

BOOK NOTE by Jennifer A. McMahon in *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* Vol.77:1 (1999 March): 119-120.

*Aesthetics The Classic Readings*. David E. Cooper (ed), Peter Lamarque and Crispin Sartwell (advisory editors). Oxford, Blackwell Publishers, 1997, 276, £40.00 (cloth)/£12.99 (paperback).

The authors included in this anthology of historical texts on aesthetics and philosophy of art, address the big questions. They attempt to place art within experience generally or within the life of a community; or they attempt to understand the nature of the aesthetic and its role within experience. Topics include mimesis, the relation between art and truth, the metaphysics of beauty, the function of art, and the ontology of art. All of the extracts included were written prior to the middle of this century. The only aspect of this anthology which suggests that it was published recently is the inclusion of three Chinese pieces and one Indian piece.

In the introduction the editor writes: 'One purpose of an anthology of historical texts is to remind us not simply of how we arrived where we are, but of what might have been forgotten on arrival.' [p.7] Another purpose might be to present past texts in the light of recent discoveries or new understandings. The editor's comparison of Hegel's ideas on art with Schiller's discussion of an aesthetic education [pp.137-138], for example, does not give enough weight to the distinction between art and the aesthetic, assuming instead that both philosophers address the same entity. Yet Hegel discusses the sensuous object and Schiller an approach to life which does not necessarily include the making or study of conventional works of art. The editor maintains a tired and unnecessary dichotomy when he writes: 'Hegel is the inspiration for those who, left cold by the Kantian emphasis on form, seek the importance of artworks in the ideas they embody and their involvement with the age to which they belong' [p.138]. Throughout the editor's commentary, the metaphysics of the aesthetic is collapsed into the ontology of art. According to the editor:

the more enduring contribution of Croce [not included in this anthology] and Collingwood is their appreciation that art is intimately connected with the whole of our mental life - intellectual, affective, imaginative - and not just a device for exercising some hived-off faculty called 'taste' or 'the aesthetic sense'. [p.245]

'[A]rt is an entirely artificial category' the editor tells us, 'and, therefore, so is the notion of the aesthetic' [p.9]. I look forward to an anthology of writings on aesthetics put together and interpreted with a mind to contemporary understandings of the aesthetic as a particular kind of cognitive process ontologically distinct from art. Art might serve the aesthetic in some ages and art styles, but it need not. What makes something art may well be arbitrary, but what constitutes the aesthetic may not be. Such a way of thinking would sharpen what these authors had to say, to this reader at least.