

# Daintiness and Rationality. Kant as the Philosopher of Rococo.

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Nothing is easier<sup>1</sup> than to point out Immanuel Kant's (1724–1804) affiliation to the rococo: the gentle tiny master (a phrase coined by Johann Georg Hamann) engaged in playful conversation at the Keyserlings' 'Musenhof', portrayed by the countess, listening to the music of Philip Emanuel Bach, Händel, Haydn, Carl Heinrich Graun, Georg Benda. Decades later his student Herder would recall: Kant "had the merry cheerfulness of a youth which would accompany him throughout his life into old age."<sup>2</sup>

The association relies on a certain aesthetic attention to the cultivated style of life or, in Kant's words, on the "adequacy of the cultivated life to sociability: that is, with taste".<sup>3</sup> Taste is "the outer appearance of morality", and it has to prove itself in social contexts; it is the "faculty of societally judging outer objects in imagination".<sup>4</sup> This is as valid in the most abstract transcendental reflections on the necessary pre-suppositions of judgements of taste, as it is in the planning of a dinner party. Among all the opportunities to bring culture into our ordinary daily lives, a good meal in good company is what most certainly promotes true humanity, provided that the menu be precisely attuned to the sequence in conversation of first exchanging information, then arguing, and finally joking. Of course, the interest in sophisticated conversation cannot define the rococo: it already evolved and peaked in the *salons* of seventeenth-century Paris.<sup>5</sup> But it diffused into the bourgeois world in the course of the eighteenth century, and more importantly, it established itself as a sort of 'formal principle' guiding reflection on the style of life because it guaranteed affinity to a [...]

1 A slightly altered German version of this text appeared in: Herbert Lachmayer (ed.): *Mozart. Experiment Aufklärung im Wien des ausgehenden 18. Jahrhunderts*. Ostfildern 2006, under the title *Schweres Luftgewebe. Kant als Philosoph des Rokoko*. I owe thanks to Gregory Dekleva who kindly helped me with this English version.

2 Herbert Meinhard Mühlpfordt, *Königsberger Leben im Rokoko. Bedeutende Zeitgenossen Kants*, Siegen: J. G. Herder-Bibliothek Siegerland e. V. 1981, p. 11.

3 Immanuel Kant, *Anthropologie in pragmatischer Hinsicht*, Königsberg: Nicolovius 1798, A 201. Quotations from Kant are in my own translation. In the case of the *Critique of Pure Reason* and the *Critique of Judgement* I rely on the translations of J. M. D. Meiklejohn and J. C. Meredith respectively. In the references, German titles are kept; page references are given in the usual style to the original editions.

4 *Ibid.*, A 192, A 186.

5 "Nei primi decenni del XVII secolo, l'élite nobile scopriva l'esistenza di un territorio fino allora inesplorato [...]". Benedetta Craveri, *La civiltà della conversazione*, Milano: Adelphi<sup>2</sup> 2001, p. 11.