveloped’ thinking might be worked out, and thus the place where a ‘bringing to light’ or ‘revelation’ of truth in art occurs. We can imagine that, referring to the Kantian notion of spirit, the more inspired a work is, or the deeper its exploration of a topic, the closer the process of working it out comes to being limitless, and the more the work can capture and sustain our interest in it. Indeed, it is often a characteristic of profound works of art that we want to return to them over and over, not simply because we enjoy them but because their complexity presents a challenge to our artistic understanding and to interpretation. In other words, in the case of profound art, the enjoyment that makes us «linger over the consideration of the beautiful» (KU § 12; AA 05: 222) is intertwined with thought-provokingness. Profound art is an art that develops understanding through pleasure.

If these considerations are plausible, I think that the doubts about a Kantian account of profound art can be rebutted. Kant’s conception of art has the conceptual resources to explain how a work can touch a profound subject in a way that is adequate to its

⁴⁵ Sharpe, *Sounding the Depths*, p. 71.

⁴⁶ That art requires interpretation by the audience suggests that its content – or its truth (cf. note 47) – is not reducible to anything as crude as a ‘message’. Artworks, as Hamilton observes, «are concerned, rather, to raise possibilities for considerations» (Hamilton, *Artistic Truth*, pp. 235-236). That a work has the potentiality for different interpretation is clearly not to be mistaken for the claim that when it comes to a complex work, opposing interpretations which are in any case correct are possible.

profundity⁴⁷. It allows for a conception of profundity that does not view depth of insight as standardly expressed in propositional form; rather, it views profundity as lying above all in the nature of the response elicited by a work. With regard to this, Kant's statement that the faculty of aesthetic ideas is at its best in poetry, which is presumably the reason why he acknowledges that this art «claims the highest rank» (KU § 53; AA 05: 326) of all the fine arts, is symptomatic. Kant could have agreed with the view sketched in the first section, according to which even the profundity of a literary work consists more in its occasioning a thought-provoking response than in expressing some kind of profound propositional content. Moreover, Kant's conception of art preserves the link between truth and profundity, assumed that we do not identify truth with propositional truth⁴⁸. These last observations provide the occasion to offer remarks on a much-

⁴⁷ As we saw in section 1, profundity also requires that a profound subject matter be treated at a very high level of artistic or aesthetic excellence, and thus at the level of form. Kant is not insensitive to this aspect. Interestingly, in a footnote to his comment on the verse by Withof quoted above, he refers to the inscription over the temple of Isis, saying that «perhaps nothing more sublime has ever been said, or any thought more sublimely expressed», than in that inscription (KU § 49; AA 05: 316). Here he seems to be using the word 'sublime' to refer, as Boileau did, both to an object that generates a certain effect and to one of the styles of classical rhetoric, and therefore to an expressive form. Given that the footnote seems to be a comment on the claim that Withof's verse opens up a vision «which no expression that is adequate to a determinate concept fully captures» (KU § 49; AA 05: 316), it may be conjectured that Kant is here trying to hint at the level of artistic excellence required by the expression of content that he would probably count as profound.

⁴⁸ Recognising that the expression 'propositional truth' (and its opposite) is in need of refinement, Hamilton (cf. Hamilton *Artistic Truth*, p. 243) prefers the term *truth of enquiry*, since it embraces the humanities as well as the sciences. Recalling the thought-provoking character of profound art, this view allows for a conception of the connection between art and truth in terms of a work raising or addressing issues which an audience would discuss also asking questions such as, e.g., 'Is it true that the world is a stage and we are merely players?', etc.

debated topic among Kant scholars, namely whether Kant was a nonconceptualist.

3.2 On Kant's aesthetic nonconceptualism

The question of whether Kant was a nonconceptualist has sparked interesting debate for years⁴⁹. Inevitably, with certain exceptions⁵⁰, the debate has almost exclusively focused on the first *Critique* and Kant's theoretical philosophy, neglecting Kant's aesthetics, even though the mere fact that he conceives of aesthetic evaluation as not bearing on conceptual activities might suggest that his third *Critique* provides evidence for his possible subscription to nonconceptualism⁵¹. Does the same hold for the notion dealt with in this paper, namely that of aesthetic ideas?

I would recommend treading with caution here. As we have seen, Kant presents aesthetic ideas, that is, the 'material' involved in creating and responding to works of art, as representations of the imagination which, on the one hand, are associated with a given concept – a concept related to the aim pursued by the artist

⁴⁹ Cf. the essays collected in D.H. Heidemann (ed.), *Kant and Non-Conceptual Content*, London-New York, Routledge, 2013, and D. Schulting (ed.), *Kantian Nonconceptualism*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2016. For a survey of the central moves in this debate, cf. L. Allais, *Conceptualism and Nonconceptualism in Kant: A Survey of the Recent Debate*, in Schulting (ed.), *Kantian Nonconceptualism*, pp. 1-25. Nonconceptualism, as defined by Dietmar Heidemann, is the view that «mental representations of objects do not necessarily presuppose concepts by means of which the content of these representations can be specified». Actually, being a nonconceptualist does not mean that one must contest the claim that mental representations of objects *can* «in principle involve concepts». Furthermore, as is the case in Kant's theory of cognition, a nonconceptualist can hold that nonconceptual content, e.g., a sensory given, is cognitively relevant, for example in justifying perceptual belief, although only on the level of judgment, that is, «in moving from sensory given to conceptual or propositional structure in judgement» (D.H. Heidemann, *Kant's Aesthetic Nonconceptualism*, in Schulting [ed.], *Kantian Nonconceptualism*, pp. 117-144).

⁵⁰ Notably Heidemann, *Kant's Aesthetic Nonconceptualism*, pp. 121-122.

⁵¹ See *ivi* for a development and defence of the view that, at least in terms of his conception of taste, Kant is a nonconceptualist.

in creating a work – and, on the other hand, are combined with such a manifold of partial representations in the free use of the imagination that, as Kant writes, «no expression designating a determinate concept» can be found for them. As representations of the imagination, aesthetic ideas are not discursive representations; their content is fundamentally different from conceptual content. Furthermore, it seems that, in having them, an artist and/or her audience are in a mental state the content of which cannot be adequately expressed by the concepts available to them: an aesthetic idea both requires conceptual understanding and is beyond our conceptual grasp. However, we should think twice about regarding Kant's use of aesthetic ideas as a genuine sign of nonconceptualism. Heidemann points out that «in order for mental content to count as nonconceptual content, this content must be phenomenal, intentional and representational»⁵². Aesthetic ideas are intuitions, and as mental contents they are subjectively phenomenal; entertaining an aesthetic idea is one with the first-person experience of a feeling which animates the cognitive faculties and cannot be detached from the individual perspective or communicated to others through conceptual means. Furthermore, aesthetic ideas exhibit a sort of intentionality; as ideas they «are representations related to an object» (KU § 57 Remark I; AA 05: 342), even if not in a full-blown way, as suggested by Kant's statement that they 'strive' toward (the representation of) something (cf. KU § 49; AA 05: 314). However, their intentional and representational character seems to depend on their belonging to the presentation of a concept; their content seems to be imbued with it, even if, as Kant points out, they give the imagination an impetus to think more than can be comprehended in a concept, and hence in a determinate linguistic expression⁵³.

⁵² Heidemann, *Kant's Aesthetic Nonconceptualism*, p. 129.

⁵³ Kant's observation that in poetry the faculty of aesthetic ideas reveals itself in its full measure is emblematic. He attributes to poetry the power to create representations which no language can make fully intelligible; but it does this

It is true that the aesthetic particular stands out thanks to a complex fullness, the grasping of which cannot be achieved in the form of a conceptual description, but one must not forget that, in the creation of a work of art, the particularity of an intuition serves as the presentation of a concept, namely of a universal. The reason why we might be tempted to consider aesthetic ideas as genuine nonconceptual contents may be that a propositional attitude is the paradigm case of a state with conceptual content, and conceptualization is a necessary, even if not a sufficient, condition for propositionality, but we cannot conceptualize aesthetic ideas. This point is overemphasized, however. It is not that we cannot conceptualize aesthetic ideas, but that we cannot fully conceptualize them or reduce their content to a cluster of propositions, because they are richer than our conceptual resources.

Having said this, there is a further aspect to consider. Propositions represent things as being a certain way, and how someone represents things as being depends on the concepts she possesses. As aesthetic ideas are mental representations that do not have determinate propositional content, they do not represent in the way that propositions do – that is, they do not represent things as being a certain way. Can representational content be about an object but not represent it as being a certain way?

Take for example Withof's verse, quoted by Kant: «The sun streamed forth, as tranquillity streams from virtue». No matter how one evaluates it, part of its effect, and its value, depends on the fact that it offers a perspective for thinking about a situation – in this case, an effect of virtue⁵⁴. Now, a perspective on an

through language, namely a medium that involves a certain degree of conceptual intelligibility.

⁵⁴ Kant's comment on the verse is telling: «The consciousness of virtue, when one puts oneself, even if only in thought, in the place of a virtuous person, spreads in the mind a multitude of sublime and calming feelings, and a boundless prospect into a happy future, which no expression that is adequate to a determinate concept fully captures» (KU § 49; AA 05: 316).

object or a state of affairs cannot be the content of a proposition or propositional knowledge; nevertheless, it has a cognitive nature, since it is a ‘tool’ for thinking; to use Kant’s expression, it gives the imagination «an impetus to think». Not all thinking or reasoning results in propositional truth. Kant seems to read Withof’s verse as prompting the reader to see things a certain way, as offering a quasi-perceptual pattern, and this is an important form of understanding⁵⁵.

Offering a novel and inspiring perspective on something is often precisely what profound works of art do; what is profound opens possibilities⁵⁶, and when a work does this, it has cognitive value – the cognitive value that contributes to making it profound, even if it is not a source of propositional knowledge. As Kant once noted: «*Was wir denken, koenen wir nicht immer sagen*» (AA 15: 66)⁵⁷.

4. *Concluding remarks*

In this paper, I have tried to show that Kant’s conception of art can account for artistic profundity. As a means of concluding, I would like to say something on two issues I have only touched on in the previous sections. The first concerns a possible (artistic) use of aesthetic ideas to approximate a presentation of concepts of reason, the second the relationship between beauty and profundity. As for the first issue, in presenting Kant’s conception of aesthetic ideas, I have mainly focused on the other possibility envisaged by Kant, namely on the artistic presentation of things of which, as Kant writes, «there are examples in experience». It could be argued that this alternative between two possible uses of aesthetic ideas is not a clear-cut one. Among the empirical things

⁵⁵ A modest conception of artistic truth as experiential or imaginative truth («art makes truth real to the imagination»), as the one defended in Hamilton, *Artistic Truth*, might be in place here.

⁵⁶ Cf. Sharpe, *Sounding the Depths*, p. 66.

⁵⁷ I owe this quote to La Rocca, *Das Schöne und das Schatten*, p. 60 footnote 160.

mentioned by Kant are love and envy, namely two feelings that, at least in some forms, can be connected with thought and reflection and have moral connotations. This is part of what makes them profound subject matters, and profundity is presumably achieved in their presentation when the aesthetic enlargement of their concepts also concerns the concepts through which we articulate our moral life in connection with those feelings.

This reference to moral ideas is important, at least in Kant's view, as it impinges on the value of art. Kant sometimes seems to think that art is a form of diversion⁵⁸, that we entertain ourselves with art when ordinary experience appears 'too mundane to us'. This is disputable. However, let us suppose that things are this way. Kant's suggestion is that to function even as entertainment, art cannot simply be a diversion. He points out that if «enjoyment [...] leaves behind it nothing in the idea», if art serves «only for diversion», then its «ultimate fate» is to «make the spirit dull, the object by and by loathsome, and the mind [...] dissatisfied with itself and moody» (KU § 52; AA 05: 326)⁵⁹.

Perhaps Kant is being too harsh here, and his further suggestion that in order to be more than temporarily satisfying art must combine, «whether closely or at a distance, with moral ideas» (KU § 52; AA 05: 326) is perhaps too strong. After all, commenting on the value of art, he himself claims that the pleasure in beautiful art «is at the same time culture and disposes the spirit to ideas» (KU § 52; AA 05: 326). Initially at least, he does not specify that the ideas in question should be moral ones.

⁵⁸ This is clearly the case of what he calls 'agreeable art', a kind of art which he distinguishes from fine art as it is aimed 'merely at enjoyment'. The content of agreeable art is intended as «momentary entertainment, not as some enduring material for later reflection or discussion». A Kantian example of this kind of art is 'table-music': an odd thing, he comments on, «which is supposed to sustain the mood of joyfulness merely as an agreeable noise, and to encourage the free conversation of one neighbor with another without anyone paying the least attention to its composition» (KU § 44; AA 05: 305).

⁵⁹ As Andy Hamilton pointed out to me, supposed that an art that has these effects is still art, this seems a description of bad art.

The condition is simply that the disposition of the mind in the experience of art is purposive «in the judgment of reason» (KU § 52; AA 05: 326), and, as a matter of fact, the entertainment provided by aesthetic ideas is supposed to be more than a mere distraction, given that imagination reshapes mundane experience following «principles that lie higher in reason». However, with regard to this, we must not forget that on Kant's view the interests of reason are ultimately practical; if we recall this, we can also make sense of his claim that art can meet the condition of purposiveness «in the judgment of reason», above all combining with moral ideas, but the combination with moral ideas can also open up for art the dimension of profundity⁶⁰.

As we have seen, profound art deals with topics that are of great concern to us as human beings – topics such as love, death, crime and punishment, human loss, human weakness, etc. These are issues that have remained generally constant over time, which is due in part to their being moral topics and therefore deeply connected to our ultimate interests. Profound art, Kant would have probably said, is deeply engaging; it can capture and sustain our interest in it precisely because the combination with moral ideas is closer in it.

I now move to the second issue I would like to address in this conclusion, namely beauty and its relation to profundity. I have claimed that it might be counterintuitive to claim that, just because it is beautiful, a work of art is also profound. Profundity is compatible with beauty, but it does not arise from it. My impression is that we incline to see things in this way because of a conception of beauty that identifies it with a certain kind of pleasure and because of an oversimplified view of the satisfaction in the beautiful. Kant might not be without responsibility for this, as he often seems to suggest that our response to beautiful art is confined to purely formal aspects of artworks. However, and quite the opposite, the pleasure we take in artistic beauty arises

⁶⁰ The object of beautiful art, Kant claims on one occasion, «must always display some dignity (*Würde*) in itself, and hence requires a certain earnestness in the presentation, just as taste does in its judging» (KU § 54; AA 05: 335).

from the complexity of the interplay between the form of a work and the content and spirit to which it gives expression, for in responding to a work of art, as Paul Guyer points out, «we respond to both its form and its content and to the relation between them», all of which induce «the free play of the cognitive faculty and thus the feeling of beauty»⁶¹. If we further consider that Kant views beauty as a symbol of morality (cf. KU § 59) and the satisfaction in the beautiful as an aesthetic (namely non-conceptual) representation of the purposiveness of nature (cf. KU, Introduction VII; AA 05:188) – that is, of the idea that is at the heart of his concern for our moral destination – the connection between artistic beauty and profundity loses its counterintuitive aspect. In Kant's view, beauty has a relationship with something that is of deep concern to us: the good and the ultimate meaning of reality. This is presumably what he has in mind when he claims that beauty is the expression of aesthetic ideas, given that he conceives of such ideas as counterparts of ideas of reason that seek to approximate a presentation of them (cf. KU § 49; AA 05: 314). When they are products of genius, works of art express aesthetic ideas and are therefore both beautiful and thought-provoking and deeply moving, and thus profound.

I began the paper by claiming that profundity is one of the highest virtue an artwork can possess. That Kant can account for profundity in art might not be surprising in the end if one observes that his view of art is fitting for what we would call 'great' or 'high art'. It is this kind of art – in his terms, the art of genius – that is his focus, and his conception of genius parallels the requirements of artistic profundity. As we have seen, at least according to the view embraced in this paper, for a work of art to be profound it must have a profound subject matter and treat that profound subject matter in a way that is adequate to its profundity. According to Kant, genius consists in the ability to

⁶¹ P. Guyer, *Kant's Conception of Fine Art*, «The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism», LII, 1994, pp. 275-285, p. 280.

find both rich aesthetic ideas that suggest ideas of reason and aesthetically enlivening forms that are particularly suitable for the communication of those deep contents.