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Civilization in Eighteenth Century Britain: A Subject for Taste

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Maria Semi

CIVILIZATION IN EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY BRITAIN:  
A SUBJECT FOR TASTE

Has taste ever been a ‘mere’ matter of taste? What role did the reflections on taste play in the economy of eighteenth-century thought? Are the reflections about taste developed in eighteenth-century Europe part of the discipline that goes under the name of aesthetics?

The last question is perhaps the least relevant: first of all, the discipline of aesthetics as we usually conceive of it is a nineteenth-century product. During the eighteenth-century most authors who wrote about topics we usually associate with aesthetics did not develop a coherent aesthetic theory, or - when they did so, as in Baumgarten and Meier’s case - they did so in terms quite different to those one usually finds in post-Kantian aesthetics. Secondly, it would perhaps be more productive to adopt the argumentative strategy espoused by Paul Guyer when he declares that:

there is little value in attempting to stipulate a clear definition of the field in advance: How philosophers have conceived of the boundaries of the field has been part of its history, and we will simply have to see how that history goes. The history will have to define the field for us rather than the other way around.<sup>1</sup>

But, unless we believe in an invisible hand guiding history in our stead, it is not always easy to understand how “history defines the field for us”, as it is the historian who selects what shall be included in his narrative and what shall be excluded from it. Moreover, taste in the eighteenth century is only in part a topic of the so-called ‘philosophical aesthetics’: taste pervades many aspects of the culture of the age.

The other two questions sound more promising. Just as any other type of value judgement, taste has arguably ever been a mere matter of taste and indeed the insistent reference to this concept in the century we are concerned with, its prominence in written sources, forces us to ask what changes brought taste so forcefully to the fore. Historians have already pointed out several important societal changes that impacted on the emergence of taste in eighteenth-century Britain: the birth of consumerism, journalism, the creation of public places like coffee-houses where illiterate could listen to the public reading of journals, pleasure gardens, public theatres, paying concerts. And one should also not forget other kind of amusements such as cock-fighting, attending hangings, fireworks and visiting places like prisons and madhouses which historians frequently overlook in their narratives of eighteenth-century leisure. These grim forms of amusement were broadly shared across the whole spectrum of the British population, and tell us a lot about how people “construed the world, invested it with meaning, and infused it with emotion”, to use Robert Darnton’s words.<sup>2</sup> Some of the above-mentioned forms of amusement involve kinds of taste which have little to do with aesthetics and a lot to do with morals and socially approved attitudes, others (like attending fireworks) could find their way in a history of aesthetics, but they seldom do.

To explain easily and briefly how the topic of taste can lend itself to multiple considerations, I will make the case of the visits to Bethlem Hospital. Here, the same event or attitude (visiting the Bedlamites) could be interpreted as the fruit of different tastes, according to the social standing – and to the willingness to open one’s purse – of the people involved:

Sightseers – of an approved kind – were positively courted by the Governors. The ideal visitor was the ‘person of quality’, who came to the Hospital with the intention of doing ‘the poore Lunatiques’ good ‘&

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Guyer, *A History of Modern Aesthetics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), vol. I, 3.

<sup>2</sup> Robert Darnton, *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), 3.

relieving them'. Such 'people of note and quallitie' who were given particular access by the rulers, were defined in accordance with elite notions of morality and benevolence and with Bethlem's charitable status.<sup>3</sup>

The delight afforded to visitors by the Bedlamites could denote two different kinds of taste: the good taste of the "people of quallitie" when the delight was coupled with moral concerns and charity, the wicked taste of the rabble when the very same delight didn't imply any act of benevolence. Both might have laughed at the Bedlamites, but their laughs did not denote the same taste: "people of quallitie" could *de facto* buy their way into the realm of good taste. But changes in sensibility influenced these forms of social entertainment, and, as evidenced by the authors of *The History of Bethlem*,

as sensibilities grew more refined, the fun went out of seeing the insane. The new sentiments of the Age of Sensibility robbed visiting Bethlem of its humour, replacing the ribaldry of a Brown or Ward with the tears of a 'Man of Feeling'. [...] While, before the mid-eighteenth century, there had been nothing more remarkable or amusing than Bedlam and its inmates, there was subsequently 'nothing so affecting'.<sup>4</sup>

As we will see later in this chapter, Hume will devote some thoughts to the question of historical changes in sensibility, morals and taste, asserting that morality has to be taken into account when judging, for example, literary descriptions. Morality has a retroactive value, and it can influence our judgement on pieces of work coming from past ages.

Indeed, reflections on taste populate so many domains of eighteenth-century discourse that the concept seems extremely far-reaching. Unless one makes the eighteenth century start in 1790, when Kant's third critique was published, we can hardly find any reason for seriously arguing the actual existence of something like aesthetic autonomy and aesthetic disinterestedness in that century, and I will not deny that I think it's simply wrong, though academically common, to talk about aesthetics for most of eighteenth-century contexts (English speakers anyway didn't use that word to describe what they were talking about).<sup>5</sup> Are we sure it really is 'aesthetics', as we usually think of it, that best subsumes all the aspects of eighteenth-century thought we attribute to its realm? My position in this chapter is that if we want to talk about taste as part of eighteenth-century aesthetics either we narrow down, as has been done, the realm of taste – which in the eighteenth century far exceeds aesthetics – or we have to expand the realm of aesthetics.<sup>6</sup> And this makes any claim about autonomy, disinterestedness and the likes absolutely unsustainable.

Reading Hume's *Essays Moral, Political, Literary* and other British literature of the age, I will argue that considerations about taste were (among other things) inextricably connected to ideas about human difference and civilization, and therefore to the domains of morals, history and politics. Considering taste simply as the "capacity for disinterested contemplative pleasure"<sup>7</sup> would make us completely miss

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<sup>3</sup> *The History of Bethlem*, ed. by J. Andrews, A. Briggs, R. Porter P. Tucker and K. Waddington (Abingdon: Routledge, 1997), 176–177.

<sup>4</sup> *The History of Bethlem*, 184.

<sup>5</sup> Dabney Townsend refers to this issue right at the onset of his book on *Eighteenth-Century British Aesthetics*: "To use the word at all with regard to eighteenth-century Britain is anachronistic. It is also misleading because the issues in eighteenth-century British discussions centered on the arts and do not reflect many of the Kantian presuppositions that references to aesthetics now take for granted. Kantian notions of disinterestedness, intuitive sensibility, and the free play of the imagination, as well as relations to art, the beautiful, and the sublime based on aesthetic attitude appear, of at all, only in tentative ways in the eighteenth century", *Eighteenth-Century British Aesthetics* (Abingdon - New York: Routledge, 2018 [1999]), 2. See also Karl Axelsson, *Political Aesthetics. Addison and Shaftesbury on Taste, Morals and Society* (London - New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019), 17, n. 72.

<sup>6</sup> For example, when Dabney Townsend writes in his monograph *Hume's Aesthetic Theory: Taste and Sentiment* (New York: Routledge, 2001), that Hume's way of dealing with problems relating to the relationship between reason and passions "presumes a role for sentiment that is essentially aesthetic in the sense that 'aesthetics' refers to the way that feeling and sentiment determine how the mind represents its world" (p. 10) he is *de facto* expanding the realm of aesthetics.

<sup>7</sup> The quote comes from David Lloyd, "The Pathological Sublime: Pleasure and Pain in the Colonial Context," in Daniel Carey and Lynn Festa (eds.) *The Postcolonial Enlightenment* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 73. I am using this quote to give a classic post-Kantian definition of taste.

the complexity of that category in eighteenth-century discussions, also when these discussions relate to the world of the arts. As Suvir Kaul argued,

Scholars must continue to work with the idea that Great Britain [...] was forged both via internal commerce, conflict, and treaty, and via overseas trade, warfare, and colonization. This means that—in the instance of Britain—the frames of reference, whether in an analysis of an English lyric or a parliamentary document [...], will not simply be the poet or the parliamentarian [...], but will expand to incorporate questions about the making of national subjects and civic and military institutions adequate to the demands of international trade and a burgeoning [...] empire.<sup>8</sup>

The perspective here depicted is one which is often absent in traditional discussions about aesthetics. The otherwise deep and well-argued analysis one finds in books such as Townsend's, who calls for a contextual reading of Hume, which should pay special attention to context and style, or in Kivy's analysis of Hume's aesthetic views, both deal with philosophical theories as if they were not enmeshed in a worldly dimension, but only in a philosophical one.<sup>9</sup> Narratives of philosophical aesthetics often resemble the history of ideas, detached, as it were, from the flesh of their subjects, from their daily toils and from their social and political concerns.

#### CIVILIZATION AS HISTORY AND THE HISTORICITY OF TASTE

To narrow down the scope of this chapter, I will focus only on one of the possible novelties in eighteenth-century's conceptions of taste, trying to show that in that century a powerful alliance between the ideas of taste and civilization was established, and that both performed what can be described – using the words of Quentin Skinner<sup>10</sup> – as an evaluative-descriptive function, and became markers of difference. Skinner points the attention to the fact that historians should consider the texts they study also from the point of view of the theory of speech acts, therefore endowing words with a double agency: as illocutionary and perlocutionary acts. This means that when we analyze historically the words that were used in determinate sentences, we should pay attention not only to the plain meaning of the phrases, but also to the aim of the sentence, what its author wanted it to perform (illocutionary act), and what in the end was the result of the phrase, what were its effects (perlocutionary act). Brett Bowden has shown how and why we should consider the term 'civilization' as having the double evaluative-descriptive function. As he points out:

The label civilization is not usually used to describe the collective life of just any group, as culture sometimes is<sup>11</sup>; rather, it is reserved for social collective that demonstrate a degree of urbanization and organisation.<sup>12</sup>

In following the history of the use of the term 'civilization', Bertrand Binoche has stressed that during the last part of the eighteenth-century an important shift took place: "From being an abstraction, inducted from the analysis of empirical histories, so, from being a natural history of humanity, civilization became *the universal history of human beings* [...]. Becoming universal, civilization became also *irreversible*."<sup>13</sup> This 'irreversibility' process in the British soil was closely linked to the development of so-called

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<sup>8</sup> Suvir Kaul, "How to write Postcolonial Histories of Empire", in *The Postcolonial Enlightenment*, 316

<sup>9</sup> Townsend, *Hume's Aesthetic Theory*; Peter Kivy, *The Seventh Sense: Francis Hutcheson and Eighteenth Century British Aesthetics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2003).

<sup>10</sup> Quentin Skinner, *Visions of Politics. Vol. I Regarding Method* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 148.

<sup>11</sup> As highlighted by David Lloyd, culture has also been used as such a marker of difference, as "the civilized society, with the complex differentiation of spheres that distinguish modernity, *has* culture. The uncivilized, who fail to differentiate the spheres of religion, art, labour, and so forth, *are* culture," "The Pathological Sublime," 73.

<sup>12</sup> Brett Bowden, "Civilizational security", *The Routledge Handbook of New Security Studies*, ed. by P. J. Burgess (London - New York, Routledge, 2010), 9.

<sup>13</sup> Bertrand Binoche, *Les equivoques de la civilisation* (Seyssel : Champ Vallon, 2005): "D'abstraction induite à partir de l'analyse des histoires empiriques, c'est-à-dire d'histoire naturelle de l'humanité, la civilisation devint *l'histoire universelle du genre humain* [...]. En s'universalisant ainsi, la civilisation devient aussi *irreversible*." 16.

conjectural histories, and the result of this process was that ‘civilization’ became the outcome of historical development. Cultural productions also became part of this teleologically oriented narrative.

Much has been written about the birth of a specific type of historical narrative in eighteenth-century Scotland that goes under the name of ‘stadial history’ or ‘conjectural history’.<sup>14</sup> I will briefly retrace some important aspects of this intellectual tradition, without which it would be impossible to understand the significance of the connection established during Enlightenment’s age between taste and civilization. In the words of David Allan, “Smith and his colleagues were recognised very quickly by contemporaries as having developed a new type of historiography marked by a strong abstract or conceptual content informed by essentially philosophical concerns.”<sup>15</sup> In particular it was their analysis of social and economic factors and of the influence these had on political institutions and laws that gave their histories a peculiar and innovative flavor.<sup>16</sup> What matters mostly to our discourse is that the arts and what we would nowadays call ‘cultural aspects’ were englobed in these histories. Civilization proceeded by stages, equally valid for any population, and each stage was characterized by specific forms of government, laws and customs. Since especially the first stages of humanity were thought to be universally partaking in the same characteristics, general histories also provided the means for transcultural comparison. A main theme that underlies many of the works written by philosophers and historians dealing with the development of society through the ages was the understanding of change and difference. Encapsulating diversity in a historical dynamic has been a peculiar way in which the Scottish Enlightenment tried to deal with it, as Carey observes: “The strategy that eventually gained favour among Scottish writers was to recast difference as a product of history, conditioned by varying economic and social situations.”<sup>17</sup> One of the categories that was going to benefit from this new trend was ‘taste’, which also acquired a historical dimension. The ideal “history of taste” was interpreted as presenting an imagined uniformity at its beginning (in a natural, simple world, devoid of the needs induced by commercial society) and a subsequent differentiation brought about through economic and social change. A statement like the one by Racine, who in his preface to *Ifigénie* (1674) said that he was happy to ascertain that “common sense and reason don’t change over the centuries. The taste of Paris is therefore in agreement with the one of Athens,”<sup>18</sup> would not have been prevalent a hundred years later. Taste in the eighteenth century is a pervasive topic to be found in almost any kind of writing and it would therefore be misleading to restrict its discussion to the realm of ‘philosophical aesthetics’. Taste, together with politeness, is enmeshed in eighteenth-century society at large, and bears significant relations not only to the domain of morals and civility, but also to economy, political science and to history. As emphasized by many scholars, the discourse about taste in the eighteenth century acquires a peculiar significance also because it “arose in no small measure as a reactionary new regime of social demarcation, enabling those of a certain social standing to continue to distinguish themselves in a commercialist age from the promiscuous hordes of parvenus at their heels,”<sup>19</sup> making taste a preeminently evaluative-descriptive concept. The intellectual effort of framing the discourse about taste in historical terms has been one of the powerful ways used

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<sup>14</sup> Think of Hume’s letter to William Strahan in August 1770 where he says “I believe this is the historical Age, and this the historical Nation” (quoted in David Allan, “Identity and Innovation: Historiography in the Scottish Enlightenment,” in Sophie Bourgault and Robert Sparling (eds.), *A companion to Enlightenment Historiography* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 307). About Scottish historiography see also chap. 5 in Nicholas Phillipson’s monograph *Adam Smith: an Enlightened Life* (New Haven - London: Yale University Press, 2010), and Silvia Sebastiani, “National Characters and Race: A Scottish Enlightenment Debate,” in Thomas Ahnert and Susan Manning (eds.), *Character, Self, and Sociability in the Scottish Enlightenment* (New York: Palgrave, 2011), 187–205.

<sup>15</sup> David Allan, “Identity and Innovation,” 319.

<sup>16</sup> Milestones of this historiographical tradition are Robertson’s *History of Scotland* (1759), Ferguson’s *An Essay on the History of Civil Society* (1767), many of Hume’s essays in *Essay and Treatises on Several Subjects* (1772), Smith’s *Lectures on Jurisprudence*, Millar’s *Observations Concerning the Distinction of Ranks in Society* (1771), and Kames’ *Sketches of the History of Man* (1774).

<sup>17</sup> Daniel Carey, *Locke, Shaftesbury, and Hutcheson: Contesting Diversity in the Enlightenment and Beyond* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 188.

<sup>18</sup> Quoted by M. Fumaroli, *Les abeilles et les araignées* in Anne-Marie Lecoq (ed.), *La Querelle des Anciens et des Modernes* (Paris: Gallimard, 2001), “le bon sens et la raison étaient les mêmes dans tous les siècles. Le goût de Paris s’est trouvé conforme à celui d’Athènes,” 171.

<sup>19</sup> David L. Porter, “Monstrous Beauty: Eighteenth-Century Fashion and the Aesthetics of the Chinese Taste,” *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 35/3: 400.

by men of letters and philosophers to legitimize the values they championed. The temporal dimension acquired by taste in this period has been underscored by James Noggle, who thus describes its dual nature:

Discussions of taste imposed two forms of contemporaneity – the present of an individual mind’s experience and the impersonal, historical present, distinguished from what preceded it – upon each other. The two were obviously related but drew on different kind of thinking. One came from the period’s discussions of human nature and their characterizations of the mind as a theatre of present impressions. The other derived from increasingly elaborate distinctions between what was called the “modern” era and Europe’s Gothic and classical past.<sup>20</sup>

Edmund Burke in a certain way exemplifies this dual nature when he writes that:

when it is said, taste cannot be disputed, it can only mean, that no one can strictly answer what pleasure or pain some particular man may find from the taste of some particular thing. This indeed cannot be disputed; but we may dispute, and with sufficient clearness too, concerning the things which are naturally pleasing or disagreeable to the sense. But when we talk of any peculiar or acquired relish, then we must know the habits, the prejudices, or the distempers of this particular man, and we must draw our conclusion from those.<sup>21</sup>

On the one hand taste refers to what is naturally pleasing or disagreeable to sense, on the other hand particular men tend to have “habits, prejudices or distempers”. As we will see in Hume’s case, if – as Burke states – the taste of particular men cannot be discussed, when one deals with big numbers things change and it becomes possible to find out some kind of laws which can lead to a ‘standard of taste’ historically defined.

“BARBARISM”, “SUPERIOR BEAUTIES” AND “REAL DEFORMITIES”: HUME’S RELATIVELY NORMATIVE TASTE.

In his *Essays Moral, Political, Literary* Hume frequently addressed the topic of taste. Dabney Townsend points our attention to the fact that:

many of the arguments in Hume’s work that bear on aesthetics must be based on parallels that Hume himself suggests between aesthetic and moral emotions [...]. Moral emotions are Hume’s usual focus; typically, emotions of beauty or taste in the aesthetic realm play a supporting role. For example, Hume often will begin an analysis of some emotion or passion such as envy or pride and in the process discuss beauty and deformity. [...] The relation between aesthetic and moral emotions, beauty and virtue, and taste and moral judgment must be worked out if one is to understand Hume’s position and influence on aesthetics.<sup>22</sup>

In the case of Hume’s discussions about taste in his *Essays*, we can venture to assert that, apart from morals, his views about history, human nature and politics also strongly influenced his opinions about that concept. Reasoning about uniformity and singularity in human history, Hume asserted that “In *civil* history, there is found a much greater uniformity than in the history of learning and science, and that the wars, negotiations, and politics of one age resemble more those of another, than the taste, wit, and speculative principles.”<sup>23</sup> The principal cause of this difference lies in numbers. In the analysis developed in the *Rise and Progress of the Arts and Sciences* Hume explains that “what depends upon a few persons is,

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<sup>20</sup> James Noggle, “Literature and Taste, 1700–1800,” Oxford Handbooks Online; accessed 19 Aug. 2019. On the temporality of taste see esp. his *The Temporality of Taste in Eighteenth-Century British Writing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

<sup>21</sup> Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*, ed. by P. Guyer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 66.

<sup>22</sup> Townsend, *Hume’s Aesthetic Theory*, 137

<sup>23</sup> David Hume, “Of Eloquence,” in *Essays Moral, Political and Literary*, ed. Eugene F. Miller (Indianapolis: Liberty Classics, 1987), 97.

in a great measure, to be ascribed to chance or secret and unknown causes: What arises from a great number, may often be accounted for by determinate and known causes,”<sup>24</sup> and this is why

it is more easy to account for the rise and progress of commerce in any kingdom, than for that of learning. [...] Avarice, or the desire of gain, is an universal passion, which operates at all times, in all places, and upon all persons: But curiosity, or the love of knowledge, has a very limited influence [...]. We may, therefore, conclude, that there is no subject, in which we must proceed with more caution, than in tracing the history of the arts and sciences [...]. Those who cultivate the sciences in any state, are always few in number: The passion, which governs them, limited: Their taste and judgment delicate and easily perverted: And their application disturbed with the smallest accident. Chance, therefore, or secret and unknown causes, must have a great influence on the rise and progress of all the refined arts.<sup>25</sup>

However, looking at history and comparing civilizations Hume finds a few “rules” that enable the development of the arts (a pre-requisite for the refinement of taste): the first requisite Hume singles out is the existence of a free government, secondly “Nothing is more favourable to the rise of politeness and learning, than a number of neighbouring and independent states, connected together by commerce and policy.”<sup>26</sup> The third rule is that the freedom of the State is necessary only for arts and sciences to develop, but once they are invented, they can be transmitted to any other form of government. Analyzing specifically the case of republics and monarchies, Hume adds that “A strong genius succeeds best in republics: A refined taste in monarchies,” because “to be successful in the first one, it is necessary for a man to make himself *useful*; to be prosperous in the second one, it is requisite for him to render himself *agreeable*.”<sup>27</sup> Agreeableness therefore is not only a generic human characteristic, but it becomes the marker of a political strategy.<sup>28</sup> Refined taste thus becomes also a product of the historical development of the forms of government and of the kind of human qualities they promote. If Hume’s second rule already establishes a link between commerce and politeness (which goes hand in hand with refinement) it is in the essay *Of Refinement in the Arts* that Hume explains the interplay between industry, refinement and civilization: he denotes Luxury, a keyword of the age, as meaning a “great refinement in the gratification of the senses” and he explains why it rose so prominently as a characteristic of his own times:

Another advantage of industry and of refinements in the mechanical arts, is, that they commonly produce some refinements in the liberal; nor can one be carried to perfection, without being accompanied, in some degree, with the other. [...] The more these refined arts advance, the more sociable men become. [...] Thus *industry*, *knowledge*, and *humanity*, are linked together by an indissoluble chain, and are found, from experience as well as reason, to be peculiar to the more polished, and, what are commonly denominated, the more luxurious ages.<sup>29</sup>

These luxurious ages are characterized by sociability, which enhances a natural penchant of the human mind, which is

of a very imitative nature; nor is it possible for any set of men to converse often together, without acquiring a similitude of manners, and communicating to each other their vices as well as virtues. The propensity to company and society is strong in all rational creatures; and the same disposition, which gives

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<sup>24</sup> David Hume, “Of the Rise and Progress of the Arts and Sciences,” in *Essays Moral, Political and Literary* (hereafter *EMPL*), 112.

<sup>25</sup> “Of the Rise and Progress of the Arts and Sciences,” 113.

<sup>26</sup> “Of the Rise and Progress of the Arts and Sciences,” 119. Which is why Hume believes, with many other critics of the age, the Chinese to have remained stuck, as it were, in the past and not having been able to proceed further on the ladder called ‘progress’ that leads to the refinement of civilization.

<sup>27</sup> “Of the Rise and Progress of the Arts and Sciences,” 126–7.

<sup>28</sup> And, indeed, Rousseau too showed in his first *Discourse* the link between political regimes like monarchies and the requisite of making oneself “agreeable”: in Rousseau’s case, however, this progress in the arts was negatively connoted, as it spread deceit, opacity, cheat.

<sup>29</sup> Hume, “Of Refinement in the Arts,” *EMPL*, 271.

us this propensity, makes us enter deeply into each other's sentiments, and causes like passions and inclinations to run, as it were, by contagion, through the whole club or knot of companions.<sup>30</sup>

Natural characteristics of the human mind, forms of government, development of industry and commerce: all these elements in Hume's analysis become tools that partially explain the prominence of taste in eighteenth-century society. Commerce is particularly relevant, as it makes it possible to develop a specific relish for superfluous goods, among which one counts the products of art.<sup>31</sup> We should also remark that none of the above discussed elements relate directly to anything that we usually link with the domain of aesthetics. Generally speaking, Hume defines refined taste as something which should guide man toward happiness, and which

enables us to judge of the characters of men, of compositions of genius, and of the productions of the nobler arts. A greater or less relish for those obvious beauties, which strike the senses, depends entirely upon the greater or less sensibility of the temper: But with regard to the sciences and liberal arts, a fine taste is, in some measure, the same with strong sense, or at least depends so much upon it, that they are inseparable. In order to judge aright of a composition of genius, there are so many views to be taken in, so many circumstances to be compared, and such a knowledge of human nature requisite, that no man, who is not possessed of the soundest judgment, will ever make a tolerable critic in such performances.<sup>32</sup>

It is therefore evident that taste is here a very broad concept, which is characterized by two major points: being able to be affected (positively or negatively), and being prone to judge. These abilities may exert themselves in the domain of art as well as morals (judging the characters of men). As Hume stated in his essay *Of Commerce*, man is a variable being:

susceptible of many different opinions, principles, and rules of conduct. What may be true, while he adheres to one way of thinking, will be found false, when he has embraced an opposite set of manners and opinions.<sup>33</sup>

This holds true also in the domain of taste, making taste something which is heavily influenced by what we commonly call the 'culture' of an age, the set of opinions and manners in eighteenth-century language. Although durable approbation is identified as a possible constitutive element of a 'standard of taste,' Hume nevertheless heavily circumscribes the likeliness of such a standard.

Though we are not entitled to make a coherent theory of taste out of Hume's several essays, what I suggest we are entitled to say is that he links taste both to 'phylogenetic' and 'ontogenetic' factors: the world's differing tastes are in the end the products of the opinions and manners both of the age and of particular men. We can identify several factors which help the refinement of taste, and these are by no means confined to the domain of aesthetics, but range from political conditions to the development of commerce.

Among Hume's essays, the one devoted to the standard of taste is among the best known to scholars and it is for sure a very rich text which gives no definite answer to the problem of the nature (subjective or objective) of taste. Hume actually identifies a law which can help us in directing our taste toward adequate objects, like the one of durable admiration ("the uniform consent and experience of nations and ages"), but he cleverly never fixes a formula good for all seasons. Although in the opening of the *Standard of Taste* Hume seems to adopt an utterly relativistic point of view, we will see that his opinion is far more nuanced. He observes that:

Those, who can enlarge their view to contemplate distant nations and remote ages, are still more surprized at the great inconsistency and contrariety [of Taste]. We are apt to call *barbarous* whatever departs widely from our own taste and apprehension: But soon find the epithet of reproach retorted on us.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Hume, "Of National Characters," *EMPL*, 202.

<sup>31</sup> Hume, "Of Commerce," *EMPL*.

<sup>32</sup> Hume, "Of the Delicacy of Taste," *EMPL*, 6.

<sup>33</sup> Hume, "Of Commerce," *EMPL*, 256.

<sup>34</sup> Hume, "Of the Standard of Taste," *EMPL*, 227.



This sentence is remarkable. It shows the awareness of the benefits of a comparatist approach in intellectual forays, a method Hume uses a lot in his *Essays* and which characterizes the Scottish tradition of thought that gave birth to conjectural history. At the same time it recognizes the importance of one's own standpoint: *barbarous* is an epithet that only denotes an incomprehension, a lack of knowledge, a distance in customs. Another quote seems to share the same degree of openness:

Every work of art, in order to produce its due effect on the mind, must be surveyed in a certain point of view and cannot be fully relished by persons, whose situation, real or imaginary, is not conformable to that which is required by the performance. [...] A critic of a different age or nation, who should peruse this discourse [by an orator], must have all these circumstances in his eye, and must place himself in the same situation as the audience, in order to form a true judgment of the oration.<sup>35</sup>

One might infer from these quotes a readiness on Hume's part to judge cultural productions in their own terms, but other statements in *the Standard of Taste* seriously limit the reach of the preceding quotes. At a certain point in this text, Hume addresses the topic of changes in morals across the centuries:

Must we throw aside the pictures of our ancestors, because of their ruffs and fardingales? But where the ideas of morality and decency alter from one age to another, and where vicious manners are described, without being marked with the proper characters of blame and disapprobation; this must be allowed to disfigure the poem, and to be a real deformity.<sup>36</sup>

So, although it is hard to establish a standard of taste and although times and places modify our sensibilities, there are "real deformities" one has to recognize. When we are dealing with "fardingales" we can place ourselves in the same situation as the audience and try to annihilate the temporal distance that would make us "throw aside" a picture, for not having considered it in its own terms. But if we are dealing with morals we cannot behave in the same way. We can here recall our Bedlam example at the opening of this chapter, with the shift in sensibility that led from laughing at the insane to be affected by their status: a powerful representation of these two different attitudes can be found in Hogarth's eight plate of the *Rake's Progress* with the contrast between Sarah's sorrow and the amusement of the two fashionable ladies.

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<sup>35</sup> Hume, "Of the Standard of Taste," *EMPL*, 239.

<sup>36</sup> Hume, "Of the Standard of Taste," *EMPL*, 246.



Figure 1. William Hogarth, *A Rake's Progress*, Plate 8, London, 1735

In the age of the man of feeling, those laughs are no longer approvable, and the moral disapprobation of which Hume writes clearly has a retroactive validity. A poem or a picture that would display sympathy for blamable subjects should therefore be an object of blame as well, and in this case we should not adopt the point of view of the age in which that sympathy was shown.

Apart from moral concerns, Hume seems to allow for the existence of other elements that further limit the reach of his aesthetic relativism:

By comparison alone we fix the epithets of praise and blame, and learn how to assign the due degrees of each. The coarsest daubing contains a certain lustre of colours and exactness of imitation, which are so far beauties, and would affect the mind of a peasant or Indian with the highest admiration. The most vulgar ballads are not entirely destitute of harmony or nature; and none but a person, familiarized to superior beauties, would pronounce their numbers harsh, or narration uninteresting.<sup>37</sup>

It is difficult to reconcile this last quote with the one where Hume talked about *barbarism*. Here the peasant or the Indian share the same unprivileged standpoint, they represent the unpolished observer, who clearly can feel admiration for a picture but in this very exertion of his emotions denounces his socially subordinate position, for what he is admiring would appear “harsh” or “uninteresting” to someone “familiarized to superior beauties.” This last position is extremely common in Hume’s age, and the “tell me what you like, and I’ll tell you who you are” perspective was used in order to judge the grade of civilization of the Other. As Hume clearly puts it: “though a civilized nation may easily be mistaken

<sup>37</sup> Hume, “Of the Standard of Taste,” *EMPL*, 238.

in the choice of their admired philosopher, they never have been found long to err, in their affection for a favourite epic or tragic author.”<sup>38</sup> So, we can add, if a nation fails in the affection for an acclaimed author, this might mean that it is not enough (or at all) civilized. I will conclude this chapter with an example of this kind of reasoning.

#### WRITING ABOUT MUSICAL COUNTERPOINT, TALKING ABOUT CIVILIZATION

An interesting case of the workings of the temporal dimension of taste in the musical realm is the one offered by the case of what we nowadays call polyphonic music. The ability to create pieces of music where multiple layers of sounds coexist following determinate rules was a Western cultural emblem extremely prized by European literati. In the words of David Irving, Europeans

used counterpoint as a self-conscious cultural emblem to emphasize their difference from the non-European Other: one of the principal ways they could maintain a sense of musical “uniqueness” and “superiority” was to point to the apparent absence of counterpoint elsewhere, thereby increasing intercultural difference. Essentialist ideas about the exceptionalism of European musical theory and practice have long pervaded historical musicology, and contrapuntal polyphony was considered to be the exclusive preserve of early modern European music.<sup>39</sup>

In an ideal picture where polyphony became a marker of civilization (and of polite taste), and where the relish for polyphonic counterpoint was also considered natural, as polyphony was ‘naturally’ pleasing to the sense, any instance (and there were many) in which a cultural encounter involving music did not lead to a universal appreciation of European music led to puzzlement on the European’s observer side. For example the reverend Richard Eastcott in his *Sketches of the Origin, Progress and Effects of Music, with an Account of the Ancient Bards and Minstrels* asserts that:

I have in my possession, a number of native airs, collected from different parts of Hindoostan, by Mr. William Bird, of Calcutta; and I was surprised to find by him, that accompaniments are totally unknown in every part of India; he says, that during a residence of nineteen years in India, and with the most favourable opportunities, he never heard the addition of a third or fifth, and that neither composers or performers have an idea beyond an octave. I bring this forward only as an extraordinary circumstance, considering the long intercourse which has subsisted between the people of that country and the Europeans.<sup>40</sup>

How is it possible to justify the fact that a Western musical practice, which ought to be perceived as part of a natural (and therefore universal) standard of taste, isn’t perceived as such by several other cultures?<sup>41</sup> A common answer to the question was precisely linked to the temporality of taste, but not in the sense that any time or place could or indeed should sport its specific values in matter of taste, but in the sense of the “irreversible civilization” Binoche writes about: when non-Western cultures did show no taste for polyphony (or ‘contrapuntal harmony’, as it was then called), they simply contextually stated their place in the hierarchy of civilized societies. As counterpoint should be naturally pleasing to a polite and civilized ear, not being sensible to its objective beauties meant that the said ear was ‘not there yet,’ not

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<sup>38</sup> Hume, “Of the Standard of Taste,” *EMPL*, 243.

<sup>39</sup> David Irving, *Colonial Counterpoint. Music in Early Modern Manila* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 18.

<sup>40</sup> Richard Eastcott, *Sketches of the Origin, Progress and Effects of Music, with an Account of the Ancient Bards and Minstrels* (Bath, 1793), 256. A similar remark is to be found in Jean-Baptiste Labat’s *Voyage du Chevalier Des Marchais en Guinée, Isles voisines et a Cayenne...* (Amsterdam, 1731), II, 200: “Il est surprenant que les Européens établis à Juda, et particulièrement les François qui y ont introduit le luxe de leurs meubles et l’abondance et la délicatesse de la table, n’ayent pas encore fait passer chez ces peuples leur musique et leur symphonie. Rien n’est plus aisé : car ces peuples ont du gout, et il ne faudroit pas beaucoup de tems pour les persuader d’abandonner leur concerts barbares qui déchirent les oreilles les plus dures, et leur faire aimer nos instrumens et notre musique.”

<sup>41</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau is one of the few writers who will actually use this observation not to support the view of the primacy of Western civilization, but to call into question the very principle of the universal validity of harmony and counterpoint. It is however significant that his position was especially enabled not only by a purely “aesthetic” theory, but also by his uncommon views about the nature of progress and his social theories.

ready for appreciating the universal beauties relished by a highly civilized society.<sup>42</sup> Therefore also counterpoint became an evaluative-descriptive concept: writing, as the music historian Charles Burney did, that the Chinese had no taste for European harmony, meant also casting them a few steps down on civilization's ladder. Chinese culture was often a cause of puzzlement; Europeans acknowledged China's antique culture, but were unable to perceive how it changed across centuries and saw China as a place frozen in time. Hume too addressed the "Chinese case" in his *Essays*. He thought that the stillness that characterized Chinese culture, according to Westerners, was motivated by the political nature of their Empire:

In China, there seems to be a pretty considerable stock of politeness and science, which, in the course of so many centuries, might naturally be expected to ripen into something more perfect and finished, than what has yet arisen from them. But China is one vast empire, speaking one language, governed by one law, and sympathizing in the same manners. [...] This seems to be one natural reason, why the sciences have made so slow a progress in that mighty empire.<sup>43</sup>

As we have already observed, Hume gave as a rule for the development of arts and sciences the need for neighboring free-states connected by commerce, a characteristic which the Chinese empire lacked.<sup>44</sup>

I think that the example taken from the musical domain is telling for our general aim in this chapter. In British writings of the eighteenth century when one comes across a sentence where it is stated that some people do or do not have a taste for music in parts, one should always be aware that this is not just a description of a matter of fact, and that the implications of such a sentence far exceed the domain of aesthetics. Being able to appreciate polyphonic music becomes a marker of politeness and of civilization. As pointed out by Jennifer Tsien, in the eighteenth century:

One could even say that the difference between good and bad taste was as important [...] as the difference between good and evil or between truth and illusion. In all of these areas of human experience philosophers attempted to resolve the problematic relationship between subjectivity and authority, and they sought to mark the difference between a savage and a civilized man.<sup>45</sup>

Being a man of taste meant many things in the eighteenth century, it marked a sense of belonging and taste became a part of what constituted a man's identity.

It is now time to resume the three questions which opened this chapter: Has 'taste' ever been a 'mere' matter of taste? What is the place of the reflections on taste in the economy of eighteenth-century thought? Are the reflections about taste developed in eighteenth-century Europe part of the discipline that goes under the name of aesthetics? In the preceding pages I have argued that taste in the eighteenth century is a very broad concept, and by reading passages from Hume's *Essays* I have showed how he discussed taste together with morals, but also politics and economy (commerce). My main interest in this chapter has been to show that taste in the eighteenth century acquired a historical dimension which was used in order to compare both ancient and new tastes, and also distant and homely tastes. This comparative method, together with the ideology of progress, brought about an evaluative system where Western tastes and customs were often interpreted as the paramount of European civilization, and used as touchstones to evaluate other cultures: not only geographically distant ones, but also to create a standard which divided elite and popular culture (as we have seen in Hume's quote were the Indian and the peasant were on the same footing), a topic which, in the wake of the Ossian debate, was lively discussed in Europe at that time. In judging geographically distant tastes, Europeans often exerted that

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<sup>42</sup> Indeed, 'unreadiness' has been a characteristic Westerners attributed their Others: "Historicism [...] one might say, came to non-European peoples in the nineteenth century as somebody's way of saying "not yet" to somebody else", Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincialising Europe. Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008 [2000]), 8.

<sup>43</sup> Hume, "Of the Rise and Progress of the Arts and Sciences," *EMPL*, 122.

<sup>44</sup> For a more nuanced discussion of Scottish references to China, see Philip Dodds, "'One vast empire': China, Progress, and the Scottish Enlightenment", *Global Intellectual History*, 3 (2018), 47-70.

<sup>45</sup> Jennifer Tsien, *The Bad Taste of Others: Judging Literary Value in Eighteenth-Century France* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), 2.

“denial of coevalness” which Johannes Fabian recognized as a typical historicist move<sup>46</sup>: people living together on earth weren’t really living in the same eras. Some were living in a modern civilized state, others were still “in the infancy of mankind”. Taste has been powerfully used to demarcate these differences, and even if taste is indeed an element of aesthetics as a discipline, we should always bear in mind that it is so entrenched in the social, political, cultural life, that we need to go ‘beyond autonomy’ in order to fully comprehend its scope.

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<sup>46</sup> Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes its Object* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), chap. 1 and 2.

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