CHAPTER THREE

AESTHETICS: AN OVERVIEW

As Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten (1714–1762) indicates at the beginning of his treatise Aesthetica (Aesthetics, 1750), “Aesthetics (theory of the liberal arts, doctrine of inferior knowledge, art of beautiful thinking, art of the analogous of reason) is the science of sensible knowledge.”¹ This is the opening statement of a work that is considered to be the genealogical moment in the creation of aesthetics as an autonomous philosophical field—a creation prompted by the need to rescue the senses from the primacy of reason. The association of feelings (aisthesis) with the fallacious world of experience has a long history that goes back to Plato’s (428–384 B.C.) mistrust of the senses. The latter gave access to a reality whose essences could only be found in the reflection of transcendental forms, or ideas. The senses and their cosmetic apparatuses (including the rhetorical world of poets) came to be enslaved to a mind (or dialectical logos) that the philosopher applied to the study of knowledge (the ultimate good). Baumgarten was faced with the challenge of formulating a theory of sensibility in which the body could stand shoulder to shoulder with the mind—a “science of sensuous cognition” (scientia cognitionis sensitivae) investing the sensible world with the perfection of logic. No matter how hard the philosopher tried to elevate the status of the senses, these could not escape the destiny of remaining “an inferior form of knowledge” (ratio inferior) grounded in the analogon rationis (conformity to the principle of reason).

When Nishi Amane (1829–1897) introduced to Japan the field of aesthetics in Bimyōgaku Setsu (The Theory of Aesthetics, 1877), and applied it to the organization of what could be called “the arts” in Japan, he was faced with the paradox of accepting the basic Descartian

apriori that “I am because I think” (cogito, ergo sum). René Descartes’ (1596–1650) motto does not deny the importance that passions and feelings have in the life of human beings, as his treatise Les Passions de l’Ame (The Passions of the Soul, 1649) attests. It does indicate, however, that one cannot rely on the passions in order to understand them. Instead, one must analyze them with the rationality of the geometer whose tools of inquiry—mind and reason—need to be free and independent from the object of their exploration. For Descartes, to think is definitely not to feel, even if, as Pascal reminded him, “the heart has its reasons, which reason cannot know.” Considering the fact that in pre- and early modern Japan, most of what is currently considered aesthetic speculation was made by poets and artisans, cogito, ergo sum was not very well suited to begin a treatise on aesthetics, as its Japanese translation—ware omou, yue ni ware ari—already demonstrates. The verb “omou” 思ふ does not correspond to the English “to think” or the French “penser,” as it includes strong pathetic elements. Etymologically, omou has been related to the words “to hide” (ōu 覆う) and “surface” (omo 面). Therefore, omou originally meant keeping inside feelings such as anxiety, hatred, hope, love, expectations, and so on, without letting them come out to the surface (the face). The act of omou took place in the “heart” (kokoro 心) which was the driving force behind the externalization of the feelings pent up in the process of “thinking.” Therefore, kokoro originally appears to have referred to the disclosure of one’s inner “thoughts/feelings” (omoi). In other words, the Japanese translation of “I think, therefore I am” actually means that my existence can only be explained by my omou, i.e., yearning for something or somebody, hoping that something will happen, being distressed and feeling a secret anxiety, and realizing that something is taking place at the bottom of one’s heart. The pathic aspect of the verb omou explains the Japanese expression “kokoro ni omou” 心に思う which literally means “to think inside the heart”—a contradiction in terms according to the logic of thinking with the mind and feeling in the heart. This expression appears in Ki no Tsurayuki’s (868–945?) Preface to the first imperial anthology of poetry in Yamato language, the Kokinshū

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2 For a translation of Nishi’s work, see Michele Marra, Modern Japanese Aesthetics: A Reader (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 1999), pp. 26–37.
4 Quoted in René Descartes, The Passions of the Soul, p. ix.