

1 Introduction

Qu'est-ce que la littérature? Jean-Paul Sartre posed this question in *Les temps modernes* in 1948.¹ Two hundred years earlier, Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten had provided what remains a largely neglected answer: “LITERATURE is *perfect sensate discourse*” (MED § 9; *Oratio sensitiva perfecta est POEMA*). This definition lays the foundation for Baumgarten’s philosophical approach to literature, which is what this book is about. With constant and open-minded attention to concrete literary texts – “facing poetry,” so to say – Baumgarten presents this definition as the result of a radical conceptualization of literature:

I intend to demonstrate that many consequences can be derived from a single concept of literature which has long ago been impressed on the mind, and long since declared hundreds of times to be acceptable, but not once proved.

Ut enim ex una, quae dudum mente haeserat, poematis notione probari plurima dicta iam centies, vix semel probata posse demonstrarem. (MED, [preface], 4)²

In intellectual history, Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten, who was born on July 17, 1714, in Berlin and died on May 27, 1762, in Frankfurt an der Oder, is known as the last prominent representative of Wolffian scholastic philosophy. He worked in an age when every great philosopher sought to publish a universal system of philosophy, spanning all the disciplines. Baumgarten’s publications reflect this objective with his often enormous monographs on aesthetics, metaphysics, ethics, jurisprudence, and epistemology. His aesthetics thus belongs to a holistic philosophical system, and it must be considered from such a perspective. But it is his aesthetics – which he initiated with his 1735 master’s thesis, entitled *Meditationes philosophicae de nonnullis ad poema pertinentibus*, and extended with the two volumes of his *Aesthetica*, published in 1750 and 1758 – for which he is best known. With these works, he established the modern discourse of aesthetics and gave the discipline its name. Intellectual history has thus particularly sought to determine where Baumgarten fits in the development of major facets of modern aesthetic philosophy, such as the autonomy of art, the universality of aesthetic judgments, and the subjectivity of aesthetic experience. My study aims to intervene in the traditional understanding of his aesthetics by outlining how it developed the first modern theory of literature and discovered the

1 Jean-Paul Sartre, “Qu’est-ce que la littérature?,” pts. I–VI, *Les Temps Modernes* 17 (février 1947): 769–805; 18 (mars 1947): 961–988; 19 (avril 1947): 1194–1218; 20 (mai 1947): 1410–1439; 21 (juin 1947): 1607–1641; 22 (juillet 1947): 7–114.

2 I here translate “poema” not as “a poem,” but as “literature.” See 2.1 Ambiguity; 5.1 Prose.

central relevance of literature to philosophy. In brief, I want to show that as the “science of everything that is sensate” (KOLL § 1; Wissenschaft von allem, was sinnlich ist), Baumgarten’s aesthetics is actually a science of literature.

Baumgarten did not set out to demonstrate the value of literature to philosophy. But in working on his philosophical writings and lectures, he ended up analyzing, synthesizing, and contextualizing literature. It thereby became clear to him that aesthetics demands a sensate realization; or put differently, aesthetics is always an embodied philosophy. In any case, his aesthetics does not deal with literature as belles lettres or as a moral institution but rather as an epistemic object. Through his philosophical work, he discovers literature’s own unique capacity to address philosophical problems. Although Baumgarten was a philosopher and not a literary critic, he was able to tackle his philosophical project only because he approached it as a literary theorist *avant la lettre*. His aesthetics is thus formative for a way of thinking about literature that would coalesce in the coming centuries, beginning in particular with Friedrich Schlegel, who mobilized the concept of theory against the poetological tradition and was the first to programmatically call his poetics a theory. But no later literary theorist would ever again match Baumgarten’s holistic view.

Despite the scope and significance of his work on aesthetics, his insights into “the logic without thorns” (KOLL § 1; la logique sans épines) – a moniker for aesthetics that he quotes from Dominique Bouhours³ – were quickly superseded by Immanuel Kant.⁴ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel does not even mention Baumgarten, and the European Romantics were utterly uninterested in his scholastic philosophy with its hundreds of numbered paragraphs in indigestible Latin.⁵ Baumgarten’s aesthetics was thus relegated to oblivion, and his theory of literature remains undiscovered, waiting to take its rightful place in intellectual history. This oversight is based on a simple misunderstanding of the role literature plays in his philosophical project. Literature was always at the heart of Baumgarten’s theoretical interests, beginning with his 1735 master’s thesis. Both his *Meditationes* and the later *Aesthetica* largely draw on literary examples,

3 See Dominique Bouhours, *La manière de bien penser dans les ouvrages d’esprit* (Paris: Veuve de S. Mabre-Cramoisy, 1688; facsimile, Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1974), 11.

4 See Courtney D. Fugate and John Hymers, “Introduction,” in *Baumgarten and Kant on Metaphysics*, ed. Fugate and Hymers (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 1–4.

5 See Hans Reiss, “Die Einbürgerung der Ästhetik in der deutschen Sprache des achtzehnten Jahrhunderts oder Baumgarten und seine Wirkung,” *Jahrbuch der deutschen Schillergesellschaft* 37 (1993): 109–138; Egbert Witte, *Logik ohne Dornen: Die Rezeption von A. G. Baumgartens Ästhetik im Spannungsfeld von logischem Begriff und ästhetischer Anschauung* (Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 2000).

at first predominantly from lyric poetry, but later mainly from the great epics and fables of antiquity. The passages he selects fascinate him because of their figural, poetic qualities – and not because they belong to the genre of lyric poetry.

In the scholarship on Baumgarten, these passages are considered mere examples for something else, namely, for the “science of sensate cognition” (AE § 1; *scientia cognitionis sensitivae*). But if that were actually the case, then one would expect Baumgarten to cite examples from other technical or fine arts.⁶ He does not. Only in a very few instances does he refer to other arts at all, and these references never carry epistemological weight. Baumgarten is thus concerned not with art in general but with literature in particular. And the concept of literature itself emerges when he abstracts from his examples and draws attention to the structure of literary discourse, the actual focus of his theory. This means that by the mid-eighteenth century, literary theory had developed not only out of genre poetics, as scholars have often claimed, but also out of philosophy, albeit unintentionally.

To understand this unintended articulation of a theory of literature, one needs to remember what Baumgarten’s philosophical project of aesthetics is about. He ultimately wants to radically alter the order of knowledge, as he claims in the second letter of the *Philosophische Briefe von Aletheophilus*, in which he introduces his project in 1741: “Why shouldn’t a talented philosopher be able to work on a philosophical encyclopedia in which he presents the sciences that belong to philosophy in total in their relationship to one another?” (PHB, 6; *Warum sollte nicht ein geschickter Philosoph sich an eine philosophische Encyclopädie machen können, darinn er die zur Philosophie gehörende[n] Wissenschaften insgesamt in ihrer Verbindung vorstellte?*). Such an overview of human knowledge would have to consider both the upper and lower cognitive faculties, which motivates Baumgarten to organize his approach to an encyclopedia differently from Johann Heinrich Alsted’s standard reference work of early modern knowledge, the *Encyclopaedia septem tomis distincta* (1630). Baumgarten’s outline for a philosophical encyclopedia only appeared posthumously in 1769 – it was entitled *Sciagraphia encyclopaediae philosophicae* and edited by Johann Christian Förster – but in this earlier “silhouette” (PHB, 6; *Schatten-Riß*), he presents logic

⁶ See Jochen Schulte-Sasse, “Aesthetic Orientation in a Decentered World,” in *A New History of German Literature*, ed. David E. Wellbery et al. (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2004), 351; Frauke Berndt, “Halle 1735: Die Entdeckung der Literatur,” in *Medialität: Historische Konstellationen*, ed. Christian Kiening and Martina Stercken (Zurich: Chronos, 2019), 371–377.

as a science of rational cognition or distinct insight, and reserves the laws of sensate and vivid cognition, even if it does not ascend to distinctiveness in the most precise sense, for a specific science. He calls the latter aesthetics.

als eine Wißenschafft der Erkenntnis des Verstandes oder der deutlichen Einsicht [...] und behält, die Gesetze der sinnlichen und lebhaften Erkenntnis, wenn sie auch nicht bis zur Deutlichkeit, in genauester Bedeutung, aufsteigen sollte, zu einer besondern Wissenschaft zurück. Diese letztere nennt er die Aesthetik. (PHB, 7)

It is thus apparent that Baumgarten establishes the “art of aesthetic experience” (PHB, 8; *Aesthetische Erfahrung Kunst*) as a theoretical and not as an empirical science. Aesthetics is intimately related and equal to logic, “its older sister by birth” (AE § 13; *soror eius natu maior*), which substantiates his claim to its relevance. With this revaluation of sensate cognition and the elevation of aesthetics with regard to logic, Baumgarten overturns his predecessors’ positions, in particular those of Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz and Christian Wolff, and brings the pre-modern order of knowledge into flux. In the end, aesthetics encompasses epistemology, metaphysics, and ethics, allowing Baumgarten to outline, as his eighteenth-century biographer Thomas Abbt succinctly puts it, a “metapoetics” of sensation.⁷

But in this philosophical project – and this is the crux – Baumgarten lacks concepts for defining the a priori rules of sensate cognition and so instead turns to literary texts to discover these fundamental principles. He insists that identifying these principles must be done in a philosophically legitimate way and not through habit, that is, not through basing the rule on a single case and then expecting to encounter similar cases. Only then can aesthetics claim to have the status of a science.⁸ As early as the preface of his *Meditationes*, he wishes “to make it plain that philosophy and the knowledge of how to construct a poem, which are often held to be entirely antithetical, are linked together in the most amiable union” (MED, [preface], 4; *hoc ipso philosophiam & poematis pangendi scientiam habitas saepe pro dissitissimis amicissimo iunctas connubio ponerem ob oculos*). Literature is not just a source of examples; it rather provides the foundational model for Baumgarten’s aesthetics, which makes his aesthetics a theory of literature, worthy of a philosopher: “I may now satisfy this obligation, I have chosen a subject which many, to be sure, hold to be too trifling and remote to deserve the attention of philosophers” (MED, [preface], 4; *Nunc autem ut fiat*

⁷ Thomas Abbt, “Leben und Charakter Alexander Gottlieb Baumgartens,” in *Vermischte Werke*, vol. 4 (Berlin: Friedrich Nicolai, 1780; facsimile, Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1978), 222.

⁸ See 2.1 Ambiguity.

satis, materiam eam elegi, quae multis quidem habebitur tenuis & a philosophorum acumine remotissima).

We can thus conclude that Baumgarten presents the first modern theory of literature without intending to do so. In his theory, literature and philosophy do not relate to each other as the particular to the general. According to the principles of his aesthetics (see AE § 73), literary texts should not be used to provide initial examples or evidence. In other words, he employs examples in a rhetorical and not a dialectical context. By establishing an analogy between literature and sensate cognition, he lets the two illuminate each other reciprocally in an epistemological balancing act. And while his analogical method may have made him uncomfortable as a philosopher, he turned to it again and again during the twenty-five years he devoted to this project – though in the end Baumgarten was not able to recognize his own ultimate achievement.

Only through the detour of contemplating and describing lyric, dramatic, and epic texts can Baumgarten translate the laws of logic into the laws of aesthetics. Viewed historically, this should not come as a surprise. In the eighteenth century, many reflections on aesthetics exhibited a poetological character, and literature was about to become the prototype for sensate world-making. But such reflections lacked philosophical relevance. Literature first became epistemologically relevant when Baumgarten encountered its philosophical potential while reading. His work drew his attention to poetic passages; in dealing with them, he engages with the linguistic medium of literature in all its captivating phonetic and textual features. Not only tropes but also the rhetorical figures of detail (*amplificatio*) and figures of presence (*hypotyposis*) produce the striking structure of literary discourse as a *supermedium*. For that reason, the concept of *figura* (*schema*) is at the center of this theory of literature, which is indeed nothing less or more than a philosophy of rhetorical figures.

When analyzing poetic passages, Baumgarten becomes attentive to the unique power of what Ernst Cassirer calls “sensory ‘signs’ and ‘images’” as human interpretations of the self and the world.⁹ The elevation of sensuality in the eighteenth-century anthropological turn is accompanied by a radical affirmation of contingency: the predictable world, in which the rational subject prevails by using a logical calculus, belongs to the past; the new world is sensate, and the subject who interprets it operates aesthetically. Literature is thus positioned to offer privileged access to a sensate world that has lost its predictability.

⁹ Ernst Cassirer, “The Concept of Symbolic Form in the Construction of the Human Sciences (1923),” in *The Warburg Years (1919–1933): Essays on Language, Art, Myth, and Technology*, trans. S. G. Lofts and A. Calcagno (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 75.

In Baumgarten's meticulous work on literature, its epistemological, metaphysical, and ethical capacities for negotiating self and world come to the fore, and its servile function of transmitting moral messages recedes into the background. His reflections thus produce a literary epistemology, and literature migrates within the order of knowledge from the blurry margins to the luminous center.

Although Baumgarten's theory of literature contributes to a historical network of concepts spanning multiple disciplines, the argument of my study is not primarily a historical one. Only a perspective trained in contemporary literary theory and willing to take on what Hans-Georg Gadamer calls in *Wahrheit und Methode* (1960) the fusion of horizons can awaken Baumgarten's approach from its latency. How can and should we engage in the twenty-first century with literature and literary theory? I would argue that what is needed is not a reductionist approach or one that is overly specialized with an isolated, discrete interest – such as a theory of figurality, of performativity, of authorship, of fiction, or of praxeology, all of which can find their foundations in Baumgarten – but rather a holistic theory of literature that cannot be subsumed under any one particular school or ideology.

This book outlines Baumgarten's holistic theory of literature *as a theory*. To do so, I address its methodological basis (2 Methodology) and the epistemological justification of his philosophical project (3 Epistemology), before articulating its metaphysical aspects (4 Metaphysics). I then consider how his treatment of lyric, dramatic, and epic texts prompts him to develop a narratology that contains, with its constellation of epistemological and ontological perspectives, the most significant eighteenth-century theory of fiction (5 Narratology). Finally, I expand the frame of the book by addressing how he ties aesthetics to ethics in evaluating creative practices and their traces in literary texts (6 Ethics). My study thus aims to provide the first comprehensive engagement with Baumgarten's theory of literature. In contrast to studies of intellectual history, which focus on his relevance to the Enlightenment reorganization of the order of knowledge, this book is also particularly attuned to his relevance to literary theory today.

Central to my study are the 117 paragraphs of the *Meditationes*, which grew into the 904 paragraphs of the *Aesthetica* over the course of decades of work. Baumgarten's supposed magnum opus can thus be viewed as a palimpsest of the largely underestimated earlier work. Of the two, only the *Meditationes* has been translated into English. I quote from this 1954 translation by Karl Aschenbrenner and William B. Holther. The passages quoted from the *Aesthetica* have been translated by Maya Maskarinec and Alexandre Roberts for this book. I also consider the *Metaphysica*, which he published in seven editions between 1739 and 1757; Courtney D. Fugate and John Hymers translated this work into

English in 2013.¹⁰ Finally, I take into consideration the *Ethica philosophica* from the year 1740, which appeared in a second edition in 1751 and in a third in 1763; translations from this work are also by Maskarinec and Roberts.¹¹

The transcript of Baumgarten's lectures on aesthetics, *Kollegium über die Ästhetik*, also proves to be particularly insightful for my purposes. In these academic lectures held in Frankfurt an der Oder, 613 paragraphs of the *Aesthetica* are roughly translated into German. The freedoms Baumgarten takes in this translation significantly increase the epistemological value of this first modern theory of literature. Anthony Mahler has translated the quoted passages into English as well as the quotes from Baumgarten's *Philosophische Briefe von Aletheophilus*, published in 1741. Facing poetry, Baumgarten crosses the border between meta-language and object language: concepts give way to images, examples, similes, and metaphors, to metonymies, allegories, and personifications; proofs take on a subordinate role to that of associative, narrative, and scenic relations. This observation motivates my close readings: in large stretches of this book, Baumgarten's theory of literature is read *as literature* – with just as much attention to its stylistic techniques as to its propositional content.

Chapter 3 (Epistemology) is a comprehensive reworking of a chapter (2.1 Die Struktur des Gedichts) from my book *Poema / Gedicht: Zur epistemischen Konfiguration der Literatur um 1750*, which was published in 2011 by De Gruyter. Most notably, I have added a section (3.1.2 Desire) that considers the crucial significance of the appetitive faculties to Baumgarten's aesthetics. Chapter 4 (Metaphysics) and chapter 6 (Ethics) also pick up some threads from my earlier book, but their argumentative content and structure have been substantially changed and enlarged. Chapters 2 (Methodology) and 5 (Narratology) are new. Preliminary work for some of the chapters was published in essays cited in the footnotes.

10 I do not consider Baumgarten's *Initia philosophiae practicae: Primae acromaticae* (1760). For an English translation of this work, which was published shortly after I completed this manuscript, see *Baumgarten's Elements of First Practical Philosophy: A Critical Translation with Kant's Reflections on Moral Philosophy*, trans. Courtney D. Fugate and John Hymers (Oxford: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020).

11 A translation of this work is planned. See Fugate and Hymers, "Introduction," 3.