Renato Barilli. *A Course on Aesthetics*. Trans. Karen E. Pinkus. Minneapolis and London: U of Minnesota P, 1993. Pp. xiii, 170.

Barilli makes clear in his prefatory remarks that this book seeks to provide the student of aesthetics with a "general, flexible, and synthetic introduction" to the field. By "student," he means anyone interested in continuing his or her education beyond the formal confines of the classroom, and he therefore adopts a "plain, discursive style of writing" that aims more at the general reader and consumer of artistic products than at the specialist of the area of academic inquiry known as aesthetics (vii-viii). In short, this is a kind of "primer" rather than a highly technical inquiry into the topic at hand. Having given many university seminars on aesthetics over the years in his role as professor of the phenomenology of styles at the University of Bologna, Barilli is particularly well-prepared to present a distillation of past and current work on aesthetics, and the book fulfills its synthesizing and introductory intent very successfully.

Divided into four chapters and completed with a thorough "Bibliographical Essay" that surveys and briefly describes the theoretical and critical work of pertinence to each chapter's topic ("Aesthetic Experience," "From Aesthetics to Art," "The Multiplicity of the Arts," and "The Artist, The Patron, The Critic"), *A Course on Aesthetics* leads the non-specialist reader through what might have been, in less expert hands, a bewilderingly non-negotiable wilderness of concepts and issues, but what is, in fact, a neatly pruned garden of refreshing variety and grace. Barilli openly acknowledges the "snake" in any garden, however: that is, the contingent, hypothetical, and continually shifting nature of criteria by which art and its reception have been and are categorized. His desire is to provide some firm ground to a consumer public "hungry for certainties" (xi), while knowing full well that both firm ground and certainties are not the salient identifying marks of our postmodern, postideological, electronic age. In an attempt to avoid a monism that is decidedly at odds with today's perspectives, the author opts for a "binary" approach (again, with a clear awareness of the limitations of binarisms), which will permit him to build what he terms "family groups" across the field of aesthetic inquiry that often are closer in assumptions and results than an oppositionally-conditioned binarism might imply. Barilli is out to inform his readership much more than to convert it to one particular view of aesthetics, therefore, even though he does take "a clear position on the major problems that concern aesthetics, even if in an idiosyncratic and highly personalized sense" (viii).

The first chapter begins as much at the beginning as possible; that is, with a consideration of the origin of the term "aesthetics." Barilli informs us that it was first proposed by the German philosopher A. G. Baumgarten in 1750, who related the term to the Greek root *aisth*, which refers to the senses or physical perceptions. Thus for Baumgarten aesthetics had to do with any force that was capable of making our sensory perceptions more acute. However, the term soon became associated almost exclusively with art, a term that is, of course, of much more ancient origin. Both the Latin *ars* and the Greek *techne*, the latter a corresponding term of the former, had to do with "a notion of work, production, or certain acts that transform material through intelligence and ability" (4). Something is made in art, and the physicality of artifacts is therefore related to the idea of aesthetics as having to do with physical perceptions. Barilli briefly discusses the approach to aesthetics in antiquity — a much less unified approach than our modern one — and then moves into a detailed analysis of Baumgarten, Vico, and Croce. All of these thinkers provided something like a "unification of the field," which in earlier periods had

been fragmented into separate studies of art, poetics, and rhetoric. As a noble and high concept of art took precedence over more generic definitions of "making," aesthetics privileged high art as its primary object of inquiry. Yet, as Barilli notes, our contemporary age, as a result of the avantgardes, the fall of strong ideologies, technological advances, and the subsequent collapse of a strict distinction between "high" and "low," has returned to something like the concepts of generic technique and manual or mechanical labor, and aesthetics is therefore open once more to investigations that are more related to Baumgarten's sensory emphasis than to Vichian or Crocean approaches.

Barilli's discussions of the many art forms that have manifested themselves over the centuries are perhaps those of greatest interest to that "general reader" for whom this volume was written. Contemporary art forms such as video, performance art, cinema, and television are considered in some detail in the third chapter, "The Multiplicity of the Arts," and the current primacy of spectacle over theater, and of technology over individual technique is described, and its transformatory effects on aesthetic experience as well as on the field of aesthetics are well delineated. Even in our age of post-industrial, technological, and electronic "making," art is, in Barilli's view, still tied to some "aestheticizing" of raw experience and perception, and some concept of the "beautiful" (if only in the very general sense of the economy or greatest effectiveness of the product) is still in play. There are those who might argue that, on the contrary, media such as video, television, and even film are becoming more anaesthetic in their constant bombardment of our senses than aesthetic in their heightening of sensory enjoyment. There is no doubt, however, that, as Barilli asserts, art is far from dead; rather, it has mutated into forms and produced effects unthinkable in earlier eras, thus providing specialists in the field of aesthetics with ever expanding areas of inquiry.

The last chapter takes on the issue of the "protagonists who make art possible," that is, the producers and the receivers of artistic creations. In a few pages Barilli manages deftly to survey the role of emotion and rationality in artistic making (emphasizing the importance of Freud to our understanding of this issue), of cognition and the resultant poetics by which an artist seeks to explain his/her art, and the personal as well as societal origins of styles. He then considers the patron, whose primary responsibility it is to recognize the symbolic essence of art, and thus to avoid the "heresy of paraphrase," that is, a literalization of the artistic product. The final pages of the chapter (and of the volume) discuss the critic, and the many forms of critical and theoretical discourse pertaining to art that have been developed over time. Barilli does not agree with a certain tendency in recent times to equate the creativity of the critic with that of the artist, and he argues for a separation of the realms of critical and artistic expression, even while acknowledging that "the inclusion of critical discourse in the great scheme of the rhetorical discourses relativizes it enormously, making it the place of quite fluid, plastic interventions, susceptible to various and unpredictable results" (143). In addition, the current interest in the "science of culture" or "culturology" (what we would call "Cultural Studies" here) is, according to Barilli, a manifestation of the breakdown between "high" art and "low" cultural expressions, as critics and theorists give "the same level of attention to the low-material level of technology as to the ideal-symbolic level of the arts and sciences." This "amplification" of the field of inquiry inevitably means that the artistic work is considered less in its particularity; the intensity of specific scrutiny is substituted with the extension of "general coordinates of theory," as is the case in Barilli's book. He therefore ends with a sort of *apologia* for a "certain inefficiency in its analysis or local characterization within the various sectors of the truly enormous field covered here" (151).

Written by an Italian scholar, this primer quite naturally relies more on Italian aesthetic theory (Vico, Croce) and on Italian secondary sources than on Anglo-American or other lines. Nonetheless, the commented bibliography reveals Barilli's acquaintance with many classics of the field that are outside of a specifically Italian perspective, thus making the study much more "universal" in its appeal. Conversely, the emphases on Italian thinkers and critics serve to reveal to the non-Italianist reader the wealth of work available within this national academic sphere. The translation by Pinkus is very readable and manages for the most part to avoid "translator-eeze," although there are times when Italian syntax and/or lexicon makes itself heard under the English version. Like Barilli's *Rhetoric*, also translated by Pinkus and published by the University of Minnesota Press in 1989, this primer is an informative and useful addition not only to the "general reader's" library, but also to that of any scholar who has an interest in the production and reception of art, and in the complex field known as aesthetics.

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Franco Ferrucci. *Ars poetica*. Genova: Il Melangolo, 1994. Pp. 160.

In occasione dell'uscita in Nord America del *Casanova* di Fellini, Irving Layton pubblicò sul *Globe and Mail* del 2 marzo 1977 un'appassionata difesa dell'opera del regista italiano, poi ristampata con il titolo *A Champion for Fellini* nella raccolta *Taking Sides*. Secondo Layton, Fellini doveva giungere alla riflessione su se stesso implicita nel *Casanova* perché per un artista maturo d'anni, di saggezza e d'esperienza, non c'è soggetto più affascinante che l'artista stesso, e perché l'artista è, dopo tutto, "il trionfale compimento dell'universo, la materia giunta a piena consapevolezza di se stessa" ("The artist is, after all, the universe's crowning achievement, matter become fully aware of itself".)

L'artista come "materia cosciente di se stessa"? Franco Ferrucci è forse il solo scrittore italiano che sarebbe disposto a sottoscrivere una tesi così romantica e trascendentalista. Nella sua opera narrativa (*Il mondo creato, I satelliti di Saturno, Fuochi*) Ferrucci ha cercato di realizzare una trasmutazione della materia in letteratura sforzandosi di raccontare proprio ciò che si sottrae ad ogni racconto, vale a dire la nascita e la morte. Come critico e saggista (*Il giardino simbolico, The Poetics of Disguise, Il poema del desiderio*) la sua maggiore cura è stata dedicata all'elaborazione del concetto di "autobiografia dell'opera", in cui viene teorizzato che è la "materia" stessa dell'opera letteraria che "decide", per vie sconosciute al suo autore, di raccontare, come in filigrana, la propria genesi al lettore. Nel capitolo intitolato *Opus organicum* di questa sua recente *Ars poetica*, bilancio provvisorio di una carriera iniziata nel 1971 con la pubblicazione di *Addio al Parnaso*, Ferrucci dimostra di essere ancora fedele alla sua concezione "animista" della letteratura e della produzione artistica in generale.

C'è una singolare oscillazione nell'opera di Ferrucci, tra illuminismo e romanticismo. Quando deve giudicare, i suoi maestri sono illuministi. Quando vuole teorizzare la prassi artistica in sé si rivela invece figlio della più estrema estetica romantica, quella per cui l'opera d'arte è più una manifestazione della natura che della cultura, perché in ultima analisi non c'è altro che natura. È un'estetica che ha i suoi continuatori anche in ambienti molto più razionalisti, e non sarebbe poi così azzardato trovarne gli echi in Lévi-Strauss.