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*Código Penal* and the tensions it exhibits between religious and judicial concepts of repentance, or by alluding to the Truth and Reconciliation Commissions and their attempts to negotiate deep resentments by appeals to forgiveness. In sum, K. has fulfilled his task admirably: “If . . . I have stimulated some doubts about the very concept of forgiveness in a way that invites further inquiry, the intention of this book will have been fulfilled” (p. 171).

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*The Origins of Aesthetic Thought in Ancient Greece: Matter, Sensation, and Experience.* By JAMES I. PORTER. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010. Pp. [xvii] + 607.

This is a big book (though only the first installment of a promised trilogy) with a bold, insistent, and contentious agenda. Its aim is nothing less than to redefine how aesthetics should be understood in antiquity and thereby reconceive the place of antiquity in the larger history of aesthetics. In pursuing this aim, James Porter takes on those he considers to be his opponents: above all, Plato and Aristotle. He holds these two thinkers responsible for having created versions of “formalism” and “idealism” that have skewed most subsequent approaches to aesthetics right up to the present by allegedly repudiating the senses, showing scant interest in the materiality of art, and valuing a plane of cognitive experience that depends on suprasensory abstractions.

Equating aesthetics, in a manner heavily influenced by John Dewey, with the manifold experience of works of art or of practically anything else in the world as “phenomenal and material objects, . . . palpable and sensuous” (p. 10), P.’s work ranges across, and attempts to make connections between, the zones of poetics, art history, music theory, rhetoric, science, and more besides. In fact, one of the secondary aims of the project is to break down excessively rigid barriers of subdisciplinary specialization in classics and to open up aesthetics as the entire field of play of “sensation and perception” (terms P. treats as virtually synonymous) in the experience of “all imaginable forms of art in antiquity” (p. 7)—or even (in a characteristically expansive but nebulous formulation) “whenever questions of how one experiences phenomena arise” (p. 47). P.’s methods of argument and analysis are accordingly eclectic and free-roaming: “no text and no artifact will be immune to plundering for its indexical value to the newly expanded category of the aesthetic” (p. 68). The results are notable more for their dynamically exploratory spirit than for strict adherence to a steady line of reasoning. Readers may find this either exhilarating or disconcerting—or possibly a bit of both.

The broad compass of this energetically, and often polemically, pursued project makes summary difficult. Here is a mere thumbnail sketch. Chapter 1 vigorously contests the thesis (particularly associated with Paul Oscar Kristeller) that aesthetics, and even “art,” was an invention of the eighteenth century. It urges that the concept should embrace sensibilities, perceptual habits, and ways of thinking that can inform the whole texture of cultural experience, and it stresses the cross-artistic, cross-modal nature of much of the ancient material that the book will draw into its ambit. Chapter 2 launches the critique of Platonic-Aristotelian “formalism,” a heresy accused of

“dematerialising” art; in addition, P. invokes a number of modern thinkers (including Viktor Shklovsky [not a “formalist” in P.’s book], Mikhail Bakhtin, Susan Sontag, and the early New Critics) whom he finds congenial to his own materialist alternative. Chapter 3 maintains that classics as a discipline has been infected by Platonic idealism and is hence averse to the authentic materiality of art. P. traces the idea of matter/materialism back to the Presocratics, in whom he also finds evidence of “aesthetic” intuitions, including a nascent “phenomenalism” and premonitions of the sublime. His treatment of the Presocratics shows how thin the line is between thought-provoking hypotheses and flimsy surmise: the claim that Leucippus and Democritus may have pioneered plot analysis of drama (p. 235) is a case of the latter.

The book’s five central chapters are thematically rich and wide-ranging. Emphasizing how much of ancient aesthetic thinking depends on comparison and cross-fertilization between different arts, chapter 4 highlights the intensity of the “aesthetic public sphere” created by the explosion of art in late fifth-century Athens. It detects a leaning toward aesthetic subjectivism on the part of Protagoras and Democritus, and also examines the latter’s interest in a style of “componential” (atomizing) analysis that paves the way for later criticism of poetic language. The attack on Plato’s and Aristotle’s allegedly anti-materialist tendencies is picked up again here. Chapter 5 uses Aristophanes’ *Frogs* to anchor some reflections (many of them astute) on what happens when aesthetics tries to get to grips *evaluatively* with the physical materials of art; it also advances a view of Gorgias as a qualified materialist. Chapter 6 is built, sometimes rather loosely, around a set of ideas on the nature of authorial “voice” as a quasi-material presence to be located (or imagined) in the sensory properties of written texts: among other things, P. provides some real insight here into the views of Alcidas and Isocrates.

Chapter 7, the most technical and speculative in the book (readers might want to glance ahead at the résumé on p. 399), attempts to reconstruct Lasus of Hermione’s musico-poetic aesthetics of sound and to uncover an Archaic complexity in this area which was later occluded by opponents of the New Music who ideologically projected simplicity and purity back onto the earlier period. Chapter 8 examines some of the qualities of visuality that characterize Greek art; incorporating P.’s own close readings of a number of artifacts (an Early Cycladic sculpture and two Attic red-figure vases among them), it contests historical narratives like that of Alois Riegl which posit a progression from Archaic “tactility” to Classical illusionism. The book’s final, rather diffuse, chapter is devoted to multiple connections/analogies between verbal and architectural/sculptural art: zigzagging between Archaic material (Simonides, inscribed epigrams), the Hellenistic period (Posidippus, euphonist criticism), and Longinus, P. conjures up what he takes to be a long-lasting Greek sense of sublimity that involves a fused awareness of monumentality and vulnerability.

The above outline cannot convey the impressive array of scholarly expertise displayed by P. in this book, let alone the abundance of subtle observations he has to offer on a remarkable spread of phenomena and ideas, all of them tackled with intellectual bravura. The book is an important and multi-faceted contribution to the study of ancient aesthetics. Although it is hardly quite as pathbreaking as it claims (“Approaches to aesthetics as a legitimate domain of thought and inquiry in antiquity are virtually non-existent,” p. 6, is a typical instance of the author’s self-hyping), the work has a freshness and incisiveness of viewpoint that is bound to stimulate debate for many years. Its main achievement is the demonstration that it is indeed possible,

with eye-opening and challenging results, to widen the category of aesthetics in a way that can be studied through an “interdisciplinary” combination of poetic criticism, art history, musicology, philosophy, and more besides. Aesthetics, on P.’s revisionist account, aspires to establish a “unified field theory” (p. 483) of large areas of ancient culture, as well as contributing cumulatively to a “history of the senses” (pp. 3, 193). There are many classicists (and others) who, provided they can cope with its demanding intricacies of presentation, will benefit from engaging with P.’s enterprise.

The book sets itself, however, to be more than an ensemble of readings of particular texts and artifacts. It commits itself to a global thesis about the nature of (ancient) aesthetics, and its success needs to be judged, on its own terms, by the coherence or otherwise of this thesis. At this fundamental level, I have to say that I find the book far from compelling: it is vitiated by a conceptually tendentious and unstable model of aesthetic experience.

The central problem is that P.’s whole case depends on an endlessly repeated but inadequately justified dichotomy between aesthetic materialism and formalism (the latter sometimes equated with “idealism,” which adds a further layer of conceptual uncertainty, though one I lack space to probe in this review). It is difficult to see how one can have an aesthetic experience of a statue, melody, or poem without responding in some degree to elements of structure, pattern, and organization that belong to its “form.” It is also hard to understand how the form of a statue, melody, or poem can avoid being a condition of its “matter.” Yet P.’s book is premised on the notion that one can have aesthetic experiences of “pure” materiality, which he mostly but not very informatively equates with “sensuous appearances.” But what is such materiality? P. struggles from the outset to define it, announcing in an alarming tautology that it can be “roughly understood as the material nature of matter” (p. 5 n. 5). When he adds to that description, “or the subjective sense or feeling one has of this,” it is immediately clear that for aesthetic purposes “matter” cannot be a self-sufficient category but is always already filtered through operations of the mind. P. is intermittently prepared, not least in chapter 2 (which fluctuates bewilderingly in its attempts to get the subject in focus), to admit the difficulty of keeping matter and form apart. He chooses an epigraph from Dewey in which the concepts are described as interchangeable (p. 121), and he even goes as far as to state perplexingly that “materialism . . . in its own way is a kind of formalism” (p. 117). But this does not stop him from insisting doggedly on a polemical polarization of categories and on an aesthetic psychology that sets “the world of the . . . senses, . . . the world of hard material objects” in a false dualism with “the mind, ideas, and words, . . . the mental or perceptual or linguistic world” (p. 406).

Everywhere one turns in this book, P.’s detailed and often illuminating analyses of texts and artifacts are patently, irreducibly concerned with the aesthetic *intertwining* of perceptions and ideas, the sensory and the formal, appearances and the linguistic interpretation of those appearances. Yet these analyses are swathed in the rhetoric of conceptual opposition that I have illustrated. In addition, P. allows himself to blame so-called *formalists* for the schematic contrast on which his own identification of them depends. “The mere separation . . . of the material and formal causes of poetry is itself a formalistic gesture. *Formalism consists in this very abstraction*” (p. 101, P.’s italics). This is not the only place in the book, incidentally, where P. confuses conceptual abstraction with the predication of abstract, nonsensory *properties*. His own statements of materialism are full of abstractions.

The tendentious flaws in P.'s rhetoric are exacerbated by the branding of Plato and Aristotle as supreme exponents of the "formalism" that is the supposed antithesis of P.'s own "materialism." It is little short of bizarre that P. can so blithely present the two philosophers as a virtual pair of twins in this regard, as though there were little or no difference between their attitudes to poetry, music, painting, and so on. He can do so only by an act of crude simplification, shackling them together as "idealist or formalist in tendency, inasmuch as they valorized either ideal Forms or abstract formal properties and relations, for instance, design and arrangement" (pp. 42–43)—as though Platonic "Forms" (which may themselves have a kind of aesthetic dimension for the mind that experiences them, as *Republic*, *Phaedrus*, and *Symposium* all suggest) were not of an altogether different order from Aristotelian notions of form in poetry or painting. (Note the somewhat embarrassed concession, "And while it is true" [p. 113]; such occasional concessions, acting as a foil to the bigger picture, play a curious role in P.'s rhetoric: e.g., "Which is not to say" [p. 248].) P. is determined to discern "a strong Platonic bias" almost everywhere in Aristotle (pp. 141–42). He is even prepared, in sheer disregard for the integrity of Aristotelian thought, to associate both philosophers equally with belief in "invisible realities lying well beyond the reach of the senses" (p. 176).

The conflation of Platonism and Aristotelianism is downright cavalier. It manifests its own shortcomings when one notices, for example, that P. can happily invoke Aristotle in support of a conception of *aisthêsis* as a commonality that cuts across different sense faculties (pp. 45–46) and can even ascribe to him a conception of "pure aesthetic pleasure" in the contemplative use of the senses themselves (pp. 53–55). How, then, has P. managed to convince himself that Aristotle was uninterested in the "materiality" of art? The answer is: by a mixture of inattention and misreading. He fails to notice a passage like *De sensu* 440a8–10, where Aristotle shows close appreciation of a painterly technique of overlaying one color on another in order to depict objects seen through water or air. (If the same passage had occurred in Empedocles, P. would have dwelt on it scrupulously, as he does with the reference to painters and colors in Empedocles B23.) He nowhere considers Aristotle's view that musical mimesis (expression?) inheres "in the melodies themselves" (*Politics* 8.5, 1340a38–9). He is aware (p. 316) of Aristotle's keen sensitivity to the special qualities of the tragic actor Theodorus' voice at *Rhetoric* 3.2, 1404b21–4. Yet he ignores this when rehashing a stale old account of Aristotle as antitheatrical (pp. 102–7, compounded later by some muddled logic on p. 115). He states, with disturbing inaccuracy, that in chapter 4 of the *Poetics* Aristotle "says" that aesthetic viewing, harmony, and rhythm are not "of any importance to his theory of literature" (p. 58). He also willfully marginalizes the *Poetics*' various references to beauty, even asserting, in defiance of his own evidence, that there is an "overall absence of any concern for beauty" in the treatise (p. 99, with some backtracking on pp. 100–101). And P. assumes without justification that what Aristotle means by a tragedy's "form" is a bloodless abstraction, rather than something embodied in the full fabric of the work. When P. says that art "cannot help but be material, given the very nature of its media" (p. 133, P.'s italics), why would Aristotle disagree? One need only refer to the first chapter of the *Poetics* to see that he would not.

Even Plato, who seems *prima facie* to deserve the label of anti-materialist and idealist, is a far more complicated aesthetic thinker than P. is willing to give him credit for.

A glaring demonstration of this point occurs when, to reinforce one of his key tenets, the existence of cross-artistic modalities of aesthetic experience, P. cites a passage from *Republic* 3.400d–e (on the relevance of “harmony,” “grace,” “rhythm,” etc. to experience of both art and life in general—a crucial passage for making sense of *Platonic* aesthetics) in the very act of purporting to illustrate a sensibility that he claims that Plato and Aristotle “openly reject” (p. 59). The failure on P.’s part, here and elsewhere, to see the bias in his own polemical schematization is troubling, a bias that makes him more generally oblivious to the significant strands of sensuality—even eroticism—that run through Plato’s dealings with poetry, music, and visual art. What is the bewitching allure of Homeric poetry to which Socrates confesses himself susceptible at *Republic* 10.607c–d if not a thoroughly sensual experience? It is deeply regrettable that with Plato as with Aristotle P. does not give a reliable or nuanced account of relevant passages in the dialogues. Thus he takes *Gorgias* 502c to mean that poetic works “are *nothing but* melody, rhythm, and meter” (p. 255, P.’s italics)—which, if true, would surely make Plato an aesthetic materialist by P.’s lights—when Socrates in fact says that if you remove those elements you are still and always left with *logoi*, an entirely different proposition altogether. Sweeping pronouncements such as “Poetry for Plato has no true content, and at the extreme it has no content at all” (p. 84), or “Art and phenomena in their sensuous appearances are simply uninteresting to Plato” (p. 91), are rhetorically reductive evasions of the dialectic of ideas in *Ion*, *Republic*, and elsewhere. It is possible, as even Nietzsche showed, to be a vehement anti-Platonist in aesthetics without lapsing from serious critique into distorted caricature.

Part of the price that P. pays for his reductive account of Plato and Aristotle as (in his own pejorative sense) “formalists” is that he misses the complexity of the position they have come to occupy in the larger history of aesthetics. It is significant, for instance, that P. can enlist Shklovsky as a materialist after his own heart without stopping to notice (even though one of his quotations, on p. 79, actually shows) that Shklovsky invoked Aristotle as providing a precedent for his concept of linguistic “defamiliarisation.” Equally, if Sontag gets plaudits from P. (p. 81) for stressing the sensuous surfaces of art in her essay “Against Interpretation,” one needs also to realize that the famous final sentence of that essay, “In place of a hermeneutics we need an erotics of art,” is not far removed from the sentiment of Socrates at *Republic* 3.403c—and less surprisingly so when one grasps that Sontag’s anti-Platonizing stance is paradoxically dependent on quasi-Platonic tropes and imagery. Those are just two brief illustrations of how historically as well as intellectually unsatisfactory is P.’s attempt to turn two great thinkers into cardboard cutouts.

Let me reiterate that this is a work that contains a wealth of stimulating arguments and penetrating observations on an impressively large range of material. It supplies an important model of how to construct one kind of inclusive, Deweyesque perspective on ancient aesthetics. It is let down, however, by a conceptual framework that is insufficiently robust to carry the weight of the project.<sup>1</sup>

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1. The book has been produced to an extremely high standard. I noticed very few misprints, a great credit to the author. But two versions of the same sentence have not been reconciled on p. 12, and “W. K. Wimsatt” on p. 374 is a slip, I think, for William Empson.