ANNA MOSTOVAIA

IDEALS OF PHYSICAL BEAUTY IN THE PROSE OF RUSSIAN WOMEN WRITERS IN THE SOVIET AND POST-SOVIET ERA

Introduction

Beauty is a notion that has always attracted the attention of philosophers. The first known definitions of beauty come from ancient Greek authors, such as Aristotle and Plotinus, who defined physical beauty as the ideal proportion, size, color and the interrelationship of body parts. The eighteenth century philosopher Johann Joachim Winckelmann was one of the most influential thinkers of the time, and developed the idea of classical influences on art and literary aesthetics in his “Reflections on the Imitations of Greek Works in Painting and Sculpture” (1755). He also found contemplating beauty useful for philosophers. Winckelmann’s ideas, and most importantly the concept of classical influences on aesthetics, are still relevant for today’s art and literature.

The proportional idea of beauty has been challenged many times, since antiquity, by thinkers who endeavored to explain the concept of beauty in terms other than pure ideal proportion of parts. Among the most significant proposals challenging the idea of proportional beauty is the idea that beauty is subjective, and depends on the recipient, or the viewer, expressed, for example, by the eighteenth century philosopher Francis Hutcheson. Hutcheson in his “Inquiry Concerning Beauty, Order, Harmony, Design” (1725), pointed out that beauty is the idea raised in us, that is, it is cultural. However, our perception of beauty depends on our “sense of beauty,” individual in each case, which Hutcheson called “our power of receiving the idea of beauty.” Hutcheson pointed out that beauty is defined by uniformity against variety and variety against uniformity. In other words, beauty is something that many beautiful things have in common, but also something which distinguishes one thing from another, and both are equally important.

Plotinus, and following him Chernyshevsky in Russia, believed that beauty is defined by a relation to something, or correspondence to something as much as it is by proportion. Thus, a plump and rosy-cheeked girl may seem beautiful to simple folk because her complexion indicates that she is healthy and is able to do the necessary work, while higher classes may have other ideals of beauty, because they have other requirements for qualities important for life. This point of view on beauty leads to an archetypal notion of beauty, also first expressed by Plotinus (cf. also Francis Hutcheson’s view above): we see something, including, or especially, a human body and face, as beautiful if it resembles a certain archetype. The eighteenth century romanticists, according to Synnott, with their attention to beauty of nature, were especially important in manifesting a new, non-proportional and more subjective approach to beauty.

The idea of proportional beauty has been successfully dismantled in philosophy, and beauty has become the subject of everyday speech and art rather than philosophy where it has been replaced by other, more precise terms, such as aesthetics. The latter, however, are also prone to acquiring imprecise meanings and building up connotations, similarly to the notion of beauty. The concept of beauty, as it exists in languages like English and Russian, is still very much based on the ancient prototype of proportional beauty, which is reflected by existing dictionaries of these languages.

It has been long known that the concept of beauty, or rather, of being beautiful, is subject to change with fashion and, therefore, is culture-specific. In other words, what is seen as beautiful in a certain place and at a certain time, may not be seen so in other places or even, in the same place at a different time. To give just one example, two hundred years ago in Russia being slim was not considered beautiful because it was a sign of poverty and malnourishment. This is still reflected in the semantic structure of the Russian word *khudoi* meaning being physically slim/thin and also “bad.”

Since real bodily beauty ideals, existing in people’s minds and art, are still very much based on the classic idea of proportional beauty, they are structural in nature. In other words, we think of beautiful in terms of certain archetypes, consisting of many elements, such as “it is beautiful for a woman to have long limbs, smooth skin, small feet”; “it is beautiful for a man to have wide shoulders, a square chin, a strong neck.” Some of these elements may be universal or quasi-universal at a certain time whereas others are culture-specific: for example the value of having small feet obviously used to be very high for Chinese aristocracy that applied a kind of wrapping procedure to girls’ feet to keep them small. Some elements of a beauty ideal change over time, as it happened with the value of being slim within Russian culture.