

***Adam Smith and the Problems of Eighteenth-Century Aesthetics***

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## ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines the aesthetics of Adam Smith. It argues that, despite appearances to the contrary, Smith not only articulated ideas on the subject and was engaged in the aesthetic debates of his time, but that he in many ways innovates on and challenges received opinion—he thus differs significantly from some of his better known contemporaries, including Edmund Burke and David Hume. For this reason, he is not merely a major thinker who happened to dabble in aesthetics; on the contrary, he considered the subject, which appears in nearly all his works, important, and often interrogates its issues in a more studied way. My project thus makes a case for Smith as a significant thinker in the history of aesthetics, one who merits renewed attention. This study does so by investigating the major aesthetic issues of the day, which Smith in fact discusses. It begins by examining Smith’s remarks on taste—the aesthetic issue of the century—which occur largely in *Theory of Moral Sentiments*. Though seemingly tangential, his discussion of taste is significant as it argues against the predominant eighteenth-century current that maintained the existence of a standard. He also challenges theorists such as Hume who made aesthetic experience classless and, especially via sympathy, disinterested. The study next investigates Smith’s aesthetic normativity and what are for him valid aesthetic judgments, which can be reconciled with his remarks problematizing taste. Here too, Smith appears to argue against the predominant impulse that sought to ground valid aesthetic experience in the immediate; in doing so, Smith demystifies and democratizes aesthetic experience. Finally, the dissertation investigates tragedy, by far the literary genre that most interested Smith, and which also drew attention from better known theorists. The paradox of tragedy—why

readers and spectators are attracted to painful representations—was an aesthetic issue that vexed many thinkers of the century, and although Smith appears to ignore the issue, we have in his moral theory a solution to the paradox, one that is unique and more satisfying than those of his contemporaries. The project concludes by examining Smith's relation to neoclassical dramatic theory. Though superficially appearing complacent in uncritically adopting neoclassical doctrine, Smith, even here, is being original.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

One inevitably incurs many debts while undertaking a project of this scope. I was fortunate to receive substantial travel funding from the University of Ottawa and the Association of Part Time Teacher's Union that enabled me to attend conferences from San Antonio to Athens and many places in between. In the process, I met many wonderful and intelligent colleagues who challenged and encouraged me to think in new ways. I wish in particular to thank the organizers and participants of "The Philosophy of Adam Smith" conference held at Balliol College, Oxford (where Smith attended), in commemoration of the 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his first major publication, *Theory of Moral Sentiments*. It was my first major conference—held in January 2009, just as I was beginning to sink my teeth into Smith—and everyone, including some of the most respected and famous Smith scholars, not only heard my paper but were very encouraging. Without their kind words, this project may not have been realized.

Those around me, my friends and colleagues who patiently heard my complaints and ideas like a broken record, deserve a heartfelt thanks, especially my colleagues at the Department of English at the University of Ottawa. My thanks are also due to my family and parents, who consistently believed in my project even when I did not.

Finally, my thanks are due to my supervisor, Frans De Bruyn. Though I unwisely did not always follow his advice, whatever strengths there are in this work are due in part to him. Any remaining faults are my own.

## NOTE ON CITATIONS

All references to Smith are to the standard *Glasgow Edition of the Works of Adam Smith*, reprinted by Liberty Fund. Citations follow standard abbreviations: TMS (*Theory of Moral Sentiments*), LRBL (*Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres*), WN (*Wealth of Nations*), LJ(A) and LJ(B) (*Lectures on Jurisprudence*, “Reports” of 1762 and 1766, respectively).

I have cleaned up quotations from *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres* and *Lectures on Jurisprudence*: as they are based on student lecture notes, they contain accidentals and much editorial work. For the reader’s sake, I have removed all such notations and modernized spellings except for correct eighteenth-century ones.

For most French works, I have used English translations where possible. In the absence of existing or accessible translations, I have provided my own, as noted.

All emphases are original except where noted.

## INTRODUCTION

Adam Smith remains undoubtedly one of the most influential thinkers and shapers of modernity, alongside Darwin in science, Marx in philosophy and politics, and Freud in psychoanalysis. My dissertation focuses on Smith's aesthetic ideas, especially in relation to his eighteenth-century context. Such a project may seem counterintuitive—after all, Smith is best known as an economist and, to fewer people, as a moral philosopher. Despite appearances to the contrary and a paucity of explicitly aesthetic writings, however, Smith was nevertheless engaged in the aesthetic debates of his age and, more significantly, he often elaborates on and challenges received opinion and innovates on his predecessors in interesting ways.

There are several reasons that justify this project. Smith has become especially relevant in our time following the financial collapse of 2008, and interest in him has grown in the past few years. For decades, he was studied in the shadow of David Hume and others; fortunately, he has justly found a place as a significant thinker in his own right. There has, in fact, been a recent explosion of academic interest in and scholarship on Smith, particularly in the past decade, a trend that began with Charles Griswold's comprehensive *Adam Smith and the Virtues of Enlightenment* (1999). This work galvanized scholars interested in Smith as a comprehensive thinker. Indeed, the renewed interest has come from disparate quarters: moral and political philosophy, sociology, history, aesthetics, and literature. Since 2009, in fact, there have been no fewer than half a dozen volumes devoted to Smith alone, along with numerous articles and chapters.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps the most accurate index of Smith's increasing

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<sup>1</sup> For instance, Fonna Forman-Barzilai's *Adam Smith and the Circles of Sympathy* (2010), Ryan Hanley's *Adam Smith and the Character of Virtue* (2009), and Paul Oslington ed., *Adam Smith as Theologian* (2011). Ildiko

importance and popularity, even outside the academy, was the publication of his *Theory of Moral Sentiments* by Penguin Books, which published this work for the first time in 2009.<sup>2</sup> The following year witnessed the publication of *The Philosophy of Adam Smith: Essays Commemorating the 250<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, the first and so far only anthology devoted solely to his *Theory of Moral Sentiments*. The same year also witnessed the publication of a new biography of Smith, Nicholas Phillipson's *Adam Smith: an Enlightened Life*, along with the long-awaited second edition of Ian Ross's standard account, *The Life of Adam Smith*. The list could go on.

There has been a similar renewed interest in sympathy recently, the master-concept of Smith's ethics. Amartya Sen, the Nobel prize winning economist, has recently written on applications of Smithian sympathy and impartial spectatorship to global ethics in *The Idea of Justice* (2009), a position challenged by Fonna Forman-Barzilai, who argues for Smith's "anti-cosmopolitanism," that is, the notion that we are mainly concerned for people around us, far more so than people we never see. In his plenary talk at the annual meeting of the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, in 2008, Bill Gates quoted not the *Wealth of Nations*, but the opening sentence of the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*: "[h]ow selfish soever man may be supposed, there are evidently some principles in his nature, which interest him in the fortune of others, and render their happiness necessary to him, though he derives nothing from it except the pleasure of seeing it." Indeed, the fame of the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Smith's first publication, along with his famous conception of sympathy, seems

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Csengei's *Sympathy, Sensibility and the Literature of Feeling in the Eighteenth Century* (2012) and Vivasvan Soni's *Mourning Happiness* (2010), among many others, devote at least a chapter to Smith.

<sup>2</sup> With an introduction by Amartya Sen.



to have come full circle. Though ignored for decades, it was a European bestseller in its own day, and was translated no fewer than three times in French and twice in German in the same century.<sup>3</sup>

There has likewise been a renewed interest in aesthetics—even in evolutionary psychology and neurobiology<sup>4</sup>—including “pre-Kantian” and especially British aesthetics of the eighteenth century.<sup>5</sup> A growing body of scholarship examining Kant’s debts to British thinkers, which had largely been overlooked, has come out during the past decade, including work by Paul Guyer, Vanessa Ryan, and Rachel Zuckert, to name but a few. This scholarship examines these British figures as precursors of Kant, while other works focus on them as important thinkers in their own right in the history of aesthetics. One such work is James Noggle’s *The Temporality of Taste* (2012), which focuses on taste as both historical process and subjective preference in the aesthetic discourse of eighteenth-century Britain

Despite this growing interest in Smith and in aesthetics in recent years, however, the twain have rarely met. In fact, as Guyer puts it, Smith’s aesthetic thought has been “largely neglected” (“History” 47). In standard treatments of eighteenth-century aesthetics, such as Walter Hipple’s *The Sublime, the Beautiful, and the Picturesque*, Smith is mentioned in passing, if at all. This is not to say, however, that previous scholars have completely ignored the subject. Charles Griswold has some interesting insights into Smith’s anti-Platonic

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<sup>3</sup> Smith’s name has been invoked even in the field of neuroscience: “[r]ecent neuroscience research on mirror neurons has now provided evidence consistent with Smith’s assertion, suggesting that humans have an innate capability to understand the mental states of others at a neural level” (Kiesling 1).

<sup>4</sup> See, for instance, C.U.M. Smith, “Evolutionary Neurobiology and Aesthetics,” and, for a more general account Di Dio and Gallese, “Neuroaesthetics: a Review.”

<sup>5</sup> I recognize the false teleology of the term, hence my use of quotation marks.

aesthetics, which I discuss Chapter Four. Peter Jones, John R. Harrison, Catherine Labio, and several others make some interesting observations, but often in the form of brief discussions. As a result, there is yet much sustained work to be done on Smith's aesthetics. This dissertation thus seeks to fill a gap in the scholarship on both Adam Smith—it provides the first book-length discussion of his aesthetics, in fact—and aesthetic and literary history.

What is more significant than the fact that Smith wrote on aesthetic subjects is that in often unique and remarkable ways, he stands apart from contemporary aesthetic thinkers and challenges received ideas. For instance, eighteenth-century theorists were particularly troubled by the issue of the standard of taste, that is, whether or not there is a right or wrong in taste. Virtually every thinker in the century attempted an answer, most arguing that there is indeed a standard of some sort, predicated either on principles of the human mind or the consensus of past critics. Smith engages in a compelling attack on the idea of a standard and, indeed, on taste itself, and he problematizes these ideas to an extent that his contemporaries did not.

Furthermore, in arguing for a standard, most theorists ignored or suppressed the class dimension of taste (the few times they do discuss socioeconomic class, they denigrate lower-class or “vulgar” taste). Against this background, Smith's independence of thought reveals itself: not only does he deny the possibility of a standard of taste, but he demonstrates that class is a significant determinant of aesthetic value. Using the example of topiary—the art of cutting and shaping bushes and trees into artificial shapes, which lost its vogue later in the century—Smith demonstrates that the taste of the privileged classes is just as contingent and arbitrary as that of any other. In short, Smith, in a manner that anticipates the work of Thorstein Veblen, Georg Simmel, Roland Barthes, and Pierre Bourdieu, historicizes and

deconstructs taste. Another issue that vexed eighteenth-century theorists was the paradox of tragedy: why we are attracted to painful art. This problem reached its critical zenith in the eighteenth century, with virtually every thinker—Addison, Hume, Burke, to name a few—attempting an answer. Though Smith was undoubtedly influenced by much of the writing that came before him, his solution, as I demonstrate, is unique and avoids the problems that characterize Burke’s and Hume’s accounts. In short, it has greater explanatory power.

Despite appearances to the contrary—namely, the absence of explicit works on aesthetics in his corpus—there is much evidence that Smith was interested in aesthetic matters and thought them important. Though the *Wealth of Nations* is Smith’s best-known contribution today, the text that established his reputation in the eighteenth century was the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*.<sup>6</sup> A treatise on moral philosophy, the text is nevertheless encyclopedic in its range and involves discussions of various aesthetic matters including taste, tragedy, and prosody. Many of these discussions appear at first glance to be nothing more than tangents in the midst of more important matters, though as I will argue later, these “tangents” are in fact significant ones.

Further, in his later years, Smith wrote of a work he had “upon the anvil,” a “sort of Philosophical History of all the different branches of Literature, of Philosophy, Poetry and Eloquence” (*Corr.* Letter 248 to Duc de la Rochefoucauld, 1 Nov. 1785). Unfortunately for posterity, this project was never realized, and in a final blow, on his deathbed Smith ordered no fewer than eighteen folio volumes of manuscripts to be destroyed, a request all too faithfully carried out by his literary executors, Hutton and Black (*Ross Life* 434-45).

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<sup>6</sup> Voltaire, whom Smith admired and finally met in the 1760s, remarked “This Smith is an excellent man! We have nothing to compare with him, and I am embarrassed for my dear compatriots” (cited in Dawson “Sympathy” 147). This was long before Smith had written *The Wealth of Nations*.

Though it is impossible to say precisely what was burnt, there is little doubt that much interesting material was lost. More fortunately, in 1795, five years after Smith's death, *Essays on Philosophical Subjects* appeared, a collection of essays on various subjects ranging from the history of astronomy to English and Italian verse, of which Smith apparently thought highly enough to preserve them. The opening essay, "History of Astronomy," contains much in the way of aesthetics. Not only does it begin with a discussion of "wonder" and "surprise," but considerable time is spent on the "beauty" of systems and theories. In fact, Smith ultimately argues that the adoption of scientific paradigms has an aesthetic basis. The collection also contains the essay, "On the Arts Commonly Called Imitative," a neglected yet fascinating piece that is central to my project, as will become clear.

In addition to these, we now possess student notes for some of Smith's unpublished works, including his *Lectures on Jurisprudence* and *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres*—the latter taken during his first professional position as lecturer of rhetoric at Glasgow University. The rhetoric lectures contain interesting remarks on literary writing and narrative, among other things, and even the jurisprudence lectures contain some aesthetic discussion. There Smith argues that societal and legislative changes have an effect on the arts. For example, he demonstrates that love only became a central theme in literature after divorce became legally more difficult. These works, then, and especially the pieces in *Essays on Philosophical Subjects* demonstrate Smith's abiding interest in aesthetics, a subject he refers to in nearly all of his works.

It should be stressed that Smith was not a significant thinker who happened to dabble in aesthetics; it was a subject he considered carefully, and one that informs his thought—

economic, moral, linguistic, meta-ethical, and meta-scientific. His thought in general was almost always conscious of aesthetic considerations. For instance, John Guillory observes that “Smith finds in the *aesthetic disposition itself* the motor of the economy” (311). Similarly, Smith himself suggests that this aesthetic disposition is also responsible for the establishment of grammatical paradigms.<sup>7</sup> Commentators argue that for Smith, virtually all human endeavour has an aesthetic impulse: the impetus to obtain trinkets, to engage in scientific and philosophical speculation, and to sympathize are all fundamentally aesthetic in nature. Charles Griswold argues that, for Smith, “[a]ll of commerce depends on the love of beauty,” and that Smith’s pleasure of sympathy is “what one might call aesthetic, because it consists of the apprehension of harmony [and] symmetry” (*Virtues* 331, 111). John R. Harrison similarly concludes that “aesthetic considerations and the faculty of imagination played a considerable role in the formation of Smith’s philosophical system” (91).

Further, the aesthetic for Smith is not “out there.” He does not seem to divorce it from the quotidian as a discrete form of experience. Griswold accurately observes that “[b]eauty is a pervasive theme in the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*,” a theme that begins with the first sentence, when we are told that “we naturally take a disinterested pleasure in the situations of others and in a correspondence of our sentiments” (*Virtues* 330). This same drive for beauty and correspondence, far from being bracketed off to some sacrosanct domain, forms a part of “the most serious and important pursuits of both private and public life” (TMS IV.1.7), and is one of “the main causes contributing to the development of a commercial

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<sup>7</sup> See his “Considerations Concerning the First Formation of Languages,” where he argues that languages that developed a system of declensions (Greek, Latin, Armenian, etc) did so owing to a natural love of rhyme: “[t]his variation, in the termination of the noun adjective ... seems to have been introduced chiefly for the sake of a certain similarity of sound, of a certain species of rhyme, which is naturally so very agreeable to the human ear” (10-11).

civilization” (Caygill 85).<sup>8</sup> The aesthetic, broadly speaking, forms an important force in our economic and social existence, and indeed, Knud Haakonssen notes that Smith is “particularly good at explaining aesthetic elements of daily life, such as the craving for order and the passion for arranging things,” and he uses the “same principle to explain why people have a desire for machinery, gadgets and other organized systems” (Introduction xii-xiii).

Indeed, Smith asks, “[h]ow many people ruin themselves by laying out money on trinkets of frivolous utility? What pleases these lovers of toys is not so much the utility, as the aptness of the machines which are fitted to promote it” (TMS IV.1.6). For this reason, to use one of Smith’s examples, a watch “that falls behind above two minutes in a day, is despised by one curious in watches,” this despite the fact that the watch will still be very useful (IV.1.5). Smith argues, then, that we in our minds confound the utility of things with their *apparent* utility. This leads to Smith’s discussion of the invisible hand, nearly two decades before its more famous appearance in the *Wealth of Nations*. If Smith were alive today, he would argue that a large part of the appeal of, say, the iPad, is its *apparent* as opposed to actual utility. No doubt the device has its uses, but Smith would argue that its appeal lies in its *appearance* of being useful. This intersection of economics, aesthetics, and moral philosophy suggests that for Smith *homo moralis*, *homo oeconomicus*, and *homo aestheticus* are not different beings, but all inextricably linked. This fact in part explains the coherence of Smith’s corpus, which will become apparent as the dissertation progresses.

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<sup>8</sup> Indeed, De Marchi has aptly noted that “[i]f Aristotle’s *Poetics* may be regarded as a brief for the defence of poetry against Plato’s charges in Book 10 of *The Republic*, then Smith’s excursions into the nature of imitation constitute additional evidence, in which ingenuity, as a peculiarly intellectual, yet at base technical, source of pleasure, is pitted against the idea that the arts are removed from reality and cater principally to the emotions” (“Ingenuity” 142).

The uniqueness and prescience of Smith's aesthetic thought should come as no surprise since they characterize other aspects of his work. He in some ways anticipated Freud on childhood sexuality,<sup>9</sup> as well as the work of Thorstein Veblen, Georg Simmel, and Pierre Bourdieu on the relation between taste, fashion, and economics—the sociology of taste, in other words. He even arguably anticipated evolutionary psychology. Scientists agree that, owing to our evolutionary past, human beings perpetually oscillate between altruism and self-interest. Smith argued that human beings are in fact both altruistic and self-interested, a position that led to the putative “Adam Smith Problem”: the concern of scholars that Smith's two major works were incompatible. His insight that human beings are self-interested *and* sympathetic and capable of altruism—Hobbes, Mandeville, and Rousseau would disagree—seems now to be supported by evolutionary science.<sup>10</sup> On historiography, Smith was, according to Mark Phillips, “the most original voice of his times” (“Belletrist” 57-58), and he further suggests, in fact, that “the most remarkable analysis of the contemporary tension in historiographical narrative comes from Adam Smith” (“Private Life” 320). Smith is also considered to have anticipated Thomas Kuhn's notion of *paradigm shifts* in science. Smith's meta-science examines the appeal of certain theories over others, and insists that their

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<sup>9</sup> Smith writes, “the appetite for sex ... I am disposed to believe almost always comes a long time before the age of puberty” (“Of the External Senses” 79).

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, Frans De Waal. Brubaker suggests that he also intimated knowledge of what we now call natural selection (176-77), while Haakonssen notes that “Smith's use of sympathy to account for the emergence of morality in the human species was taken up by Charles Darwin in his evolutionary theory in *The Descent of Man*” (Introduction xxiii). David Haig and Eric Schliesser (“Reading Adam Smith”) have also recently treated evolutionary themes in the work of Adam Smith. See also Cor van der Weele, “Empathy's Purity, Sympathy's Complexities: De Waal, Darwin and Adam Smith.”

adoption ultimately rests on their aesthetic appeal and coherence.<sup>11</sup> In many ways, then, Smith is a dynamic thinker, and this is no less true of his aesthetic ideas.

Many of the aesthetic problems that Smith and his contemporaries wrestled with are still our own; there is a great deal of continuity from the eighteenth century to the twenty-first. The paradox of tragedy, for instance, has produced a substantial body of literature even in the last thirty years, and articles on the subject continue to appear in contemporary publications.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, the problem of a standard of taste that the eighteenth-century theorists encountered is still with us in some ways, as are issues of critical versus popular taste, and the relation between class and taste—witness Bourdieu’s monumental sociological study, *Distinction*, from a generation ago. Though Gurstein confidently asserts that one’s “willingness to judge a total stranger, to hold him accountable to a single standard of judgment, could not be in sharper contrast to our contemporary attitudes,” and that “subjectivity is celebrated in the common saying that everyone is entitled to his or her opinion and taste,” the reality is quite different (204). People become incensed, for instance, when a critic denigrates their favourite film. In a recent unfavourable review of a film that was a popular success but a critical failure, Roger Ebert was compelled to offer a defense of his position following negative reaction from votaries of the film. What is more interesting is that many of his arguments, *mutatis mutandis*, sound very eighteenth-century, as if they were lifted from Hume’s essay, “Of the Standard of Taste.”<sup>13</sup> The existence of bestseller

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<sup>11</sup> It is worth noting that Richard Dawkins, in his popular defences of the theory of evolution, maintains its “elegance,” “economy,” and “beauty” (2).

<sup>12</sup> Among others, Stacie Friend’s “The Pleasures of Documentary Tragedy” (2007) comes to mind.

<sup>13</sup> See Roger Ebert’s “I’m a Proud Braniac” (July 5, 2009). Ebert recalls the following remark from his colleague, Gene Siskel: “‘There is a point when a personal opinion shades off into an error of fact. When you



lists and television ratings presuppose the operational logic of some sort of standard of taste. It is safe to say that the idea of a standard of taste, then, has not really gone away; we merely call it something else. Indeed, as Peter Lloyd Jones contends, “in a world of real problems such as nuclear threat, unemployment, pollution and famine ... taste obstinately refuses to disappear. Indeed, submerged just below the surface of secular discourse and political battle, it survives and flourishes” (ix). In this sense, not much has changed in the past 250 years.

My project straddles philosophy and literary history and theory. This interstitial approach was necessary since much of the work on Smith in these two disciplines, though important in itself, rarely converges. Much valued work in philosophy neglects the historico-cultural dimension that is *de rigueur* in literary studies; as a result, many thinkers are examined as if they wrote in a vacuum.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, many important names in literary studies rarely if ever see the light of day in philosophical studies, such luminaries as Joseph Addison, Alexander Gerard, Samuel Johnson, Edmund Burke (as regards his aesthetic thought), and, to a lesser extent, Lord Kames. Smith’s originality on, say, the paradox of tragedy would be missed if it were not situated in the appropriate historico-intellectual context, especially since many “non-philosophical” literary writers contributed to the debate. Owing to a post-Kantian prejudice that diminished the importance and influence of British

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say ‘The Valachi Papers’ is a better film than ‘The Godfather,’ you are *wrong*.’ Quite true [sic]. We should respect differing opinions up to certain point, and then it’s time for the wise to blow the whistle.” Ebert also makes the distinction between critical and popular taste, arguing that “[i]t’s not a critic’s job to reflect box office taste.”

<sup>14</sup> There are, of course, exceptions, most notably Paul Guyer, who, though a philosopher, does not neglect the historical dimension. Guyer has most recently written on Alexander Gerard and Kant’s indebtedness to him.

thinkers (even Burke),<sup>15</sup> many of these literary writers have been ignored in discussions of aesthetics. Fortunately, the situation seems to be changing.

Thus, my thesis spends considerable time examining British writers coeval with Smith, including but not limited to Burke, Gerard, Kames, and Hume. Smith did not, after all, write *ex nihilo*: a well-known intellectual, he was keenly aware of the philosophical issues and debates of his time, especially since he was friends with some famous thinkers. Smith, it is true, owes a great intellectual debt to his friend and compatriot, David Hume, who was a formative influence on Smith, and we know for a fact that Smith read his works. Smith, however, almost always takes established ideas and elaborates on them, or pierces through them with greater insight. For instance, Smith's solution to the paradox of tragedy, predicated as it is on sympathy, appears to be taken straight from Burke; however, as we will see, Smith goes into greater detail and elaborates on Burke's ideas. I do not, however, merely try to trace intellectual descent or kinship; I engage with the ideas of Smith's contemporaries in an effort to illuminate Smith himself and to demonstrate his unique insights.

An inquiry must begin at some inevitably arbitrary point; one can be led into an infinite regress in searching for the antecedents of ideas. For this reason, I begin my "conversation" with Joseph Addison. He was chronologically among the very first thinkers on the subject of aesthetics in the eighteenth century. As Walter Hipple notes, although writers such as John Dennis and Shaftesbury had been discussing aesthetic issues for some time, it was Addison's *Spectator* papers that "formulated the problems of aesthetics in such a fashion as

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<sup>15</sup> In his bibliographical essay on modern aesthetics, Guyer notes that "[p]hilosophers have done little with Burke" ("History" 47).

to initiate that long discussion of beauty and sublimity—and later of the picturesque—which attracted the interest and exercised the talents of philosophers, men of letters, artists, and amateurs until well into the nineteenth century.” Thus, for most eighteenth-century aestheticians, “their science began with Addison” (13). Of course, I mention previous thinkers, such as Hobbes or Shaftesbury, but only briefly and when significant.

Smith also owed a deep debt to French writers. He not only admired and met Voltaire among others, but he read and absorbed much French thought of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries—in many cases, writers and thinkers who are all but forgotten today, such as the architect Claude Perrault and philosopher Claude Buffier. Smith also makes no attempt to disguise his admiration for Jean Racine and Voltaire, an unusual preference for a late eighteenth-century Briton, since Shakespeare had by 1760 become the undisputed master of English poetry. Therefore, I have attempted whenever possible to trace the French antecedents of Smith’s thought.

It may seem odd to some that a dissertation that discusses taste and aesthetics in the eighteenth century at length does not engage significantly with Kant. This is not an oversight on my part, and there are two reasons why I do not spend much time on him. The first is practical: there simply had to be a point at which the scope of the project would stop, otherwise it could go on *ad infinitum*. Second, Kant’s contribution to eighteenth-century aesthetics has been overstated. Perhaps owing to neglect of lesser known British thinkers, Kant’s originality had for a long time been maintained when it simply is not the case. Much of what Kant says about taste (and the sublime) can be found in earlier British thinkers. If anything, Kant’s *Critique of Judgment* (1790) is more an encyclopedia or, in Samuel Monk’s words, “a great document that coordinates and synthesizes the aesthetic concepts which had

been current throughout the eighteenth century” (4).<sup>16</sup> I do, however, invoke Kant when there appear to be interesting points of contact or contrast with Smith.

My inquiry is divided into three sections, corresponding to the key aesthetic issues of the eighteenth century. The first centres on taste, perhaps *the* aesthetic problem of the century. Chapter One provides a context for discussions surrounding taste and its standard, since a satisfactory narrative of the standard of taste in the century does not currently exist. Chapter Two examines Smith’s theory of taste. As will become clear, Smith problematizes the issue of a standard of taste to an extent that his contemporaries, even culturally sensitive ones, did not. Chapter Three investigates Smith’s prescient insight into the relationship between socioeconomic class and taste. Having already demonstrated the contingency of taste, Smith continues to maintain that the tastes even of the privileged classes are the product of an antagonism against the tastes of those below them. In other words, they do not desire what those below them in the socioeconomic hierarchy do, and the taste of the latter is likewise determined in large part by a “natural” reverence towards wealth and greatness. Chapter Four elaborates on the previous one by examining the mechanism ultimately responsible for the movement of taste: sympathy. In his *Treatise of Human Nature*, Hume had illustrated the disinterested sympathy a spectator enjoys when looking at, say, a house that he does not own. Smith challenges Hume’s relatively unproblematic illustration, and insists that sympathy actually corrupts this putatively disinterested, aesthetic moment.

The second section, forming one chapter, serves as a bridge between the first and the last. For all his relativism, Smith demonstrates an unmistakably normative aesthetic strain

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<sup>16</sup> This is a position I share with Paul Guyer, a scholar who is more qualified to speak about Kant than I am. See his “The Psychology of Kant’s Aesthetics” for a recent assessment.

in his *oeuvre*. This section begins by demonstrating some manifestations of this tendency, and attempts to reconcile them with his problematization of taste. The second and larger part of the chapter goes on to investigate what are for Smith valid aesthetic judgments. As we will see, these are largely cognitive and based on concepts—this as opposed to Kant, for whom “pure” aesthetic judgments precluded concepts. I will also examine some of the consequences of Smith’s aesthetics here, such as his democratization of aesthetic experience. Interestingly, Smith largely goes against the grain of much eighteenth-century British aesthetics in his resistance to the period’s move towards immediacy as a guarantor of valid aesthetic experience. He similarly resists any aesthetics predicated on a *je ne sais quoi* or *I know not what*, that is to say, a non-rational, inscrutable and immediate aesthetic discernment. This also has, I will argue, the effect of combatting the ideology of privileged or “natural” taste that, as Bourdieu would later note, inscribes proper taste in subjects and conceals its mode of acquisition.

The final section discusses tragedy. Not only does tragedy loom large in the eighteenth century—virtually every major thinker had something to say about it, and it was frequently performed in the theatre—but it is easily the genre in which Smith is most interested. Chapter Six investigates the paradox of tragedy and Smith’s solution to it. This paradox—that spectators are attracted to unpleasant and distressing representations—is one that vexed many significant eighteenth-century thinkers. Inherent in Smith’s formulation of sympathy in the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* is his oblique solution to the issue, which, as will become clear, avoids some of the problems and limitations that beset Burke’s and Hume’s accounts.

Chapter Seven, divided into three parts, examines Smith's relation to neoclassical dramatic theory. The chapter begins by discussing Smith's preference for preserving the neoclassical unities of time and place. Though on this he initially appears to be merely echoing neoclassical doctrine, his justification is unique as it is grounded in his epistemology of sympathy and is not, say, stated in deference to classical authority. The chapter next examines Smith's thoughts on dramatic decorum and representations of pain, another set of issues that engaged thinkers of the century. Smith comes out, as he does on the unities, in favour of neoclassical practice and the Horatian prohibition against representations of pain on stage and violence. Smith's justification is again, however, predicated on his formulation of sympathy. The chapter concludes with an examination of Smith's explicit comments on the proper characters of tragedy—namely, kings and nobles, a mode of tragedy that Northrop Frye calls “high-mimetic.” Smith's comments will first be situated in the eighteenth-century context, and as will become clear, though his preference seems neoclassical, his reasons for it are again quite new. Further, the politics of his high-mimetic preference will be contrasted with Burke's. Though seemingly in agreement with Burke, Smith differs from him in several noteworthy ways. Although both insist that it is “natural” to look up to kings, nobles, and so on, Smith is less optimistic and more begrudging of this fact. The chapter concludes by noting how Smith's sympathy, for all his efforts, slips away from him.

My project is not a comprehensive treatment of Smith's aesthetics; such an endeavour would be impracticably long. I have, as my title suggests, focussed on the intersection of Smith's thoughts with the particular aesthetic issues that vexed and challenged thinkers of his time. I am convinced that Smith is much more than an incidental figure in the history of aesthetics, and that his ideas on the subject have been unjustly overlooked. On the contrary,

he provides an opportunity to examine traditional aesthetic issues in fresh ways. Owing to his background as an economic and moral philosopher, Smith offers a unique perspective, and looking through the lens he provides allows us to study these issues with interesting results, providing us with the opportunity to re-examine and vivify these issues using his novel insights.

## Chapter One

### The Standard of Taste in the Eighteenth Century

Taste was the eighteenth-century aesthetic issue *par excellence* and a “master noun of eighteenth-century aesthetic thought” (Slauter 95). Indeed, the period, aptly dubbed the “century of taste” by George Dickie, witnessed a remarkable proliferation of texts in what we now call aesthetics,<sup>1</sup> and it was also the first century in which aesthetics was discussed as a distinct subject. The “birth” of the discourse of aesthetics, especially that of taste, was beset from its inception with problems, and the reasons for the turn to aesthetics, specifically taste, in the century are complex and multifaceted. Among other factors, one can include rising literacy and purchasing power, changing social structures, a crisis in epistemology,<sup>2</sup> the moral-aesthetic analogy itself,<sup>3</sup> and, arguably, imperialism and cosmopolitanism—for contact with other cultures and artistic and literary traditions offered a challenge to dominant Eurocentric modes.

Further, the very status of classical and national literary exemplars was being challenged. In the battle between the Ancients and the Moderns, it was long assumed by many that “the Ancients proved their superiority in the arts.” However, in Britain,

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<sup>1</sup> The term “aesthetics” was coined by Alexander Baumgarten in 1735 in his *Philosophical Meditations Concerning some Conditions of Poetry*, which he expanded on in his *Aesthetica* of 1750. Though the term was not used in English until the nineteenth century, British writers even before Baumgarten discussed “aesthetic” issues, though often referring to them under the umbrella term “criticism” or “taste.” For the sake of convenience, I use the term “aesthetic(s)” anachronistically in this dissertation.

<sup>2</sup> Karen Valihora, for instance, notes that the standard of taste was “a key response to Locke’s despair over attaining certainty in knowledge ... [which] emerges as, in fact, part of an attempt to solve the problem of judgment inherited from Locke” (61).

<sup>3</sup> Ethics and aesthetics were closely related for much of the century. I discuss the aesthetic-moral analogy in Chapter Two.



“Shakespeare and Milton had already successfully transgressed the classical rules,” that is, the putatively infallible rules drawn from the ancient masters of antiquity by Aristotle and others, and codified by French and Italian Renaissance thinkers (Makkreel 525). So much of English literary theory of the century, in fact, was “determined to a great extent by the need to accommodate Shakespeare,” a writer who broke the classical rules, yet by 1760 had become England’s uncontested national poet (Sambrook 110). Moreover, new literary forms were established in the century, including the novel: this generic experimentation undermined the faith placed on classical models. Since “the models of taste established by the ancients were no longer so generally accepted in the eighteenth century, the problem of the standard of taste came to be an urgent one” (Maakreel 547).

This section of my dissertation examines Smith and taste, and is divided into four chapters. The first chapter provides a functional intellectual account of the standard of taste in the eighteenth century in which to situate Smith, since his originality on the matter becomes apparent only when one contrasts him to the then contemporary discourse. As an extensive array of thinkers offered their thoughts on the subject, this is not the place to offer a comprehensive history of taste in the eighteenth century. I do, however, delineate the main trends of thinking on the subject in Britain during the eighteenth century.<sup>4</sup> I will focus on

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<sup>4</sup> Although there is a sufficient critical literature on taste in the eighteenth century, most of it almost completely elides the crucial issue of the standard, with the exception of Phillip Flynn’s piece. George Dickie and Walter Hipple have provided two of the most comprehensive discussions of taste in the eighteenth century, but neither of them discusses the standard of taste except in passing. The closest we have to a narrative of the standard of taste is Paul Guyer’s very brief sketch in his *Kant and the Claims of Taste* (4-5), along with Rudolf Makkreel’s brief remarks (547-550). To this we can add the brief discussion in W.J. Bate’s *From Classic to Romantic*, Robert Stock’s *Samuel Johnson and Neoclassical Dramatic Theory* (ch. 2), and Andrew Cannon Smith’s *Theories of the Nature and Standard of Taste in England, 1700-1790*, a dissertation chapter from nearly a century ago.

the most important and influential voices, and refer sparingly to Continental writers.<sup>5</sup> As we will see, eighteenth-century thinkers overwhelmingly attempted to find a standard of taste: “[n]o philosophical critic of the eighteenth century,” in Hipple’s words, “was an antinomian in taste; all establish a standard, and the only problem is to determine how the standard is established within the context of each system” (*The Beautiful* 48). The next chapter examines Smith’s theory of taste. As will appear, Smith denies the possibility of a standard and attacks the concept of taste itself. The third chapter illustrates some of the consequences of Smith’s theory, namely, his insight into the relation between class and taste, while the final chapter elaborates on the previous one by discussing Smith’s more nuanced and sceptical account of sympathy in aesthetic judgments.

## I

Joseph Addison was perhaps the first critic of note who engaged in the then fairly novel eighteenth-century practice of psychological aesthetics, a subject he broaches in his influential *Spectator* essays on the “Pleasures of the Imagination.” Though he does not discuss a standard of taste, his taxonomy of aesthetic response—to the great, uncommon, and beautiful—presupposes one, as does his disparagement of “Gothic” taste. In his paper on true versus false wit, Addison distinguishes between good poets who possess “a strength of genius to give that majestic simplicity to nature, which we so much admire in the works

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<sup>5</sup> I have chosen to overlook many minor figures and works that echoed the largely orthodox position on the standard. Such include John Gilbert Cooper’s *Letter’s Concerning Taste*, the “first book-length contribution in English to the subject” (Dix). James Ussher’s *Clio, Or a Discourse on Taste* (1767) similarly makes the standard eighteenth-century argument. James Beattie, in his *Dissertations Moral and Critical* (1783) and *Elements of Moral Science* (1790-1793) also defends the standard by comparing it to truth in the sciences. Thomas Reid also avers a standard in his *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man* (1785). The encyclopedias in Britain iterated the normative arguments, sometimes copying them verbatim.

of the ancients” and those who “are forced to hunt after foreign ornaments and not to let any piece of wit of what kind soever escape them.” Addison looks “upon these writers as Goths in poetry, who, like those in architecture, not being able to come up to the beautiful simplicity of the old Greeks and Romans, have endeavoured to supply its place with all the extravagances of an irregular fancy” (No. 62, 348).<sup>6</sup> Thus, taste for Addison presupposes a standard.

Like Hume nearly forty years later, Addison prescribes the test of time as a determiner of taste. A man should “read over the celebrated Works of Antiquity, which have stood the Test of so many different Ages and Countries; or those Works among the Moderns, which have the Sanction of the Politer Part of our Contemporaries.” If, after reading these, he is not “delighted in an extraordinary Manner” or if he finds “a Coldness and Indifference in his thoughts, he ought to conclude, not (as is too usual among tasteless Readers) that the Author wants those Perfections which have been admired in him, but that he himself wants the Faculty of discovering them,” namely, taste (No. 409, 365). Addison’s remarks lack the philosophical rigour of later thinkers, but his aesthetic thought influenced many in the coming decades and laid out the accepted taxonomy and categories for the subsequent discussion. What is also significant to note here is an early intimation of the “test of time” justification for a standard: the argument that whatever has pleased for long must have some basis in fact, and that if a reader or auditor be not pleased, then he judges or feels amiss.

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<sup>6</sup> Citations refer to the issue number, followed by page number.

Francis Hutcheson's *An Inquiry into the Original of Our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue* (1725) has been justifiably deemed the first treatise on aesthetics in Britain.<sup>7</sup> The impetus behind the work was to combat the egoistic ideas of Thomas Hobbes and Bernard Mandeville—that is, that human beings are selfish by nature, and that “virtue” and morality are arbitrary and largely matters of convenience. Hutcheson does this, however, by beginning with taste and beauty. He argues for something resembling a standard of taste, or what we may, following Kant, call intersubjectively valid aesthetic judgments. Like Burke over three decades later, Hutcheson argues that people's senses are uniform, and, since he postulates the existence of an inner aesthetic-moral sense, the same uniformity by extension must hold for taste. Hutcheson confidently and plainly avers that “[t]he Figures which excite in us the Ideas of Beauty, seem to be those in which there is Uniformity amidst Variety,” and further posits “the universal Agreement of Mankind in their Sense of Beauty from Uniformity amidst Variety (I.ii, I.vi).<sup>8</sup>

Hutcheson attempts to reconcile the apparent dissimilarity of tastes in individuals to his system. He argues, much as Gerard, Hume, and Burke would later do, that differences in taste are in fact products of (faulty) education or a random association of ideas. If these defects were remedied, taste would be uniform. The aesthetic sense is universal and

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<sup>7</sup> Peter Kivy calls Hutcheson's *Inquiry* “the inaugural work” and “certainly the first book-length study in what we now call philosophical aesthetics” (*Seventh Sense* ix). Walter Hipple similarly calls it “the first philosophical document in modern aesthetics” (*The Beautiful* 25), while Wellek considers it “the first formal treatise on aesthetics in English” (107).

<sup>8</sup> As commentators have pointed out, however, Hutcheson's criterion of beauty, uniformity amidst variety, “refers to such general qualities as to be nearly useless.... [T]here seems to be no work [of art] which would violate the formula” (Korsmeyer, “Hutcheson,” 327). Alexander Broadie similarly deems Hutcheson's position “empirically vacuous,” and notes that “he has so described what occurs that nothing can count as evidence against this claim” (“Art and Aesthetic Theory” 284).

uniform, and deviations from it can easily be explained by the mechanism of the association of ideas: “the Association of Ideas ... is one great Cause of the apparent Diversity of Fancys in the Sense of Beauty, as well as in the external Senses; and often makes Men have an aversion to Objects of Beauty, and a liking to others void of it, but under different Conceptions than those of Beauty or Deformity” (I.vi). Explanations that accounted for aberrations by a mechanism of association became common later in the century (a strategy that, as we will see in the following chapter, Smith implicitly challenges). Education and custom can likewise corrupt this sense. Hutcheson offers the typically eighteenth-century example of “[a] Goth,” who is “is mistaken, when from Education he imagines the Architecture of his country to be the most perfect: and a Conjunction of some hostile Ideas, may make him have an Aversion to Roman Buildings, and study to demolish them” (I.vi).

David Hume’s “On the Standard of Taste” (1757), undoubtedly the best known of the eighteenth-century works on the subject, begins by observing the plurality of taste.<sup>9</sup> However, Hume tells us that despite the variety of tastes and our subscription to the motto *de gustibus non est disputandum* (“there is no disputing taste”),

there is certainly a species of common sense which opposes it, [or] at least serves to modify and restrain it. Whoever would assert an equality of genius and elegance between Ogilby and Milton, or Bunyan and Addison, would be thought to defend no less an extravagance, than if he had maintained a mole-hill to be as high as Teneriffe, or a pond as extensive as the ocean. (230-231)

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<sup>9</sup> The literature on Hume’s essay, and his aesthetics in general, is enormous. See Costelloe’s useful critical bibliography.

Thus Hume argues for a standard of taste, though he acknowledges the difficulties of arriving at one *a priori*. One must rely on “general observations, concerning what has been universally found to please in all countries and in all ages” (231). Hume is empirical and grounds his claim in a “common sense,” though he also heavily relies on the argument from consensus or test of time to support his argument: “[t]he same Homer, who pleased at Athens and Rome two thousand years ago, is still admired at Paris and at London. All the changes of climate, government, religion, and language, have not been able to obscure his glory” (233). Using this example, Hume concludes that “amidst all the variety and caprice of taste, there are certain general principles of approbation or blame, whose influence a careful eye may trace in all operations of the mind. Some particular forms or qualities, from the original structure of the internal fabric, are calculated to please, and others to displease” (233).

Of course, Hume qualifies his test of time by limiting the class of taste’s practitioners. Although the principles of taste are universal, “few are qualified to give judgment on any work of art, or establish their own sentiment as the standard of beauty” (241). The proper judge, the only one qualified to provide a standard of taste, is the one who demonstrates “[s]trong sense, united to delicate sentiment, improved by practice, perfected by comparison, and cleared of all prejudice, [which] can alone entitle critics to this valuable character.” It is “the joint verdict of such, wherever they are to be found, [that] is the true standard of taste and beauty” (241). The best critics are those who admire these works that have stood the

test of time, and in this way, Hume's argument appears circular;<sup>10</sup> he supports his argument by using the argument of time or consensus that we saw Addison use.

Edmund Burke, who published *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* in 1757, is best remembered for his contribution to the discourse of the sublime. The subject of taste, however, was of such import that he added "An Essay on Taste" as his introduction to the second edition published in 1759<sup>11</sup>—coincidentally, the same year that Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments* first appeared. He argues that though there appears to be a legitimate plurality of taste, this is not really the case. In the prefixed essay, Burke writes, "if Taste has no fixed principles, if the imagination is not affected according to some invariable and certain laws, our labour is like to be employed to very little purpose" (64). Since all human beings possess the same organs, senses, and faculties, the basis of taste must be the same: "[w]e do and must suppose, that as the conformation of their [people's] organs are nearly, or altogether the same in all men, so the manner of perceiving external objects is in all men the same.... [I]t must necessarily be allowed, that the pleasures and pains which every object excites in one man, it must raise in all mankind" (65).<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Hume's "circular" argument itself has produced a spirited debate. Kivy is probably correct when contends that Hume's argument is characterized by an "infinite regress" rather than circularity (*Seventh Sense* 151).

<sup>11</sup> It is also worth noting briefly the sometimes curiously supplemental nature of discussions on taste. Like Burke, Gerard added a fresh chapter on the standard in the third edition of his *Essay*, which appeared twenty-one years later, and Kames's monumental *Elements of Criticism* concludes with a chapter on the standard of taste, which, along with his remarks in the dedication, effectively bookends the entire work. Hume's essay specifically devoted to taste was one of his last pieces of philosophical writing (1757), which, at the urging of his friends and publisher, he included instead of the controversial essay "Of Suicide" he had originally planned to include.

<sup>12</sup> As Boulton notes, "[i]n the Newtonian tradition Burke looks for—and finds—immutable laws governing taste" (xxviii).

Unlike his predecessors and most of those who followed, Burke grounds his argument for a standard not in *a priori* ideas or a common human nature or sense, but a common physiology. In this he resembles Locke, though Burke is more sensationistic. Uniform sensory apparatus means uniform taste. The same idea applies to the imagination, whose operations are the same in everyone. Differences in taste, according to Burke, are attributable to differences in experience and/or education: “it is from this difference in knowledge that what we commonly, though with no great exactness, call a difference in Taste proceeds” (70). Thus, as it was for Hutcheson, for Burke there are no actual differences in taste; any manifestations of such are merely the result of differences in education or experience.<sup>13</sup>

Alexander Gerard published *An Essay on Taste* in 1759, two years after it was awarded a prize for the best essay on taste by the Select Society of Edinburgh (David Hume was likely one of its readers at that stage). The first two editions contained translations of essays on taste by Voltaire, d’Alembert, and Montesquieu that also argued for a standard.<sup>14</sup> Gerard begins by taking the difficulties posed by Burke’s and Hume’s accounts and demonstrates that the senses of men are rarely the same, so that a variety of taste is inevitable. However, he continues by noting that there is, notwithstanding all appearances to the contrary, a

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<sup>13</sup> Howard Caygill suggests that Burke’s addition of the essay on taste reveals that he “was sufficiently threatened by Hume’s essay” (84). Boulton also suggests that Burke wrote his introduction in response to Hume, despite their agreement on many points (xxviii-xxix). Dario Perinetti has recently argued convincingly that Burke’s supplemental introduction is a response to Hume’s essay, though it is “not so much a reaction against Hume’s theory of aesthetic sense as such, as it is of the sceptical twist Hume gives to the idea of an aesthetic sense” (284).

<sup>14</sup> D’Alembert solicited Montesquieu for articles on “Democracy” and “Despotism” for the *Encyclopédie*. The usually political Montesquieu refused, insisting instead on contributing an article on taste, which he never lived to complete. It was, however, added to the subsequent edition of the *Encyclopédie*. For further discussion, see Downing Thomas’s “Negotiating Taste.”



standard. Like Hume, Gerard observes that people rarely, in practice at least, put much stock in the received wisdom that *de gustibus non est disputandum*: “[h]owever frequently the indisputable equality of tastes may be retailed....every man makes it evident at times, that he gives no credit to the maxim, that he knows some of the sentiments of taste to be right, others to be wrong” (209).

Though he does not discuss the issue of a standard at any length in the first two editions of the essay, Gerard nevertheless maintains a confidence in one. In a passage that would remain untouched in the third edition, he writes:

[t]here are qualities in things, determinate and stable, independent of humour or caprice, that are fit to operate on mental principles, common to all men, and, by operating on them, are naturally productive of the sentiments of taste in all its forms. If, in any particular instance, they prove ineffectual, it is to be ascribed to some weakness or disorder in the person who remains unmoved when these qualities are exhibited to his view. (I.vii, 72)

Gerard argues that although “an imperfection” in one’s organs, custom and education may corrupt or impede the proper operations of taste, the uniform mental principles are still there. Though Gerard, like Hume and others before him, ascribes differences in taste to a familiar litany of factors, he is one of those theorists whose argument for a standard does not rest on the common eighteenth-century test of time that others proposed.<sup>15</sup>

Henry Home, Lord Kames, who sponsored Adam Smith’s first teaching position as a lecturer on rhetoric in Edinburgh from 1748-1751, published his influential *Elements of*

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<sup>15</sup> In fact, he problematizes the test of time argument, though not until the supplemental part of the third edition of his work (“Of the Standard of Taste”), which was published in 1780, long after the apogee of the debate.

*Criticism* in 1762. It reached a wide audience in Britain and Europe, going through eight authorized British editions in the subsequent forty-three years of its publication—among its admirers was Immanuel Kant. Kames’s comprehensive work is an attempt to found or fix the science of criticism—what we would now call critical and literary theory. Kames concludes his work with a chapter entitled “The Standard of Taste,” in which he voices his conviction that human beings share a common nature: “[t]his conviction of a common nature or standard and of its perfection, accounts clearly for that remarkable conception we have, of a right and a wrong sense or taste in morals. It accounts not less clearly for the conception we have of a right and a wrong sense or taste in the fine arts” (722). Kames goes on to insist that the uneasiness people feel when their tastes clash with those of others proves that there is a standard: “why should difference in opinion create uneasiness, more than difference in stature, in countenance, or in dress? The conviction of a common standard explains the mystery” (722).

In his dedication, in fact, Kames informs the reader that his work “attempts to form a standard of taste, by unfolding those principles that ought to govern the taste of every individual.” Kames has strong political reasons for choosing to do so, and it is no coincidence that the king is his dedicatee. He notes that “[b]y uniting different ranks in the same elegant pleasures, they [fine arts] promote benevolence: by cherishing love of order, they enforce submission to government” (3). I will discuss the political aims of Kames’s treatment of taste in Chapter Two and Four, but for now it is worth noting that Kames makes the relationship between the political and the aesthetic explicit. His dedication also reveals the anxiety that the changing social, economic, and political order has occasioned to Kames. He also, like Hume, rather optimistically asserts that when it comes to the fine arts, “there is

less difference of taste than is commonly imagined” (728). Kames appears to make some allowances for relativity, but only for those “points that are reckoned of [no] moment” or to which “nature hath left [us] indifferent,” such as skin colour: “a black skin upon a human being, is to us disagreeable; and a white skin probably no less so to a negro” (292-93). I will return to this discussion in the next chapter.

Sir Joshua Reynolds, undoubtedly the greatest and best known painter of his age, delivered his *Discourses on Art* in the third quarter of the century. In his seventh discourse on art, delivered in December 1776, he articulates his famous idea of the central form. Here Reynolds says in no uncertain terms that there is a standard of taste, and that it is rational. He did not accept the then increasingly popular argument, going at least as far back as the Abbé Dubos, that taste was based on sentiment: “whatever goes under the name of taste [is] under the dominion of reason,” and it has “invariable principles” (123). Since reason and “general nature” are the same in all, Reynolds also (briefly) follows the Burkean argument: “[t]he internal fabrick of our minds, as well as the external form of our bodies, being nearly uniform; it seems then to follow of course, that ... there will be necessarily an agreement in the imaginations as in the senses of men,” and further, “there are certain and regular causes by which the imagination and passions of men are affected” (132, 134). Reynolds’s thinking here resembles Hume’s, except that he avoids some of the problems Hume encounters by placing taste under the domain of reason (and fact) rather than sentiment.

Reynolds buttresses his argument with the test of time, arguing that “[w]hat has pleased, and continues to please, is likely to please again: hence are derived the rules of art, and on this immoveable foundation they must ever stand” (133). The test of time is used by others later in the century. Hugh Blair, in his *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres* (1782),

notes, “[t]hat which men concur the most in admiring, must be held to be beautiful. His Taste must be esteemed just and true, which coincides with the general sentiments of men. In this standard we must rest.... [namely,] what has been found from experience to please mankind universally” (17-18). Though no admirer of Hume, Samuel Johnson also refers to the same test in his assessment of Shakespeare as a classic: “no other test can be applied than length of duration and continuance of esteem. What mankind have long possessed they have often examined and compared, and if they persist to value the possession, it is because frequent comparisons have confirmed opinion in its favour” (“Preface” 299).<sup>16</sup>

## II

The search for a standard was not very different on the Continent, with a few exceptions. D’Alembert and Montesquieu both argue for a standard in essays that were appended to the first two editions of Gerard’s *Essay*. In his entry on “Goût” in the *Encyclopédie*, also translated and appended to Gerard’s essay, Voltaire distinguishes between physical and intellectual taste, and asserts that, when applied to the former, the maxim *de gustibus* “is just.” However, “the maxim is false and pernicious when applied to that *intellectual taste*, which has for it’s [sic] objects the arts and sciences. As these objects have real charms, so there is in reality a good taste which perceives them, and a bad one

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<sup>16</sup> It may seem ironic that Hume the sceptic would, of all people, argue for some sort of standard. He is, however, being less “metaphysical” than his contemporaries—less metaphysical because he never argues for some standard “out there,” but rests on the next best thing: the consensus of critics. Hume argues that there must be something like a standard of taste, though we can probably never *know* it, and certainly not *a priori*. Hume is sceptical in this sense and in this sense alone. By contrast, many of his Scottish contemporaries argued for a standard that would be eventually discoverable. Hume thus tries to bridge the objective and subjective theories of beauty and taste. He makes it clear in the *Treatise* that beauty does not inhere in objects themselves—that is, it is not “out there”—but is merely a mental construct. He avoids the relativism this position would entail by arguing that mental reactions follow, or should follow, predictable laws. He makes this clear when he suggests that certain proportions, for instance, provide the same aesthetic response.

which perceives them not” (“Essay on Taste” 219). Voltaire maintains his conviction in the entry on “Extrême” in *Questions sur L’Encyclopédie* (1771), where he gives examples of passages of poetry that are in good and bad taste. He then asks, “[i]s there a good and a bad taste? Yes, without doubt, though men may differ in opinions, morals, and customs. The best taste in all cases is to imitate nature with the greatest fidelity, energy, and grace” (translation mine).<sup>17</sup>

Voltaire occasionally seems to acknowledge a relativism of taste, such as in his *Essay on Epic Poetry* (“Essai sur la Poésie Épique,” 1728). He notes there that nearly “all the works of mankind change just as much as the imagination that produced them. Customs, languages, the taste of people who are neighbours differ ... [and] the same country is no longer recognizable after three or four centuries.” Further, in the arts “that depend wholly on the imagination, there are as many revolutions as there are in states: they change in a thousand ways while we attempt to standardize them” (48).<sup>18</sup> In the tongue-in-cheek entry on “Beauty” in his *Dictionnaire Philosophique*, Voltaire writes, “[a]sk a toad what beauty is, the *to kalon*? He will answer you that it is his toad wife with two great round eyes issuing from her little head, a wide, flat mouth, a yellow belly, a brown back. Interrogate a negro from Guinea; for him beauty is a black oily skin, dark eyes, a flat nose” (247, translations

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<sup>17</sup> “Y a-t-il un bon et un mauvais goût? Oui, sans doute, quoique les hommes diffèrent d’opinions, de mœurs, d’usages. Le meilleur goût en tout genre est d’imiter la nature avec le plus de fidélité, de force et de grâce.”

<sup>18</sup> “presque tous les ouvrages des hommes changent ainsi que l’imagination qui les produit. Les coutumes, les langues, le goût des peuples les plus voisins diffèrent ... [et] la même nation n’est plus reconnaissable au bout de trois ou quatre siècles. Dans les arts qui dépendent purement de l’imagination, il y a autant de révolutions que dans les états; ils changent en mille manières, tandis qu’on cherche à les fixer” (246).

mine).<sup>19</sup> It must be noted, despite this seeming relativism, that “in the light of Voltaire’s later writings it seems rather doubtful that it can claim such a [relativistic] position, for he never gave up the idea of one universal taste” (Wellek I. 33). Though Voltaire ultimately rests on a standard, it is possible that his “marginal” contradictory remarks influenced Smith, among others.

As we have seen, the overwhelming majority of theorists propose some sort of standard, and they almost always begin by what I call the concession of relativism; they agree that it would appear that there is no standard, given the vagaries of taste, especially across time and borders. They bring this up, however, only to dismiss it. Most if not all of these writers refer to “others” who argue that taste is arbitrary and based on nothing but caprice. Articulations of this idea were, however, relatively rare.

There were nevertheless other opinions and approaches to the issue of a standard that are worth noting. Claude Buffier’s *Treatise on First Truths and the Origin of Our Opinions* (*Traité des Premières Vérités et de la Source de nos Jugemens*), originally published in 1724, is not a work on taste or aesthetics, but it does contain significant comments of relevance to our subject. On human beauty, Buffier writes that “beauty consists in the particular form which is most common among other particular forms found in things of the same species” (71).<sup>20</sup> Further, he argues that “the form which constitutes beauty is that, in

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<sup>19</sup> “Demandez à un crapaud ce que c’est que la beauté, le grand beau, le *to kalon*. Il vous répondra que c’est sa crapauderie avec deux gros yeux ronds sortant de sa petite tête, une gueule large et plate, un ventre jaune, un dos brun. Interrogez un nègre de Guinée ; le beau est pour lui une peau noire, huileuse, des yeux enfoncés, un nez épaté.”

<sup>20</sup> Interestingly, there is some recent research that suggests Buffier was perhaps bordering on the truth. See “‘Beauty Machine’ Makes Average Face A Knockout With A Single Click”: <http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2008/11/081106122409.htm>

fact, to which our eyes are most accustomed.” Buffier welcomes the consequence of such an idea, namely, that “beauty ... must be, in a great measure, arbitrary,” which would “exempt us from seeking an essential and real character of beauty which we have not yet been able to discover” (72-3). To the objection that “true beauty is that which is approved by connoisseurs,” Buffier responds in anticipation of Hume, “I would desire, that mankind first agree who are to be reckoned connoisseurs” (72).<sup>21</sup> As we will see in the next chapter, Smith cites Buffier at length and draws a similar conclusion.

An interesting debate in the sphere of architectural theory in France likewise problematized a standard of taste. Claude Perrault, who designed the eastern façade of the Louvre Palace, argued against other architectural theorists, such as Blondel, on the nature of objective versus subjective beauty (Tatarkiewicz 417). Perrault first articulated his ideas in his French edition (1673) of Vitruvius’ *Ten Books on Architecture*, which Smith owned. There he divides beauty into two kinds: “‘positive’ (or, variously, natural, real, and necessary), and subjective, relative beauty, which ... [are] arbitrary.” As examples of the former, Perrault lists “especially fine building materials, grandeur and splendour in a building, symmetry and exemplary execution” (qtd. in Tatarkiewicz 418).

However, apart from these criteria, any beauties are arbitrary, including the beauty of proportion, since ultimately “no proportion ... is good in itself; some merely appear so to us”

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<sup>21</sup> Buffier’s views were later criticized by Dugald Stewart and Lord Jeffrey, both of whom noted that, to use Jeffrey’s example, “[w]e may believe, if we please, that one peacock is handsomer than another, because it approaches more nearly to the average or mean form of peacocks in general; but this reason will avail us nothing whatever in explaining why any peacock is handsomer than any pelican or penguin” (“Review” 22-23).

(419).<sup>22</sup> Indeed, against the opinion of the majority of architects, who held that proportions were natural, Perrault argues that they were established merely “by a consensus of architects who, as Vitruvius himself testifies, imitated the works of each other, and who followed the proportions that the first chose, not because they had any positive beauty, necessary and convincing” but only because “these proportions were in works that had other positive and convincing beauties, such as those of the substance and accuracy of execution.” He concludes by noting that this “reason of admiring things by association and habit we find in nearly all things that please, though we do not believe it because we have not reflected on it” (*Vitruve* 144, translation mine). In other words, custom and habit render things pleasant without our being aware of it. Perrault goes so far, in fact, as to insist that there are even things “that reason and common sense should see as deformed and shocking, [but] which custom has rendered bearable” (viii). Much of what people think is objectively beautiful, then, is merely the result of historically entrenched habit and association. In Chapter Two we will encounter Smith’s articulation of similar ideas.

A generation later, Jean Pierre Crousaz and Yves Marie André (better known as Père André) also distinguished between different types of beauty, including arbitrary and absolute varieties. Crousaz’s *Traité du Beau* (1715), of which Smith owned a copy, is considered the first aesthetic treatise in French. In it, Crousaz notes that there “is a beauty in relation to ideas, and a beauty in relation to sentiments; the first is more fixed, the second, more variable. The first is the basis of the truth of our judgments, the second, the strangeness of

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<sup>22</sup> As late as 1762, Kames would disagree on this point, insisting that Perrault’s argument “betrays ignorance of human nature, which evidently delights in proportion, as well as in regularity, order, and propriety.... [I]f these proportions had not originally been agreeable, they could not have been established by custom” (705).



our tastes” (56).<sup>23</sup> In his opening remarks in his *Essai sur le Beau* (1741), Père André asserts that there are three types of beauty: “an essential beauty, independent of any institution, even divine,” a “natural beauty, independent of the opinions of people,” and “a species of beauty of human sanction, and which is arbitrary” (8).<sup>24</sup> As an example of the last, and perhaps drawing on Perrault, André offers architecture, which has “two kinds of rules: the first founded on the principles of geometry, and the others founded on particular comments, that the masters of art made at different times on the proportions that please the sight by their regularity, real or apparent” (46-47).<sup>25</sup> Of the second kind are those putative “rules” that are based on more tenuous principles, for example, “those that have been established to determine the proportions of the parts of a building within the five orders of architecture,” (47-48) and human fashions such as wigs and face-painting, which even in Europe appear not ridiculous merely because of custom (59-60, translations mine).<sup>26</sup> The aesthetics of these French thinkers, then, admitted elements of both arbitrary and absolute beauty, a strain of thought that likely influenced Smith. This discussion of fine distinctions between different types of beauty will recur in Chapter Five.

A rare British articulation of this idea is Allan Ramsay’s unjustly forgotten *A Dialogue on Taste* (1762), first published with the unhelpful title of *The Investigator, Number*

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<sup>23</sup> “Il y a beauté par rapport aux idées, & beauté par raport [sic] aux sentiments; celle-là est plus fixe, celle-ci varie davantage; la premiere fonde la verité de nos jugemens, la seconde la bizarrerie de nos goûts.”

<sup>24</sup> “il y a un beau essential, & indépendant de toute institution, même divine,” “un beau naturel, & indépendant de l’opinion des hommes,” “une espèce de beau d’institution humaine, & qui est arbitraire.”

<sup>25</sup> “des règles de deux sortes: les premieres fondées sur les principes de la Géométrie; les autres fondées sur les observations particulieres, que les Maîtres de l’art ont faites en divers tems sur les proportions qui plaisent à la vue par leur régularité, vraie, ou apparente.”

<sup>26</sup> “celles qu’on a établies pour déterminer les proportions des parties d’un édifice dans les cinq ordres d’architecture.”

CCCXXII (1755), of which Smith owned a copy.<sup>27</sup> On the subject of taste, Colonel Freeman, Ramsay's mouthpiece, avers that "[t]he proper objects of taste or feeling are such as are relative to the person only who is actuated by them, who is the sole judge whether those feelings be agreeable or otherwise; and being informed of this simple fact from himself, no farther consequence can be drawn from it, neither does it admit of any dispute" (9-10). In other words, though everyone has his or her own taste, it "admits of no comparison" and cannot be intersubjectively valid (26). Taste admits no standard, nor can it ever by its very nature.

Further, Ramsay adds to this the association of ideas, which, though dismissed as a corrupting influence by thinkers such as Locke and Hutcheson, here has a more constitutive role. A child, for instance, who is told that a certain person is "vastly handsome ... will never after be able to separate the word from its original impressions; but will, from that accidental conjunction, form to himself a general system of beauty, and will keep it up, by a traditional application of it to other women, many years after she who gave birth to his system is forgotten" (22). When asked by his interlocutor, Lord Modish, about good taste in architecture, Freeman responds that it is akin "to a good taste in dress or cookery, that, abstracted from health and conveniency, the objects of reason, it is one of those tastes which custom, a second nature has bestowed upon us; and is so much mere taste that it can never with any propriety, become a matter of dispute or comparison" (32). When it comes to the arts, similarly, "either the distinction betwixt taste and judgment ... is false, or else taste is

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<sup>27</sup> Another, albeit less profound and interesting, exposition of this idea occurs in Oliver Goldsmith's *The Citizen of the World* (1762). Letter XXXIII begins: "The polite arts are in this country subject to as many revolutions as its laws or politics; not only the objects of fancy and dress, but even of delicacy and taste are directed by the capricious influence of fashion" (141).

totally excluded from being a determiner in works of art, and must leave that task for judgment to perform.... An art, then, and whatever pretends to a standard, is an object of judgment and not of taste” (55). Kant would agree with Ramsay that a judgment of taste—forgetting for the moment the paradoxical nature of the phrase for Ramsay—is one free of concepts. For Ramsay, unlike Kant, however, this precludes its validity as a genuine, intersubjectively valid universal aesthetic judgment.

Ramsay articulates some fairly unusual and heterodox ideas. Taste is mere taste, and what we consider good taste is merely the sanction of habit, custom, or association. A judgment of beauty or taste without concepts is by necessity arbitrary. This important distinction between taste and judgment, which Smith also seems to make, will be discussed in Chapter Two and especially Chapter Five. For now, it suffices to say that Ramsay, unlike most of his contemporaries, acknowledges the feeble nature of taste and that it does not and cannot admit of any standard. Ideas such as Ramsay’s and Buffier’s were in the air during the eighteenth century, though they represented a minority opinion. Smith, as we will see, pursued their line of thinking in greater depth.

### III

There was a growing tendency among literary historians and scholars in England during the middle of the eighteenth century to historicize taste, a current that eventually led to the valorization of “Gothic” literature and, arguably, Romanticism. Curiously, though none of the British (read: Scottish) taste theorists mentions proponents of this new school, they must have been aware of them. Thomas Warton, writing in 1754, defends Edmund Spenser by noting that readers must always make allowances for an author’s cultural and intellectual

context. When reading such works, “we should look back upon the customs and manners which prevailed in his age” and “place ourselves in his situation, and circumstances ... so we may be the better enabled to judge and discern how his turn of thinking and manner of composing were biass’d, influenc’d, and, as it were, tinctur’d, by very familiar and reigning appearances, which are utterly different from those with which we are presently surrounded” (*Observations*, X. 217). Samuel Johnson makes a similar plea for Shakespeare a decade later: his greatness is in spite of, not because of, the rules and the ancients. Such an argument goes back to Pope, who in 1725 quipped, “[t]o judge therefore of *Shakespeare* by *Aristotle*’s rules is like trying a man by the laws of one country who acted under those of another” (“Preface” 462). Richard Hurd’s influential *Letters on Chivalry and Romance* (1762) continues the line of thought of Pope and Warton. He begins his work by noting that “[t]he ages, we call barbarous, present us with many a subject of curious speculation. What, for instance, is more remarkable than Gothic Chivalry?” Since great writers such as Spenser and Milton “were even charmed by the Gothic Romances” it ought to be asked, “may there not be something in the Gothic Romance peculiarly suited to the views of a genius, and to the ends of poetry?” (1, 4).

In his *Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews* (1787), originally published in Latin in 1753, Robert Lowth warns against ethnocentrically reading literature since “the manner of living, of speaking, of thinking, which prevailed in those [ancient Hebrew] times, will be found altogether different from our customs and habits. There is therefore great danger, lest viewing them from an improper station, and rashly estimating all things by our own standard, we form an erroneous judgement” (72). Further, Lowth writes that the first duty of the critic is “to remark, as far as possible, the situation and habits of the author, the

natural history of his country, and the scene of the poem. Unless we continually attend to these points, we shall scarcely be able to judge with any degree of certainty concerning the elegance or propriety of the sentiments” (87). In other words, as Sambrook writes, such critics “insist[ed] that the literature of societies unfamiliar to us itself creates the taste by which it is to be enjoyed; there is no uniform standard of taste” (118).<sup>28</sup> Such sentiments may have held true among more “literary” theorists, but the search for a standard remained an ongoing enterprise among non-English and more philosophically inclined theorists.

In short, the overwhelming majority of thinkers in Britain and the Continent argued for a standard. The idea that taste is arbitrary or relative and not subject to a standard was a decidedly minority view, though normative theorists felt threatened enough to respond to it. This survey could be expanded greatly—as noted, I have omitted many writers—but this selective narrative provides an appropriate and representative context in which to situate Smith. As we will see in the next chapter, Smith is fairly original in his negotiation of the subject of taste and its standard, and his position on the issue has more in common with the minority current.

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<sup>28</sup> Sambrook notes that Burke was “apparently unmoved by the tendency of current historicism and primitivism to support the view that taste is relative” (120). Needless to say, Burke should not be singled out.

## Chapter Two

### Smith's Theory of Taste

Having surveyed the intellectual context of the question of the standard of taste in the eighteenth century, I will now proceed to Smith's contribution to the subject. As we have seen, thinkers in the period were troubled by the problem of a relativism of taste and demonstrated an anxiety about the contingency of taste. The very attempt to ground a standard, however, reveals the futile nature of the enterprise. Indeed, as De Bruyn observes, "the very fact that they [theorists] felt a need to establish the laws of taste on a scientific and philosophical basis implies their awareness of conditions that call such uniformity into question" ("Hooking" 43). Similarly, Shusterman notes that it is "obvious ... even to Hume, that no such universal uniformity of sentiment regarding works of art really exists. If it did we would not need to seek a standard of taste, let alone ponder whether we could find one; for we would have one simply in our uniform consensus" (109).<sup>1</sup> In the introduction to his *Elements of Criticism*, Kames argues that "we ought ... to know what objects are *naturally* agreeable, and what *naturally* disagreeable" (18, emphasis added). If, however, something is "naturally agreeable," then the theorist should be superfluous. The search for a standard is a paradoxical endeavour, as it seeks to tell people what they should already know, much like the moral sense theorists, who argued that "right conduct is grounded in intuition," in which case it is difficult "to see why there is a need for ethical discourse at all." Such theorists, in

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<sup>1</sup> B.H. Smith wryly observes that Hume's claim for uniformity and a natural norm of taste, with all of its concessions and qualifications, "becomes the limp truism, *some objects tend to please or displease some people under some conditions*" (63).

Terry Eagleton's witty assessment, risked "argu[ing] themselves steadily out of business" (*Ideology* 67).

Smith, perhaps cognizant of these issues, never wrote an essay on taste specifically, a surprising fact given that his immediate intellectual contemporaries—Hume, Burke, Gerard, and Kames—wrote much on the subject. Our first clue, however, that Smith was in fact keenly interested in the matter comes from Dugald Stewart, Smith's colleague and first biographer. He writes:

His acquaintance with the polite literature of both ancient and modern times was extensive; and amidst his various other occupations, he had never neglected to cultivate a taste for the fine arts; – less, it is probable with a view to the peculiar enjoyments they convey, (though he was by no means without sensibility to their beauties), than on account of their connection with the general principles of the human mind; to an examination of which they afford the most pleasing of all avenues. To those who speculate on this very delicate subject, a comparison of the modes of taste that prevail among different nations, affords a valuable collection of facts; and Mr. Smith, who was always disposed to ascribe to custom and fashion their full share in regulating the opinions of mankind with respect to beauty, may naturally be supposed to have availed himself of every opportunity which a foreign country afforded him of illustrating his former theories. (III.13)

Stewart most likely had in mind Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments*. Though a work devoted to moral philosophy, it is encyclopedic in its range, and one of the subjects it treats is aesthetics. Indeed, as Griswold notes, "[b]eauty is a pervasive theme" in the work (*Virtues* 112). Furthermore, the publication date of the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759) is

not insignificant in an aesthetic context, for the 1750s was a key decade for the discussion of taste in Britain. The five-year period between 1757 and 1762 alone was a particularly productive one for taste: in these years, Hume, Gerard, Burke, and Kames all wrote on the subject. Further, Smith was likely on The Select Society committee that awarded Gerard the gold medal for “the best essay on taste” in 1756. Given his interest in aesthetic matters (as Stewart noted) and the timing of his work, then, it is unlikely that Smith would have had no opinion about such a pressing topical issue. Peter Jones (“Aesthetics”) suggests that Smith’s views were in fact a response to Hume’s essay on taste of 1757, which Hume tells us Smith had read “in manuscript” before being published (*Corr.*, 22, Mar. 1757).<sup>2</sup>

Though it is true that, as De Marchi observes, Smith “trod carefully around taste” (“Ingenuity” 131), this observation tends to obscure the presence—almost an absent presence—of taste in the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*. As a result, the student of Smith is left in the position of having to consolidate scattered and seemingly tangential remarks. These comments are, however, significant and consistent—that is to say, it is possible to consolidate them into a fairly coherent theory of taste. As will be demonstrated, despite the fact that Smith was part of the same intellectual milieu as Hume, Burke, and Gerard, he articulated fairly heterodox views on the subject, ones that may seem more congenial to us in the twenty-first century. He argues that standards of taste are merely illusions, and he goes on to problematize the concept of taste itself. Smith was perhaps more troubled by the idea of taste than his peers, because he was more cognizant of the tensions and contradictions present in the discourse of taste. Most theorists argued that differences in taste are merely

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<sup>2</sup> Though Jones is almost certainly correct, he does not provide any evidence or point to passages that would confirm this.



apparent. They also alluded, often briefly, to corrupting factors, such as custom and education, but these were generally invoked merely to be ultimately dismissed or reconciled. Smith, by contrast, homes in on these divergences of taste and does not merely sweep them away; he appears to have taken them more seriously, and is not as confident as his contemporaries (and forbears) that disagreements in taste are not real or constitutive in some way. As will appear, Smith seems to have wrestled with his own unresolved views on taste until the end of his life, a tension between his concession of the relativity of taste on the one hand and his propensity towards aesthetic normativity on the other.<sup>3</sup>

## I

Part V of the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* deals with the influence of custom on moral judgments and begins with a disquisition on aesthetics: the first chapter, in fact, is entitled, “Of the Influence of Custom and Fashion upon our Notions of Beauty and Deformity.” It is in this section that Smith argues, as Stewart noted, that the role of custom and fashion in taste has a greater constitutive and determining influence than most would be willing to acknowledge.<sup>4</sup> Smith admits that many would agree that dress and furniture fall under the “dominion of custom and fashion,” given their obvious ephemerality. However, he continues, custom and fashion are “by no means confined to so narrow a sphere, but extend

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<sup>3</sup> I discuss Smith’s aesthetic normativity in Chapter Five.

<sup>4</sup> Smith’s remarks on taste have been largely ignored by scholars. A notable and recent exception is Robert Fudge, whom I discuss later. Andrew Hemingway (somewhat awkwardly) adds that the “currency of the view that taste was to a large extent a matter of custom, and therefore socially relative, must also have been increased by Smith’s persuasive reflections on the issue in his *Theory of Moral Sentiments*” (13). Hemingway, however, does not make a case for the “currency” of the view.

[themselves] to whatever is in any respect the object of taste, to music, to poetry, to architecture.” From this, Smith concludes:

Few men ... are willing to allow, that custom or fashion have much influence upon their judgments concerning what is beautiful, or otherwise, in the productions of any of those arts; but imagine, that all the rules, which they think ought to be observed in each of them, are founded upon reason and nature, not upon habit or prejudice. A very little attention, however, may convince them of the contrary, and satisfy them, that the influence of custom and fashion over dress and furniture, is not more absolute than over architecture, poetry, and music. (V.i.4) <sup>5</sup>

Smith sustains his novel contention that custom and fashion have a determining influence on taste by appealing to a historical perspective and dissolving any distinction between “high” and “low” art. We note that the taste for something is “ridiculous to-day which was admired five years ago” and acknowledge that “it owed its vogue chiefly or entirely to custom and fashion.” The same process applies to tastes in furniture, which, likewise owing to its materials, “generally undergoes an entire revolution” every “five or six years.” This, however, becomes obvious only in retrospect,<sup>6</sup> and we are conscious when it occurs because clothing and furniture are not built from durable materials.

By contrast, longevity of material gives the illusion of permanence, and thus the permanence of a taste for, say, a certain building or style of architecture is an illusion

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<sup>5</sup> Noggle comments on this passage: “Smith’s liquidation of fashionable taste to pure passing time, without meaning or specifiable content, extends beyond the domain of clothing to affect the status of even more stable objects of regard. Once taste in one area is seen to be a matter of temporal movement, the temptation is to reduce the value of others to the same empty standard” (161).

<sup>6</sup> Noggle has also recently observed that although “‘experimentally’ demystified, taste continues to do its ideological work because the equalization of all tastes can be revealed only in retrospect” (161)

generated merely by the durability of the materials in question. For this reason, and this reason alone,

The productions of the other arts ... are much more lasting, and, when happily imagined, may continue to propagate the fashion of their make for a much longer time. A well-contrived building may endure many centuries: a beautiful air may be delivered down by a sort of tradition, through many successive generations: a well-written poem may last as long as the world; and all of them continue for ages together, to give the vogue to that particular style, to that particular taste or manner, according to which each of them was composed. Few men have an opportunity of seeing in their own times the fashion in any of these arts change very considerably. Few men have so much experience and acquaintance with the different modes which have obtained in remote ages and nations, as to be thoroughly reconciled to them, or to judge with impartiality between them, and what takes place in their own age and country. (V.i.4)

Thus, custom influences all “objects of taste”; it is only because of the greater durability—both material and conceptual—of the fine arts that they tend to last longer. In Noggle’s words, “[d]urability of taste resides again not in some natural excellence possessed by objects but in their dumb material properties, which decay at different rates” (161). Because the fashion of such productions changes only over several generations, we have a false impression of immutability. A synchronic view calls into question only the stability of fashion, but a diachronic or chronologically expanded approach, Smith would argue, reveals the similarly contingent nature of all the (fine) arts. The fine arts, then, do not enjoy

privileged status in Smith's aesthetics; poems, building, furniture, and clothing are juxtaposed.

Other writers, including Voltaire, Reynolds, and Gerard, also acknowledged that fashion is arbitrary. These theorists, however, consciously divorced fashion from what they deemed true objects of taste. Voltaire writes:

In many things Taste seems to be of an arbitrary nature, and without any fixed or uniform direction, such as in the choice of dress and equipage.... In this low sphere it should be distinguished, methinks, by the name of *fancy*; for it is *fancy* rather than *taste*, that produces such an endless variety of new and contradictory modes. ("Essay on Taste" 219-220)

Gerard implies a similar distinction between true and invalid objects of taste. Speaking of those whose taste is corrupted, Gerard writes,

[t]hey ... enter into important subjects, with as little relish as the merest children; or are perhaps delighted with other trifles, a very little different or superior in kind. Of dress or equipage, of the beauties of a tulip, of a shell, or a butterfly, they are accurate judges and high admirers. But the sublimity of nature, the ingenuity of art, the grace of painting, the charms of genuine poetry, the simplicity of pastoral, the boldness of the ode, the affecting incidents of tragedy, the just representation of comedy; these are subjects of which they understand nothing, of which they can form no judgment. (II.iii, 103)

In the third edition Gerard notes that "mere fancies ... have been sometimes undeservedly honoured with the name of taste, as in the ever-varying modes of dress, equipage, and furniture," which he refers to as "trivial subjects" (212). Kames makes a similar distinction

when he refers to those things that please or displease universally and those “that nature hath left indifferent” to us (292).

Smith resists this convenient strategy of distinguishing true objects of taste from others. *Pace* Voltaire and others, he argues that there is no significant difference between a dress, a table, a wig, a building, and a poem; they are in fact bound by the same principles of taste. The vagaries of fashion actually prove, for Smith, that taste (broadly defined) has no solid foundation except in custom and habit. Here Smith also evinces an awareness that explanations, such as Hutcheson’s, that attempted to explain aberrations via custom and the association of ideas are unsatisfactory since, as Kivy perceptively notes, such arguments can cut both ways.<sup>7</sup> In other words, as Smith recognizes, custom and the association of ideas can be constitutive.

Smith pursues this point by offering an architectural example. He asks,

[c]an any reason, for example, be assigned why the Doric capital should be appropriated to a pillar, whose height is equal to eight diameters; the Ionic volute to one of nine; and the Corinthian foliage to one of ten? The propriety of each of those appropriations can be founded upon nothing but habit and custom. The eye having been used to see a particular proportion connected with a particular ornament, would be offended if they were not joined together. (V.i.5)

This is a bold move on Smith’s part. He is attacking the (neo)classical principle of proportion—the idea that we are pleased by *natural* proportions—though in this he was not

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<sup>7</sup> Kivy notes that the association of ideas “is a double-edged sword” since, if a theorist “can make negative use of association to explain how the ‘inherently’ pleasant can lose its attractiveness through habitual association with the unpleasant ... then it must be possible to cut the other way and use his own principle in showing that what may seem ‘inherently’ pleasant or unpleasant has gained its pleasantness or unpleasantness in the same way” (*Seventh Sense* 178-79).

alone. Burke also famously attacks this principle in his own work, and by mid-century no major aesthetic theorist in Britain took proportion seriously (though the idea had a longer afterlife on the Continent). More importantly, Smith's invocation of architecture is significant as it was regarded as one of the more "solid" arts, given its durability and sheer scale. As Tatarkiewicz notes,

the architectural canon had a stronger tradition than any, and one might, perhaps, have thought, that the objectivist conception had more basis here than in the other arts.... The proportions of the Doric and Ionic orders had been universally accepted for two and a half thousand years, and so might well have seemed objective and necessary. (*Aesthetics* 416-17)

Thus, the comparative immutability of the materials in question lent greater solidity to architecture, precisely that putatively irrefragable, solid art whose objectivity Smith set about to deny. Smith here may have been influenced by Perrault, who similarly argued that architects use the standard proportions (or orders) not because of any actual beauty they possessed, but out of custom and an association of ideas.<sup>8</sup> As late as 1755, by contrast, John Gilbert Cooper could confidently assert, "[y]ou very well know that every Rule, Canon, and Proportion in building did not arise from the capricious Invention of Man, but from the unerring Dictates of Nature" (5). If Smith has a direct target, it is likely Cooper. He demonstrates that, despite all appearances to the contrary, architectural "beauty" and the taste for it is just as arbitrary as that for chairs or clothing and he thus destabilizes the binary of true/invalid objects of taste.

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<sup>8</sup> Peter Jones notes also that Perrault's emphasis on the influence of fashion "was adapted and broadened by both Allan Ramsay and Adam Smith in their discussions with Hume about taste" ("Hume on the Arts" 419-420), though I reached the same connection independently.

From architecture, Smith moves on to problematize poetry, observing that

[a]ccording to the ancient rhetoricians, a certain measure of verse was by nature appropriated to each particular species of writing, as being naturally expressive of that character, sentiment, or passion, which ought to predominate in it. One verse, they said, was fit for grave and another for gay works, which could not, they thought, be interchanged without the greatest impropriety.

However, Smith continues by noting that the “experience of modern times ... seems to contradict this principle.... What is the burlesque verse in English, is the heroic verse in French.... Custom has made the one nation associate the ideas of gravity, sublimity, and seriousness, to that measure which the other has connected with whatever is gay, flippant, and ludicrous” (V.i.6).<sup>9</sup> There is thus nothing *natural* about the moods ascribed to either of these poetic metres. This is a decidedly anticlassical view: the Glasgow editors point out that Smith probably had Aristotle (*Poetics* 1459b) and Horace (*Art of Poetry* 73-98) in mind here. Smith makes a similar observation in the posthumously published “Of the Affinity between Certain English and Italian Verses.” Here he observes that “what in English appears to be the verse of the greatest gravity and dignity, appears in Italian to be the most

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<sup>9</sup> Joshua Reynolds, whose reception of Smith has yet to be charted, likely had this passage in mind since he distinguishes, in fact, between the arbitrariness of different metres and the universality of metre itself: “[c]ustom has appropriated different metre to different kinds of composition, in which the world is not perfectly agreed. In England the dispute is not yet settled, which is to be preferred, rhyme or blank verse. But however we disagree about what these metrical ornaments shall be, that some metre is essentially necessary [to poetry], is universally acknowledged” (VII, 135-36).

He also apparently takes exception to Smith’s remarks on fashion since he insists that “[t]he component parts of dress are continually changing from great to little, from short to long; but the general form still remains” (136). Noggle has recently noted that by the end of that discourse, however, “the arbitrariness definitive of fashion takes over, as if mere consideration of the idea impels him to revise his entire understanding of taste in light of it” (167). In fact, “[t]he acceptance in *Discourse VII* of the function of fashion in determining taste.... undermines the fixed, general standards he usually upholds throughout his theoretical writings” (168).

burlesque and ludicrous; for no other reason, I apprehend, but because in the one language it is the ordinary verse, whereas in the other it departs the most from the movement of the ordinary verse” (9). This remark along with that in *Theory of Moral Sentiments* makes it clear that Smith ascribes this poetic phenomenon to mere convention.

Smith’s position contrasts with that of Thomas Hobbes, who in his “Answer” to William Davenant’s *Gondibert*, notes that the metre the Greeks and Romans

found by experience most grave, and for an epic poem most decent, was their *hexameter*.... Instead of which we use the line of ten syllables, recompensing the neglect of their quantity with the diligence of rhyme. And this measure is so proper to an heroic poem, as without some loss of gravity or dignity, it was never changed.

A longer is not far from ill prose; and a shorter, is a kind of whisking. (446)

Smith’s observations demonstrate an awareness of the ethnocentrism implicit in such arguments—they reveal an ignorance of other traditions. That awareness may have gone on to influence Gerard’s additions to the third edition of his *Essay on Taste*.<sup>10</sup>

Elsewhere, Smith offers an illuminating example of how social changes can lead to wholesale changes in the arts and, by extension, taste. Though he was not a thoroughgoing materialist, Smith demonstrates an almost proto-Marxist awareness of the alterations in taste that arise from changing social conditions and modes of production.<sup>11</sup> He observes, for instance, that love was not a subject of serious ancient literature, though it has become *de*

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<sup>10</sup> There Gerard writes that “there are regions in the East, exceeding Europe in extent, and in the number of inhabitants, who have never given their suffrage in favour of” Homer and Virgil, yet “among them too poetry and eloquence have flourished” (232).

<sup>11</sup> For the Scottish Enlightenment’s influence on Marxist thought, see R.L. Meek, “The Scottish Contribution to Marxist Sociology.”



*rigueur* in the modern world. He ascribes this change to the increasingly stringent laws on divorce that arose in the Christian Middle Ages, whereby marriage became “almost indissoluble”—this in contrast to antiquity, where “the frequency and easiness of divorce made the gratification of it of no great moment” (LJ (A) iii.20). In this manner, there was a shift in the “character and regard” given to love, and as a result, “the choice of the person was a matter which would have a great influence on the future happiness of the parties” (iii.22).<sup>12</sup> By contrast, in the ancient world love was “esteemed to be a very silly and ridiculous [passion], and such as was never talked of in a serious manner.” For this reason, there are “no poems of a serious nature grounded on that subject either amongst the Greeks or Romans,” whereas love eventually became “a respectable passion ... and accordingly makes the subject of all our publick entertainments, plays, operas, etc” (iii.22, 23).<sup>13</sup>

Thus, a love story applauded in eighteenth-century Paris would be ridiculed by or at least appear unaccountable to Homer’s audience. Though other thinkers observed the same difference between ancient and modern tragedies—Richard Hurd and Fontenelle, for instance—only Smith offered a socio-juridical explanation. The point to stress here is his sociological awareness that material changes can affect consciousness, a striking anticipation of Marx’s famous assertion that “[i]t is not the consciousness of men that determines their

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<sup>12</sup> Though Smith also observes that these same changes “gave the wife a more respectable character,” and at times appears to rehearse the (Scottish) Enlightenment narrative of the improved condition of women in modern societies, he expresses some ambivalence on the subject. He notes that although there was “little or no regard paid to women in the first state of society as objects of pleasure, yet there never was more regard paid them as rational creatures” (LJ(B)105). Smith makes it clear, then, that this is not a linear model of progress. For related discussions, see Chris Nyland and Maureen Harkin (“Missing Primitives”).

<sup>13</sup> Smith repeats this concisely in the report of 1766: “love which was formerly a ridiculous passion became more grave and respectable. As a proof of this it is worth our observation that no ancient tragedy turned on love, whereas now it is more respectable and influences all the public entertainments. This can be accounted for only by the changes of mankind” (LJ (B) 111).

existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness” (“Preface” 211).

This consciousness extends to the aesthetic domain. Taste is therefore subject to the same constitutive historical and legislative forces.

In the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Smith makes the perceptive claim that artists themselves effect changes in taste:

An eminent artist will bring about a considerable change in the established modes of each of those arts, and introduce a new fashion of writing, music, or architecture. As the dress of an agreeable man of high rank recommends itself, and how peculiar and fantastical soever, comes soon to be admired and imitated; so the excellencies of an eminent master recommend his peculiarities, and his manner becomes the fashionable style in the art which he practises. (V.1.7)

As examples, Smith notes that the “taste of the Italians in music and architecture has, within these fifty years, undergone a considerable change, from imitating the peculiarities of some eminent masters in each of those arts.” Similarly, Smith continues,

[i]n our own language, Mr. Pope and Dr. Swift have each of them introduced a manner different from what was practised before, into all works that are written in rhyme, the one in long verses, the other in short. The quaintness of Butler has given place to the plainness of Swift. The rambling freedom of Dryden, and the correct but often tedious and prosaic languor of Addison, are no longer the objects of imitation, but all long verses are now written after the manner of the nervous precision of Mr. Pope. (V.1.7)

Smith here equates literary arts and dress, once again denying a distinction between taste and mere fashion. He then adds memorably that “[a]fter the praise of refining the taste of a

nation, the highest eulogy, perhaps, which can be bestowed upon any author, is to say, that he *corrupted* it” (V.1.7, emphasis added). This was a highly unusual idea in 1759 (and seems to anticipate some of William Wordsworth’s remarks on taste).<sup>14</sup> Smith’s cognizance of changing tastes and of the historicity of taste is a significant advance over his peers. Indeed, “it is surprising,” writes Jones, that of all people “Hume did not consider more carefully changes of fashions in taste” (*Sentiments* 120).

Smith’s unspoken target is the popular “test of time” argument used by Addison, Hume, and Reynolds, among others. Reynolds, as we saw, asserts, “[w]hat has pleased, and continues to please, is likely to please again: hence are derived the rules of art, and on this immoveable foundation they must ever stand” (Discourse VII, 133), while Hume avers that “[t]he same Homer, who pleased at Athens and Rome two thousand years ago, is still admired at Paris and at London. All the changes of climate, government, religion, and language, have not been able to obscure his glory” (“Standard of Taste” 233). Smith,

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<sup>14</sup> Wordsworth attempts to explain the popularity of certain works over others, and concludes that not only are great poets rarely appreciated in their own time—a central tenet of Romantic ideology—but that the best poets actually create taste. In the supplementary essay to the 1815 Preface, Wordsworth writes, “every author, as far as he is great and at the same time *original*, has had the task of *creating* the taste by which he is to be enjoyed: so has it been, so will it continue to be ... [H]e will be called upon to clear and often to shape his own road.” Wordsworth nevertheless skewers Smith in the same document as “the worst critic, David Hume not excepted, that Scotland, a soil to which this sort of weed seems natural, has produced.” The editors of the Glasgow edition have not been able, seemingly, to account for the motivation of Wordsworth’s ire, but it makes sense when read in context.

Wordsworth is bemused by the lack of an initial readership of *Paradise Lost*, and then remarks, “[s]o strange indeed are the obliquities of admiration, that they whose opinions are much influenced by authority will often be tempted to think that there are no fixed principles in human nature for this art [poetry] to rest upon” (487). Given the context, Wordsworth is probably referring to the section of *Theory of Moral Sentiments* under discussion and objecting to Smith’s argument against a standard of taste, and not, as J.C. Bryce suggests, the apocryphal “interview” by Amicus in *The Bee*. Wordsworth’s modern editors have made a similar conclusion: “[s]omething like the opinion ascribed to Smith here may be found in his *Theory of Moral Sentiments*.... Wordsworth, by insisting that poetry is based on ‘fixed principles,’ appears to be contesting this view” (Owen and Smyser iii.93).

perhaps with Hume especially in mind, does not accept this idea. He not only demonstrates the contingency of taste, but its historicity, something his contemporaries (except for Ramsay) largely ignore. Whereas such thinkers insisted that the continued admiration for the greats—Homer, for instance—*must* demonstrate their greatness, Smith goes in the other direction, and argues that such exemplars merely obscure the contingency of literary fashion. Other thinkers who acknowledged historical and cultural relativism, by contrast, often did so only to reconcile any apparent discrepancies with a standard. His abrogation of the test of time argument is, further, a manifestation of his ambivalence towards the ancients, a theme that will recur in this dissertation.<sup>15</sup>

Unlike Addison, Dubos, Hume, Gerard, and others, Smith never prescribes a regimen of aesthetic experience. Most taste theorists offered a prescription for cultivating and improving one's taste, a true taste that would gain the sanction of the polite world. They often enjoined the reader to study the great works of the past, and to "practise" their taste. Pope, for instance, advises, "[b]e Homer's Works your Study, and Delight, / Read them by Day, and meditate by Night, / Thence form your Judgment, thence your Maxims bring.... Learn hence for Ancient Rules a just Esteem; / To copy Nature is to copy Them" (*Essay on Criticism* ll.124-26, 139-40). Burke recommends "extending our knowledge, by a steady attention to our object, and by frequent exercise" (*Enquiry* 77), while Hume makes it clear that "nothing tends further to encrease and improve this talent [taste], than *practice* in a

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<sup>15</sup> He not only denounced several Greek authors, but he also disparaged ancient rhetorical texts as "a very silly set of books and not at all instructive" (LRBL i.v.59). The final nail in the coffin of the test of time was probably Archibald Alison's *Essay on the Nature and Principles of Taste* (1790), whose associationist theory argues that our high estimation of the works of antiquity arise merely from our associations.

particular art, and the frequent survey or contemplation of a particular species of beauty.... So advantageous is practice to the discernment of beauty" ("Standard of Taste" 237).

Since Smith does not subscribe to the view that taste conforms to a pre-existing model, it makes sense that he does not offer an aesthetic regimen for its cultivation; indeed, as Ian Duncan observes, even Smith's *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres*, designed to instruct university students, "show little concern with the hierarchies of taste and canon-formation" (42). Even in his late essay on the imitative arts, which contains by far his most normative aesthetic statements, Smith exhorts the reader not to practise, but merely to be honest: "the next time you have an opportunity of surveying those out-of-fashion ornaments [topiary], endeavour only to let yourself alone, and to restrain for a few minutes the foolish passion for playing the critic" (I.14). Smith here does not, it should be noted, impugn the spectator with an incorrigible lack of taste or judgment.

Smith begins his discussion of taste in the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* with the (fine) arts and eventually settles on the natural world. He notes that custom and fashion "influence our judgments, in the same manner, with regard to the beauty of natural objects" (V.i.8).<sup>16</sup> Here Smith cites Claude Buffier's *Treatise on First Truths and the Source of our Judgments* (*Traité des premières vérités et de la source de nos jugemens*), a rarely cited eighteenth-century French philosophical text. In it, Buffier argues briefly that beauty is arbitrary, and the "middle form" is what constitutes beauty in different species: "[t]he most customary

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<sup>16</sup> This is perhaps an anticipation of Kant's strategy of attempting to avoid historicity in aesthetics by appealing to natural beauty. Kant writes that "[b]eautiful nature contains innumerable things about which we do not hesitate to require everyone's judgment to agree with our own, and can in fact expect such agreement without being wrong very often" (CJ 265). Of course, as Roger Scruton notes, "[n]othing is more time-bound and parochial in Kant than the interest in natural beauty.... Kant's aesthetics is a product of its time in the same way as the poems of Ossian and Rousseau.... For most people in most periods of history nature has been harsh and inhospitable" ("In Search" 238-39).

form, therefore, is in each species of things ... the most beautiful.” The same principle explains different views of cultural beauty: a fair skinned person would be a “deformity upon the coast of Guinea. Thick lips and a flat nose [there] are a beauty.” Smith agrees with Buffier on personal beauty. Not only does he cite him, but earlier in *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, he notes that a human being who had always lived in solitude “could no more think of ... the beauty or deformity of his own mind, than of the beauty or deformity of his own face.... Our first ideas of personal beauty and deformity, are drawn from the shape and appearance of others, not from our own” (TMS II.i.3-4). This passage makes it clear that Smith considers personal, human beauty to be largely a social construct.

The related issues of skin colour and differences in racial beauty had to be confronted and acknowledged in the period as they offered potentially contradictory evidence for a standard.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, “[w]ith global expansion, the test cases for universalism changed” between 1680 and 1780 (Festa and Carey 20), which resulted in a ““shock of the human new,”” “a shock of the human Other” (Withers 136).<sup>18</sup> Smith appears to follow a mainstream current in eighteenth-century thought on the subject of personal beauty—namely, that it is culturally or even racially relative. Many thinkers were compelled to concede the irrefutable relativity of personal beauty.<sup>19</sup> Voltaire, as we have already seen, notes in his *Dictionnaire Philosophique* that physical beauty is culturally and racially

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<sup>17</sup> See Roxann Wheeler’s *The Complexion of Race* for a nuanced discussion of the issue of complexion in the eighteenth century.

<sup>18</sup> Further, “Enlightenment encounters with the globe provided new and radical visions of humankind.... Understandings of human origin and of human difference as derived from classical learning and the Bible were challenged by the human diversity” (136).

<sup>19</sup> Bindman makes the intriguing yet not fully developed suggestion that “[r]ace was seen then essentially as a new category of human variety, and ... aesthetics played an important part in its emergence in the last quarter of the century” (11).

relative (“Beauty”). Despite maintaining the racially and culturally contingent nature of (personal) beauty, however, Voltaire (among others) nevertheless holds that skin colour or human beauty is not a true object of taste anyway. Likewise, Kames would conveniently dismiss skin colour as a thing of no importance, which “nature hath left indifferent,” noting that “a black skin upon a human being, is to us disagreeable; and a white skin probably no less so to a negro” (292-93).

Smith, though acknowledging the contingent nature of personal beauty, does not bracket off human beauty or skin colour as unimportant. Just as he avoids the gambit of partitioning true objects of taste from invalid ones, Smith here allows the ineluctable relativity of personal beauty as a significant fact that cannot be dismissed. This explains in part the unusual amount of space he devotes to Buffier, a writer no other British taste theorist in the century mentions—in fact, contemporary thinkers in *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, including Hume, are almost never mentioned, much less quoted.

Smith’s politics of taste in this context differs from that of many of his contemporaries. Other theorists acknowledged cultural or racial relativity—Voltaire, for instance—though as P.J. Marshall notes, “that appreciation of physical differences between races was an entirely subjective matter” was sounded “without much conviction” (240). Smith not only escapes this criticism, but in fact distinguishes himself from a current that that was far more ethnocentric, one that privileged white/European beauty. Georges-Louis Leclerc, Comte de Buffon, for instance, writes, “the most temperate climate ... produces the most handsome and beautiful men. It is from this climate that the ideas of the genuine colour of mankind, and of the various degrees of beauty, ought to be derived” (qtd. in Withers 147). Oliver Goldsmith, as both Wheeler and Gikandi have noted, confidently asserts in his *History of the*

*Earth* (1774) that the complexion of Europeans is “the most beautiful to the eye” (qtd. in Gikandi 227).<sup>20</sup> Burke famously offers an illustration of the blind boy whose sight was restored by Dr. Cheselden, and who “upon accidentally seeing a negro woman ... was struck with great horror at the sight” (IV.xv, 173), while denying that this occurred owing to any possible association of ideas.<sup>21</sup> Smith distinguishes himself from this current by resisting this privileging of European beauty while simultaneously eschewing the strategy of placing skin colour (and the problem it presents for a universal standard) outside the realm of taste.

Smith’s account avoids the Eurocentrism of such thinkers, a circumstance that also ties in with his criticism of European aesthetic practices:

In China if a lady’s foot is so large as to be fit to walk upon, she is regarded as a monster of ugliness. Some of the savage nations in North-America tie four boards round the heads of their children, and thus squeeze them, while the bones are tender and gristly, into a form that is almost perfectly square. Europeans are astonished at the absurd barbarity of this practice, to which some missionaries have imputed the singular stupidity of those nations among whom it prevails. But when they condemn those savages, they do not reflect that the ladies in Europe had, till within these very few years, been endeavouring, for near a century past, to squeeze the beautiful

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<sup>20</sup> On the Continent, J.J. Winckelmann considered the horizontal eyes of East Asian people “an offense against beauty,” while Johann Kaspar Lavater, who would extend his inquiry on human aesthetics to physiognomy, insisted on a standard of human beauty, one that is a sign of God’s wisdom: “as none except Negros admire a flat nose ... it is evident that nothing but the tyranny of an ancient national and hereditary prejudice could have extinguished or altered ... the natural sentiment of the beautiful” (qtd. in Bindman 89, 102).

<sup>21</sup> Commenting on this episode, David Lloyd notes that Burke’s putative universalism “falters when the universal eye of the white subject encounters the black body that embodies the difference that denies it that universality. The black body becomes the abyss into which the claims of universality, founded as they are on its difference, inevitably founder” (101).



roundness of their natural shape into a square form of the same kind. And that, notwithstanding the many distortions and diseases which this practice was known to occasion, custom had rendered it agreeable among some of the most civilized nations which, perhaps, the world ever beheld. (V.1.9)

Smith chides Europeans who would decry the “barbarity” of the Native American and Chinese practices, reminding them that European women engaged in similar ones until fairly recently.<sup>22</sup> Thus, Smith is more aesthetically tolerant than many of his contemporaries, a circumstance that ties into his tolerance in general of other cultures and traditions.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Smith was not prejudiced as many of his contemporary theorists were, and was in fact more tolerant of other societies and cultures (Pitts 26; Fleischacker “Kultur” 6). His attitude contrasts strikingly with that of Hume, especially in the notorious footnote that was added to his essay “Of National Characters”:

I am apt to suspect the negroes to be naturally inferior to the whites. There scarcely ever was a civilized nation of that complexion, nor even any individual eminent either in action or speculation. No ingenious manufactures amongst them, no arts, no sciences.... In Jamaica indeed, they talk of one negroe as a man of parts and learning; but it is likely he is admired for slender accomplishments, like a parrot, who speaks a few words plainly. (208)

Despite some recognition of cultural relativity, Hume’s ethnocentrism privileges some cultures over others. By contrast, Smith, who bemoans the existence of slavery on economic *and* moral grounds, was far more tolerant, and denies the existence of natural differences among human beings:

The difference of natural *talents* in different men is, in reality, much less than we are aware of; and the very different genius which appears to distinguish men of different professions, when grown up to maturity, is not upon many occasions so much the cause, as the effect of the division of labour. The difference between the most dissimilar characters, between a philosopher and a common street porter, for example, seems to arise not so much from nature, as from habit, custom, and education. (WN I.ii.4)

The unprejudiced Smith further counters Hume by arguing that any ostensible national characters are merely the product of custom and the material conditions of the society. “Of all the nations in Europe,” Smith writes, “the Dutch, the most commercial, are the most faithful to their word.... This is not at all to be imputed to national character, as some pretend. There is no natural reason why an Englishman or a Scotchman should not be as punctual in performing agreements as a Dutchman” (LJ (B) 326-27). Smith is clearly convinced by his denial of innate differences as it recurs throughout his corpus (ED 26-27, LJ(A)vi. 47-48). It is the division of labour that is responsible for perceivable differences of character and abilities, which Smith extends to national characters.

<sup>23</sup> Indeed, Jennifer Pitts notes that Smith was “of all the Scottish historians...the most consistently respectful of precommercial societies as well as the most consistently skeptical about European claims to superiority,” even

At the conclusion of his convincing attack on taste, however, Smith appears to recant and express some reservations about his conclusion that taste is largely relative:

I cannot, however, be induced to believe that our sense even of external beauty is founded altogether on custom. The utility of any form, its fitness for the useful purposes for which it was intended, evidently recommends it, and renders it agreeable to us, independent of custom. Certain colours are more agreeable than others, and give more delight to the eye the first time it ever beholds them. A smooth surface is more agreeable than a rough one. Variety is more pleasing than a tedious undiversified uniformity. Connected variety, in which each new appearance seems to be introduced by what went before it, and in which all the adjoining parts seem to have some natural relation to one another, is more agreeable than a disjointed and disorderly assemblage of unconnected objects. (TMS V.1.9)<sup>24</sup>

This retreat is curious for several reasons, though it must not be emphasized at the expense of what has come before, as some readers have done.<sup>25</sup> First, Smith's objection appears somewhat perfunctory: he spends six pages making a compelling case for the contingency of taste—including explicitly citing and paraphrasing the “ingenious” Buffier at length, a privilege he grants to no other contemporary writer in the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*—and

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in spite of his stadial theory (26). Fleischacker similarly notes that “Smith is one of the most respectful of 18<sup>th</sup> [sic] century writers towards other societies” (“Kultur” 6).

<sup>24</sup> These exceptions Smith lists are fairly minor and can be reconciled to his aesthetic system. I will return to this in Chapter Five.

<sup>25</sup> Ian Ross briefly notes that “[a]fter entertaining to some degree the thesis of Claude Buffier ... Smith stands on the bedrock of utilitarianism also found in Hume's aesthetics” (*Life* 177). Fudge argues for Smith's aesthetic naturalism, but his account largely ignores Smith's preceding comments in Part V. Cannon Smith writes that “after reporting Buffier's theory in great detail and illustrating it from certain conventional features of French and English versification, [Smith] concludes unfavorably as to its general application” (144).

concludes with a retraction in the form of a swift single paragraph. Second, in the first part of his discussion, he speaks of “object[s] of taste,” while in the concluding paragraph, he silently shifts the terms of the argument since he refers there to “external beauty” and writes, “I cannot admit that custom is the sole principle of *beauty*” (V.1.9, emphasis added). As a result, he leaves the earlier discussion of objects of *taste* largely untouched, and thus his concluding objection does not attenuate the force of his previous arguments. Here we get the first suggestion that Smith makes a distinction between taste and beauty or more robust aesthetic judgments, a distinction I will revisit in Chapter Five. Finally, he nearly retracts his own retraction by concluding,

though I cannot admit that custom is the sole principle of beauty, yet I can so far allow the truth of this ingenious system [i.e., Buffier’s] as to grant, that there is scarce any one external form so beautiful as to please, if quite contrary to custom and unlike whatever we have been used to in that particular species of things: or so deformed as not to be agreeable, if custom uniformly supports it, and habituates us to see it in every single individual of the kind. (V.1.9)<sup>26</sup>

Smith begins the following section by asserting “[t]here is, perhaps, no form of external objects, how absurd and fantastical soever, to which custom will not reconcile us, or which fashion will not render even agreeable” (V.2.1).

These arguments, followed by their qualifications and concessions, expose a tension in Smith’s aesthetic thought, one that manifests itself as an increasing *desire* for aesthetic normativity. In a sense, he wants to have it both ways. This tension should come as no

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<sup>26</sup> This possibly influenced Kames, who grudgingly conceded that “[s]o far has custom power to change the nature of things, and to make an object originally disagreeable, take on an opposite appearance” (293).

surprise since, as John Harrison notes, the period struggled to reconcile a belief in universal standards with an emerging subjectivity:

strict neo-classic canons of taste continued to coexist with the increasing emphasis on taste as a subjective phenomenon until well into the latter part of the century, a marriage of convenience that could not indefinitely survive the dynamic tensions and eventually gave way, in artistic terms, to the full-blown subjectivism and free expression of Romanticism.... Adam Smith's work reflects, perhaps indirectly and without a specific concern for aesthetic matters, the tensions that existed and the changes that were taking place. (99)

Smith, then, argues for a contingency of taste, but he is perhaps not always comfortable with the idea, which explains the brief objections that punctuate his argument. Still, Smith's "retraction" reveals, at the very least, an anxiety with his own conclusions. There is certainly a normative strain in his aesthetics, one that attempts to combat the relativist or subjectivist implications of his ideas. It becomes more pronounced towards the end of his life, even though the remarks from Part V remained unchanged throughout all six editions Smith revised.

## II

So far we have examined what Smith says about taste as it manifests itself in changing fashions and styles; he does not, however, end there. Previous taste theorists had often begun by positing some sort of faculty of taste, and describing it and its mechanisms, hoping thereby to demonstrate some sort of universality and uniformity. Hutcheson, Smith's "never

to be forgotten” teacher (*Corr.* 274, 16 Nov. 1787, 309), posits an aesthetic-moral sense analogous to the external senses that is pleased immediately and prior to reflection, a sentiment largely shared by Addison. Other taste theorists would often set out, however tentatively, by attempting a definition of taste. Burke, in his supplemental essay to the *Enquiry*, after bemoaning the fact that taste is an “aerial faculty, which seems too volatile to endure even the chains of a definition,” offers the following tentative definition: “I mean by the word Taste no more than that faculty, or those faculties of the mind which are affected with, or which form a judgment of the works of imagination and the elegant arts” (63, 65).<sup>27</sup>

Despite his interest in the subject, Smith never offers a definition of taste, perhaps because he thought it arbitrary and contingent enough to begin with and thus did not warrant a definition. The closest we get is a description of taste at the end of Part IV of the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*. Here Smith describes the moral reflections of a person who has grown up outside society:

If it was possible ... that a person should grow up to manhood without any communication with society, his own actions might, notwithstanding, be agreeable or disagreeable to him on account of their tendency to his happiness or disadvantage....  
*As these perceptions, however, are merely a matter of taste, and have all the feebleness and delicacy of that species of perceptions, upon the justness of which what is properly called taste is founded, they probably would not be much attended to by one in this solitary and miserable condition.* (IV.2.12, emphasis added)

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<sup>27</sup> The issues and tensions of Burke’s account are beyond the scope of this dissertation, but it is worth noting that his definition is a deferral, since to understand it, sensation, imagination, and judgment need to be considered in the process. Indeed, Burke considerably modifies his views and inserts judgment into the mix in the supplemental “Introduction on Taste” added to the second edition.

This is the closest we get to a definition of taste in Smith, and it is largely pejorative; it insists on the feebleness and nugatory nature of taste. The passage is significant as it distinguishes taste—merely private and agreeable—from other more robust (aesthetic) judgments, as has been noted. Here, Smith anticipates Kant, who a generation later in his *Critique of Judgment* would distinguish between the judgment of taste and the agreeable: “[a]s regards the *agreeable* everyone acknowledges that his judgment, which he bases on a private feeling and by which he says that he likes some object, is by the same token confined to his own person.” Thus, the proper statement concerning such a liking should be “[i]t is agreeable to *me*” (CJ 212).<sup>28</sup> Judgments on the agreeable, then, “are merely private, whereas judgments about the beautiful are put forward as having general validity (as being public)” (214). In other words, the beautiful—and its proper judgment of taste—“requires the same liking from everyone” (212). Smith performs a similar operation in the passage above, except that he does not ascribe any legitimacy to the “judgment” of taste, which corresponds to Kant’s agreeable. Taste, then, for Smith, is always *mere* taste.

Though his account looks forward to Kant, Smith must have had in mind previous formulations of taste. Voltaire, for instance, defines it as “a quick discernment, a sudden perception, which, like the sensation of the palate, anticipates reflexion” (“Essay on Taste” 213). Similarly, a British periodical source defines taste as “a Metaphor to express that Judgment each Man forms to himself of those Things, which are not contain’d in any certain Rules, and which admit of no Demonstration.... [H]ence arises the Propriety of the Metaphor, because Taste in every thing is undetermined and Personal, as in the Palate” (*Common Sense*, Feb 11, 1738, 9). Smith objects to accounts such as these that ascribe any

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<sup>28</sup> Numbers refer to the standard *Akademie* edition pagination.

legitimacy to taste in these formulations. It is at least partly the immediacy of taste, as the metaphor suggests, that Smith wishes to resist.

### III

Smith's discussion of the contingency and relativity of taste would seem to entail problems for his ethics; after all, ethics and aesthetics were inextricably bound for much of the eighteenth century. Shaftesbury, for instance, asks, "[w]ho can admire the outward beauties and not recur instantly to the inward, which are the most real and essential, the most naturally affecting and of the highest pleasure as well as profit and advantage?" (*Characteristics* 416). Francis Hutcheson's *An Inquiry into the Original of Our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue*, the title of whose work makes the analogy explicit, begins with an investigation of aesthetics that leads, in the second half of the treatise, to moral philosophy, and he ultimately argues that our sense of beauty and morals is analogous.

Later thinkers maintained this association. In his essay on taste, Hume begins by discussing a standard of taste for moral sentiments, and then by analogy he argues that "it is natural for us to seek" a similar standard in aesthetics. Kames follows this logic when he wryly comments that if *de gustibus* is actually taken seriously, then "there is no ground of censure against any one, if such a one there be, who prefers Blackmore before Homer, selfishness before benevolence, or cowardice before magnanimity" (719). Kames later adds that we have a "conviction of a common nature or standard and of its perfection," one that "accounts clearly for that remarkable conception we have, of a right and a wrong sense or taste in morals. It accounts not less clearly for the conception we have of a right and a wrong sense or taste in the fine arts" (722). In fact, he opens his *magnum opus* with an address to

the king, in which he argues for the congruity between aesthetics and ethics. “By uniting different ranks in the same elegant pleasures,” Kames writes, the fine arts “promote benevolence: by cherishing love of order, they enforce submission to government” and are not useful merely for “private amusement,” but for “their beneficial influence in society.” Kames sees the aesthetic, in fact, as a corrective to “opulence” and “luxury” (3-4). It is precisely this analogy, however, that occasioned so much an anxiety since, in Flynn’s words, these thinkers “recognized that relativism in aesthetic questions might lead to anarchy in moral matters” (8). These theorists thus felt an urgent impetus to establish a standard of taste.

Like his forebears Smith follows this tradition, as Dan Lyons, John Harrison, and Robert Fudge have illustrated, the latter going so far as to (justifiably) describe the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* as Smith’s “aesthetic morality” (133). Indeed, the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* is not only informed by aesthetics but is itself aesthetic. Like Hutcheson, Smith begins his discussion in Part V with aesthetics and then settles on ethics. Given the clear analogy between taste and morals, an analogy that becomes ever more explicit in Part V, one might wonder whether what Smith says about taste affects his argument about morality—that is to say, that morals are relative or at least contingent on historical circumstances. Smith grants this to an extent—witness his discussion of the toleration of infanticide in ancient Athens: “the murder of new-born infants, was a practice allowed of in almost all the states of Greece, even among the polite and civilized Athenians ... [and] was regarded without blame or censure” owing to “uninterrupted custom” (TMS V.2.15).

However, the ultimate purpose of Part V is to demonstrate that, despite the congruity of the two, morals are in fact different from aesthetics. In a sense, Smith is trying to have it



both ways since, like Shaftesbury, Hutcheson, and Hume, he describes virtue as an object of beauty (“Virtue is excellence, something uncommonly great and beautiful”; “the natural beauty of virtue” TMS I.i.5.6, VII.ii.2.13). At this most precarious point in the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* when it appears that the analogy will prove troublesome, however, Smith divorces the two, a significant move since it was precisely here that his forbears and contemporaries would most firmly make the analogy between ethics and aesthetics. Despite the freedom and autonomy of the aesthetic realm Smith so convincingly illustrates, there is an irreducible core of morality, a point he confidently asserts, and which finds echoes in the present day:<sup>29</sup> “the characters and conduct of a Nero, or a Claudius, are what no custom will ever reconcile us to, what no fashion will ever render agreeable; but the one will always be the object of dread and hatred; the other of scorn and derision” (TMS V.2.1).

Further, despite his telling remarks on the toleration of infanticide in ancient Greece, he insists by way of conclusion that “[n]o society could subsist a moment, in which the usual strain of men’s conduct and behaviour was of a piece with the horrible practice I have just now mentioned” (V.2.16). Smith elaborates by cementing the distinction between the two:

[t]he principles of the imagination, upon which our sense of beauty depends, are of a very nice and delicate nature, and may easily be altered by habit and education: but the sentiments of moral approbation and disapprobation, are founded on the strongest and most vigorous passions of human nature; and though they may be somewhat warped, cannot be entirely perverted. (V.2.1)

In other words, Smith’s insistence on the constitutive role of custom in taste does not translate to the moral realm. Indeed, D.D. Raphael notes, “while following Hutcheson and

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<sup>29</sup> One thinks, for instance, of Sam Harris’s *The Moral Landscape* (2010).

Hume in allying ethics with aesthetics, Adam Smith departs from them in perceiving that the alliance has its limits” (*Impartial* 93).<sup>30</sup>

Though Smith enforces the distinction between ethics and aesthetics in Part V, he anticipates it fairly early on:

I can much more easily overlook the want of this correspondence of sentiments with regard to such indifferent objects as concern neither me nor my companion, than with regard to what interests me so much as the misfortune that has befallen me, or the injury that has been done me. Though you despise that picture, or that poem, or even that system of philosophy, which I admire, there is little danger of our quarrelling upon that account. Neither of us can reasonably be much interested about them.

They ought all of them to be matters of great indifference to us both.... Though your judgments in matters of speculation, though your sentiments in matters of taste, are quite opposite to mine, I can easily overlook this opposition. (I.i.4.6)

This passage does two things. First, it demonstrates Smith’s distinction between moral and non-moral judgment. Second, it supports his later statements concerning the arbitrary nature of taste. Smith’s passage above suggests we are never uneasy when it comes to matters of mere taste, and this is because there is no standard, no common sense, no awareness of a common standard from which one ought never to deviate—this in contrast to Kames, who describes the anxiety present in all people of conforming to a vaguely felt human standard. In moral matters, agreement and sympathy are paramount for Smith, but it is of no great

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<sup>30</sup> I revisit this discussion in Chapter Six.

concern if it does not occur in less important aesthetic matters.<sup>31</sup> Commenting on Smith's passage, Paul Guyer suggests that, in fact, "the realm of taste affords us a welcome outlet for our appreciation of the diversity rather than similarity of fellows" (*Values* 66-67).

Thus, one central reason that Smith does not feel the same impulse to legislate taste by establishing a standard is that he did not feel that a failure to find a standard in taste would entail a corresponding failure in ethics. It is tempting to ascribe this sentiment to Smith's optimism, but it must be noted here, if only briefly, that Smith quietly evinced greater aesthetic normativity towards the end of his life, and his final and most substantial additions to the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* in 1790 demonstrate caution, if not outright pessimism, concerning the relation between aesthetics and ethics. It might be said that for Smith, morality is aesthetic, but aesthetics is not moral. As Smith demonstrates later, in fact, aesthetics can be amoral or even anti-moral, a theme that will emerge in the next two chapters, the first of which examines Smith's insight into the relation between socioeconomic class and taste.

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<sup>31</sup> A present day reader may respectfully quarrel with Smith here, as aesthetic disagreements have in fact been the cause of passionate conflicts—in popular responses to film critics, for instance.

## Chapter Three

### The ‘Scandal of Taste’ Revisited:<sup>1</sup> Smith’s Insight into the Class-Hierarchical Foundations of Taste

As we have seen, Smith entertains a relativism and contingency of taste. Although other writers of the Scottish Enlightenment acknowledged the role of culture and custom in taste,<sup>2</sup> Smith pushes this inquiry further, and did not attempt to reconcile aberrations to a standard. This chapter will examine some of the implications of Smith’s remarks, especially his investigation into perceived determinants of value and his insight into the relation that obtains between socioeconomic class and taste. According to Smith, as we will see, the contingency of taste is further marked by its *predictable* susceptibility to and inextricability from the influence of class. As with his discussion on the putative standard of taste, Smith goes further than his contemporaries in assigning class a constitutive role in aesthetic judgment. There is, as we will see, a determining relation between class, taste, and sympathy.

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<sup>1</sup> I borrow this title from Richard Shusterman’s essay, “The Scandal of Taste,” which I discuss in this chapter.

<sup>2</sup> This “recognition” among the Scottish thinkers should not be exaggerated. Christopher Berry notes that the anthropology and sociology of the century

seem to suggest a cultural relativism.... However, Enlightenment thinkers were unwilling to follow that suggestion. It is true that there was some critical mileage to be got out of the variety of religious and sexual practices as a way of taunting traditional thinkers and casting doubt on the solidity of traditional institutions. But as Montesquieu himself put it in the Preface to *The Spirit of the Laws* (1748) ‘amidst the infinite diversity of laws and mores [mankind] were not led by their fancies alone’ [xlili]. Social institutions are not entirely the fruit of locally variable whim; there are universally applicable standards.

Furthermore, these thinkers, including the Scots, did not “hesitate to label some practices ‘superstitions’ and convey by that anything other than hostility” (75). Andrew Hemingway notes that each Scottish Enlightenment theorist “recognizes historical variation but asserts a supra-historical standard” (26).

As mentioned briefly in the first chapter, rising levels of wealth in the eighteenth century and the impact this had on social distinctions was one factor behind the increasing anxiety over taste. Indeed, especially in the period during which Smith flourished (c. 1760-1780), the relative wealth and well-being of even the lower classes in England became the stuff of legend; it impressed observers from Georg Lichtenberg of Gottingen, to the Russian visitor Nikolai Karamzin.<sup>3</sup> Eighteenth-century England in fact witnessed wealth that was “unprecedented in the depth to which it penetrated the lower reaches of society” (McKendrick 23). The increase in social mobility and purchasing power had significant consequences for class relations. The influence of moneyed wealth led to an articulation of concerns that social boundaries were being dissolved. This anxiety is voiced by the memorably querulous Matthew Bramble in Tobias Smollett’s *Humphry Clinker* (1771), who complains about

the general tide of luxury, which hath overspread the nation, and swept away all, even the very dregs of the people. Every upstart of fortune, harnessed in the trappings of the mode, presents himself at Bath, as in the very focus of observation – Clerks and factors from the East Indies, loaded with the spoil of plundered provinces; planters, negro-drivers, and hucksters from our American plantations, enriched they know not how.... [M]en of low birth, and no breeding, have found themselves suddenly translated into a state of affluence, unknown to former ages.... Knowing no other criterion of greatness, but the ostentation of wealth, they discharge their

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<sup>3</sup> In 1789, he observed of London, “[h]ow different this is from Paris! There vastness and filth, here simplicity and astonishing cleanliness; there wealth and poverty in continued contrast, here a general appearance of sufficiency; there palaces out of which crawls poverty, here tiny brick cottages out of which health and contentment walk with an air of dignity and tranquillity—lord and artisan almost indistinguishable in their immaculate dress” (qtd in McKendrick, 80).

affluence without taste or conduct through every channel of the most absurd extravagance. (65)

It is no coincidence that Matthew Bramble denies this new moneyed class any sense of taste. Taste, in fact, was “a way of reasserting the importance of social distinction” (Day 180).

Despite such sentiments as Bramble’s, one complaint levelled against many of the taste theorists of the eighteenth century is that they ignore or, more accurately, elide social-hierarchical considerations. Shusterman finds this to be especially true of Hume and Kant. He argues that both thinkers ignore

a central dimension and dilemma.... which their theories instinctively tried to avoid or minimize, if not suppress. This dimension is the social and class-hierarchical foundation of aesthetic judgment; and its apparently inevitable introduction of difference, distinction, and conventional prejudice sharply contrasts with and threatens the idea of a natural uniformity of feeling or response.... [T]he full force of the social dimension of taste and the contradictions it presents for their attempts to justify a standard of taste and vindicate the normative necessity and universality of aesthetic judgment is never openly and adequately confronted. It is, rather, evasively swept under the carpet with the aid of some vague nostrum of foundational universality, of natural human uniformity, essentially free from social determination and distinction. (96-97)

For theorists such as Hume, “taste is not in any significant sense socially and historically conditioned,” and its judgments “are thus accorded the status of natural and necessary facts rather than seen as the contingent and alterable product of social dynamics and history”

(Shusterman 98). Though Shusterman confines his remarks to Hume and Kant,<sup>4</sup> the same may be said for almost any taste theorist of the century.

Similarly, Korsmeyer has argued that the putative universalism in theories of taste was an appealing “fiction.” Such theories claim a

universal ability to appreciate art that expands the privileges of good taste to a small elite; yet, at the same time, the exercise of taste is effectively limited to a class of people who have the leisure to develop the refinement of their perceptions.... [T]aste really describes appreciation for the accepted canon of art that perpetuates the cultural hegemony of an elite.... [W]hat appears to be an exercise of common dispositions is the acceptance of values as one’s own that mimic and thereby confirm social privilege. (“Taste” 360-61)

Although theorists ostensibly argued for some kind of classless aesthetic universalism, their theories do not successfully make the case.<sup>5</sup>

Thus, eighteenth-century theorists who did not explicitly acknowledge class nonetheless did so implicitly, ultimately privileging bourgeois, educated taste—that is to say, that of their own class. This elision is, as Shusterman has noted, more a case of deliberate suppression than mere ignorance. Despite this silence or elision, however, these theories of taste “are

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<sup>4</sup> David Lloyd makes the interesting point that the sublime for Kant too “is predicated on the development in the individual of a certain level of cultivation.... For Kant, the unmediated confrontation with the sublime leaves the savage or the peasant overwhelmed by the abysmal terror of the phenomenon that exceeds the imagination” (91-92). Indeed, Kant writes that “what is called sublime by us, having been prepared through culture, comes across as merely repellent to a person who is uncultured” (CJ 265).

<sup>5</sup> Bohls similarly observes that “eighteenth-century aesthetic discourses all play a pattern of excluding or rejecting material particularity,” which occurs also in moral philosophy, such as Smith’s (17). The aesthetic subject was constructed “through the exclusion of practical interests, needs, and desires” (30).

variously confronted, disturbed, or haunted by the presence of an other, variously identified as uneducated, corrupt, foreign, or feminine taste,” which “runs through the whole ‘standard of taste’ argument” (Harkin “Theorizing” 172). This confrontation with vulgar taste sometimes manifested itself, when it did explicitly, through a process Herrnstein Smith has aptly described as the “pathologizing of the Other” (38). For most theorists, the notion that the taste of the lower classes was somehow deficient and not even worth discussing was so obvious that it did not bear iteration; they would often make passing remarks on it. Joseph Addison, for instance, casually notes that “[a] Man of Polite Imagination, is let into a great many Pleasures that the Vulgar are not capable of receiving” and “looks upon the World, as it were, in another Light, and discovers in it a Multitude of Charms, that conceal themselves from the generality of Mankind” (No. 411, 369), while Joshua Reynolds adds that “we know that the more low, illiterate, and vulgar any person is, the less he will be disposed to make these allowances [in the theatre], and of course to be deceived by any imitation” (Discourse XIII 239). Even Dubos, who is more egalitarian in preferring public opinion over that of artists or cabals of critics, enacts a class distinction that inheres in his formulation of the public: “I do not mean the lower class of people by the public capable of passing judgment on poems and pictures and of deciding their excellence. The word public is applicable here to such persons only, as have acquired some lights, either by reading or by being conversant with the world” (II 245).<sup>6</sup> Burke, for all his putative universalism, reintroduces privilege and education in the second edition of his *Enquiry*: “[t]he politics of the *Enquiry* is the politics of the aristocratic and cultural elite. For all that Burke insists on the universal nature of our ideas of the beautiful and the sublime, and seems to equate Don Bellianis with Virgil, not for

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<sup>6</sup> For some of the tensions in Dubos, see Dabney Townsend’s discussion in *Hume’s Aesthetic Theory*.



a moment does he really put the ignorant and the educated on a level” (Lock “Politics” 137-38).<sup>7</sup>

A few thinkers, however, did openly acknowledge and confront the influence of class on taste, though they tend to bring up the issue only to denigrate vulgar taste—to argue, in fact, that the lower classes have no taste at all. Lord Kames offers a useful illustration, and makes the class distinction unequivocal:

[t]hose who depend for food on bodily labour, are totally void of taste; of such a taste at least as can be of use in the fine arts. This consideration bars the greater part of mankind; and of the remaining part, many by a corrupted taste are unqualified for voting. The common sense of mankind must then be confined to the few that fall not under these exceptions. (726)<sup>8</sup>

Though he draws attention to class and, as Harkin has observed, “has the virtue at least of requiring that he then provide his reader with some sketch of just how these lower-class readers and spectators ... participate in aesthetic experience” (“Theorizing” 182-83), Kames ultimately has recourse to a providential wisdom that ossifies tastes and social relations:

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<sup>7</sup> Lock continues: “[p]hysical sensations and even natural imaginative responses may be nearly the same in all, but judgment and reflection give superiority to the educated class” (137-138). Furniss suggests that Burke’s supplemental essay on taste “seems designed to limit the egalitarian impetus inadvertently opened up by his formulation of the sublime,” and that he “reintroduces rationality in order to distinguish the man of taste from the common labourer” (66).

<sup>8</sup> Kames goes so far as to assert that those who are “addicted to the grosser amusements of gaming, eating, drinking ... pronounce in favour of the more elegant pleasures, and they invariably approve those who have a more refined taste, being ashamed of their own as low and sensual.” This is owing to “the authority of the common standard with respect to the dignity of human nature” which “even upon the most groveling souls, is so vigorous, as to prevail over self-partiality,” which makes “them despise their own taste compared with the more elevated taste of others” (723).

it is necessary that the different branches of business, whether more or less agreeable, be filled with hands: a taste too refined would obstruct that plan; for it would crowd some employments, leaving others, no less useful, totally neglected. In our present condition, lucky it is that the plurality are not delicate in their choice, but fall in readily with the occupations, pleasures, food, and company, that fortune throws in their way. (720)

Here Kames seems to anticipate (uncritically) Bourdieu's remark that "art and cultural consumption ... fulfil a social function of legitimating social differences" (7).

Alexander Gerard seems even more concerned with the aesthetic responses of lower class subjects; in fact, as Harkin observes, he is anxious that lower-class auditors and spectators are "too easily affected by what they see or hear, offering no resistance to texts" ("Theorizing" 177). Gerard speaks of objects "gross and coarse, which vulgar minds pursue with ardour," and concludes that "[s]avages have a grossness both of taste and of passion, which distinguishes them from civilized nations. The vulgar in every nation are distinguished, by the same circumstance, from the polite" (200). Similarly, he contends that "[a] very sorry ballad, or the wildest flights of ungoverned fancy are admired by the vulgar: but nothing inferior to the regular invention and masterly execution of *Homer* can fully satisfy a perfect taste" (117-118). In the supplement to the third edition of his essay that appeared twenty-one years after the original, Gerard adds that "[i]n the bulk of mankind," the powers of taste

receive no culture: engrossed by attention to the necessities of life, attached to pursuits remote from the pleasures of the imagination, or by some other means deprived of opportunities of exerting the internal senses, their taste remains wholly

unimproved; or rather the elements of taste which nature implanted in their souls, are extinguished, as seed, by being buried so deep as to prevent its vegetating, is corrupted and lost. (204-205).<sup>9</sup>

The point so far is that social class, either as an absent presence or an explicit threat, was a problem for taste theorists, and those who discuss class explicitly as a determining factor of taste do so *only* insofar as it affects the lower classes; the taste of the privileged was not questioned, since it was deemed natural. These theorists invoke socioeconomic class only to explain away the nettlesome vagaries of taste that conceal a true standard.

## I

Smith appears to be the only eighteenth-century theorist who escapes Shusterman's criticism. Unlike his peers, he makes no pretensions to universalism; he never suppressed or elided class in his analyses. As we will see, Smith anticipates the "sociology of taste," and long before Thorstein Veblen, Georg Simmel, and Pierre Bourdieu, he argued for a determining relation between class and taste. Smith not only acknowledges class as a factor in the establishment of taste, he in fact argues that it is a significant determinant of value. Contrary to most of his fellow theorists, Smith does not focus on taste in lower-class subjects, which was a strategy they used to account for aberrations in their systems that would otherwise impugn the idea of a standard. On the contrary, perhaps owing to his experience as an economic theorist, Smith focuses squarely on the taste of the privileged

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<sup>9</sup> In fairness to Gerard, however, his tone is not one of condescension; rather, he acknowledges that many people simply do not have the opportunity of practising and cultivating their taste: "[o]ne who has never had access to study the works of the great masters in painting or sculpture, will naturally be diffident of his own taste in these arts, disposed to pay a deference to that of others, who have had superior opportunities" (217).

class. What makes Smith remarkable here is his recognition of the social and historic dimensions of taste, and especially his recognition of the contingency of “polished” or “correct” taste itself.<sup>10</sup> Smith, on the contrary, confronts this troublesome issue head-on and is not afraid to question the prevailing orthodoxy.

These insights of Smith should come as no surprise, since he raises issues of class in important ways during his discussion of sympathy in *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (even in the very first edition):

the condition of the great.... is the very state which, in all our waking dreams and idle reveries, we had sketched out to ourselves as the final object of all our desires. We feel, therefore, a peculiar sympathy with the satisfaction of those who are in it. We favour all their inclinations, and forward all their wishes. What pity, we think, that any thing should spoil and corrupt so agreeable a situation! ... Every calamity that befalls them, every injury that is done to them, excites in the breast of the spectator ten times more compassion and resentment than he would have felt, had the same thing happened to other men. (I.iii.2.2)

Sympathy, then, is itself from the outset characterized by a partiality for certain social subjects over others based merely on socioeconomic status.<sup>11</sup> Smith goes on to connect this partiality with the prevalence of one taste over another:

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<sup>10</sup> Harkin observes, the “cultural dominance of the bourgeoisie prematurely suppresses the possibility of class-based and other differences of response that is present as a problem, and at times a real threat, in some of the most compelling works of mid-eighteenth century British aesthetics” (“Theorizing” 173).

<sup>11</sup> For this reason, Bohls’s argument that Smith is “especially concerned to suppress” social inequality, bodily appetites (“especially sexual passion”) and “femininity” is partly inaccurate (41).

[t]he graceful, the easy, and commanding manners of the great, joined to the usual richness and magnificence of their dress, give a grace to the very form which they happen to bestow upon it. As long as they continue to use this form, it is connected in our imaginations with the idea of something that is genteel and magnificent, and though in itself it should be indifferent, it seems, on account of this relation, to have something about it that is genteel and magnificent too. As soon as they drop it, it loses all the grace, which it had appeared to possess before, and being now used only by the inferior ranks of people, seems to have something of their meanness and awkwardness. (V.1.3)<sup>12</sup>

Smith amplifies this observation in the final edition of *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, where his language is more vigorous:

It is from our disposition to admire, and consequently to imitate, the rich and the great, that they are enabled to set, or to lead what is called the fashion. Their dress is the fashionable dress; the language of their conversation, the fashionable style; their air and deportment, the fashionable behaviour. Even their vices and follies are fashionable.... Many a poor man places his glory in being thought rich, without considering that the duties (if one may call such follies by so very venerable a name) which that reputation imposes upon him, must soon reduce him to beggary, and

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<sup>12</sup> This passage possibly influenced Kames, who three years later wrote: “the respect and esteem, which the great, the powerful, the opulent, naturally command, are in some measure communicated to their dress, to their manners, and to all their connections: and it is this communication of properties, which, prevailing even over the natural taste of beauty, helps to give currency to what is called *the fashion*” (*Elements of Criticism* 54).

render his situation still more unlike that of those whom he admires and imitates, than it had been originally. (I.iii.3.7)

We sympathize, according to Smith, with those above us in the socioeconomic hierarchy, and desire what they want. Smith pursued this train of thought in *Wealth of Nations*, published nearly twenty years later. There, he observes that in the eyes of the rich,

the merit of an object which is in any degree either useful or beautiful, is greatly enhanced by its scarcity, or by the great labour which it requires to collect any considerable quantity of it, a labour which nobody can afford to pay but themselves. Such objects they are willing to purchase at a higher price than things much more beautiful and useful, but more common.... With the greater part of rich people, the chief enjoyment of riches consists in the parade of riches, which in their eyes is never so compleat [sic] as when they appear to possess those decisive marks of opulence which nobody can possess but themselves. (I.xi.c.31)

This phenomenon would later be described by Thorstein Veblen as “conspicuous consumption.” Smith, then, amplifies what was already present in the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, except he is now focussing on the tastes and practices of the privileged class.

Smith’s observation in the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* on the relation between taste and class, then, is not an isolated one, and in fact, this train of thought culminates in observations recorded in “On the Arts Commonly Called Imitative” (hereafter “Imitative Arts”), published posthumously in 1795.<sup>13</sup> Though the imitation essay is a late work—written

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<sup>13</sup> The scholarship on Smith has all but ignored this piece. Peter Jones’s “The Aesthetics of Adam Smith” focuses largely on the rhetoric lectures and *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, while Howard Caygill’s discussion is

sometime in the 1780s, the last decade of his life—its ideas can be read as an elaboration of earlier ones, and the essay adds a level of precision and detail. While discussing imitation and the requisite conditions for its production of beauty or pleasure, Smith makes what appears to be a slight digression on the subject of topiary, the art of clipping plants and especially bushes to resemble other shapes. Here he makes some brief but penetrating remarks on the socioeconomic basis of taste. He notes that “[i]t was some years ago the fashion to ornament a garden with yew and holly trees, clipped into the artificial shapes of pyramids, and columns, and vases, and obelisks.” However, it is “now the fashion to ridicule this taste as unnatural.” Smith goes on to ask, “[w]hat then, it may be said, has brought them into such universal disrepute among us?” to which he responds:

[i]n a pyramid or obelisk of marble, we know that the materials are expensive, and that the labour which wrought them into that shape must have been still more so. In a pyramid or obelisk of yew, we know that the materials could cost very little, and the labour still less. The former are ennobled by their expence; the latter degraded by their cheapness. In the cabbage-garden of a tallow-chandler we may sometimes perhaps have seen as many columns and vases, and other ornaments in yew, as there are in marble and porphyry at Versailles: it is this vulgarity which has disgraced them. The rich and the great, the proud and the vain, will not admit into their gardens an ornament which the meanest of the people can have as well as they. The taste for these ornaments came originally from France; where, notwithstanding that

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confined to the latter. For two exceptions, see De Marchi (“Ingenuity”) and James Malek. Smith, however, must have thought highly enough of the piece since it is one of the very few he did not consign to the flames. We know he read it, or some version of it, to a live audience twice in the 1780s, and can count Joshua Reynolds as one of its admirers.

inconstancy of fashion with which we sometimes reproach the natives of that country, it still continues in good repute. In France, the conditions of the inferior ranks of people is seldom so happy as it frequently is in England; and you will there seldom find even pyramids and obelisks of yew in the garden of a tallow-chandler. Such ornaments, not having in that country been degraded by their vulgarity, have not yet been excluded from the gardens of princes and great lords. (I.15)<sup>14</sup>

This passage is significant for its illustration of Smith's insight into the socioeconomic determinants of value. He is attempting to explain the vagaries of taste that he had witnessed in his own lifetime: topiary, esteemed only a few decades earlier, was derided in the 1780s in Britain, not, however, by the "vulgar," but the leisured class, for whom beauty had a different standard, one based on scarcity and exclusivity. It is worth noting that this process occurs despite the fact that topiary ought to be esteemed by us (a point I will return to) since Smith enjoins the reader, as we have already seen, "the next time you have an opportunity of surveying those out-of-fashion ornaments, endeavour only to let yourself alone, and to restrain for a few minutes the foolish passion for playing the critic, and you will be sensible that they are not without some degree of beauty" (I.16).

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<sup>14</sup> It is significant that Smith invokes the difference in the condition and purchasing power of the average person in France and England. In *Wealth of Nations*, written only a few years earlier, he observed that "[t]he wages of labour are lower in France than in England. When you go from Scotland to England, the difference which you may remark between the dress and countenance of the common people in the one country and in the other, sufficiently indicates the difference in their condition. The contrast is still greater when you return from France" (WN I.ix.9). This observation provides yet another link between the imitation essay and *Wealth of Nations*. Indeed, the disparity between the condition of the average citizen in England and France was a subject of political cartoons around the time of the French Revolution, in which the French people are represented as emaciated while Britons as well-fed and corpulent. See, for instance, James Gillray's *French Liberty, British Slavery* (1792).



By a similar logic, tapestries are viewed as more beautiful by the rich because their labour value renders the cost prohibitive for most:

[t]he great expence of good Tapestry, the circumstance which confines it to the palaces of princes and great lords, gives it, in the eyes of the greater part of people, an air of riches and magnificence, which contributes still further to compensate the imperfection of its imitation. In arts which address themselves, not to the prudent and the wise, but to the rich and the great, to the proud and the vain, we ought not to wonder if the appearance of great expence, of being what few people can purchase, of being one of the surest characteristics of great fortune, should often stand in the place of exquisite beauty, and contribute equally to recommend their productions. As the idea of expence seems often to embellish, so that of cheapness seems as frequently to tarnish the lustre even of very agreeable objects. (I.13)

Tapestry, like topiary, is largely valued by the rich because of its exclusivity.

The economy of taste Smith describes especially in “Imitative Arts” is governed by a dialectical relation between different social agents. Smith argues that, because of a natural sympathy one feels for those who are socioeconomically superior, the middling classes emulate the consumer desires of the wealthy. In this manner, luxury goods become increasingly desirable to lower-class people. However, the reverse is not true. The wealthy feel a natural antipathy towards the desires of the lower classes, so those once-desirable luxury goods, now in the hands of social inferiors, are no longer beautiful to the wealthy, and

thereby lose their value.<sup>15</sup> The wealthy must choose a new product, service, or fashion to desire, and the cycle begins again.<sup>16</sup> This process Smith illustrates supports his contention in the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* noted above since there he insists that our desire for that which the privileged classes possess operates “[a]s long as they continue to use” a certain form or object. Smith, then, was conscious of the motors of fashion, and was cognizant of what we would today call the “feedback” loop of fashion.<sup>17</sup> (His discussion also demonstrates his awareness of consumerism, which I discuss in the next chapter).

Bourdieu seems to describe just this phenomenon when he writes that tastes “are the practical affirmation of an inevitable difference. It is no accident that, when they have to be justified, they are asserted purely negatively, by the refusal of other tastes. In matters of taste, more than anywhere else, all determination is negation” (56). This process of negation explains the privileged class’s depreciation of what was formerly their own taste. As for Smith, for Bourdieu taste is differential, transactional, and even antagonistic. For him,

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<sup>15</sup> My thanks to Carrie Shanafelt and Kristin Lindfield-Ott, who helped me clarify this idea.

<sup>16</sup> McKendrick describes this process in historical terms: “[i]n imitation of the rich the middle ranks spent more frenziedly than ever before.... Spurred on by social emulation and class competition, men and women surrendered eagerly to the pursuit of novelty, the hypnotic effects of fashion, and the enticements of persuasive commercial propaganda. As a result, many objects, once the prized possessions of the rich, reached further than ever before down the social scale” (11). This resulted in “new levels of spending by those in the higher ranks who felt for the first time threatened by the loss of their distinctive badge of identity” (55). Smith’s remarks are very much of his time.

<sup>17</sup> It is likely that Smith also had *Chinoiserie* in mind while writing “Imitative Arts,” though he does not mention it. David Porter notes that the “philosophical tradition demarcated by Addison, Shaftesbury, Hutcheson, Hogarth, Reynolds, Hume” and others intersects “with the emergence of the ‘China craze’ in precisely the same period” (17). These products and their imitations “initially appeared as luxurious markers of class distinction in the drawing-rooms of the social elite but soon spread to a much broader market, driven by the forces of fashion and the new merchant classes’ contagious ambition” (18).

distinction inheres in the operation of taste. As Bourdieu would centuries later, Smith problematizes putatively disinterested taste.

Unlike Smith, Kames derides the taste for topiary as “insipid” and the province of the lower orders: “the vulgar, great and small, are entertained with the oddness and singularity of a resemblance, however distant, between a tree and an animal. An attempt in the gardens of Versailles to imitate a grove of trees by a group of *jets d’eau*, appears, for the same reason, no less childish” (693). Smith goes in the other direction and attacks the taste of the privileged, while insisting on the merits of the artform. This is significant, considering that privileged taste was not deemed at the time to need any justification, since its validity was taken for granted. His lack of condescension or derision towards the lower classes in the passages above is striking in contrast to his peers.

Smith likewise avoids the habitual pathologizing of non-privileged taste indulged in by his contemporaries, a circumstance consonant with his characteristic concern for the poor and disadvantaged as well as his democratization of aesthetic experience. He is, to my knowledge, the only taste theorist who ascribes to the corruption of taste a more reciprocal social structure: the corruption of taste affects everyone, not only those at the bottom or middle, but at the top as well. He would enjoin men of taste from the privileged classes not to remain complacent in the putative validity and purity of their own taste. In this sense, Smith again seems to anticipate Bourdieu, who contends that “[t]he ‘eye’” and “‘pure’ gaze” are both “product[s] of history reproduced by education” (3). Shusterman notes that Hume “tried to avoid or minimalize, if not to suppress.... the social and class-hierarchical foundation of aesthetic judgment,” but that, ultimately, he cannot “get on without appealing

to social privilege in an essential way and thus undermine[s] [his] project of a foundational naturalistic, class-free aesthetics” (96, 98-99). Smith appears to have been aware of the weakness of his contemporaries’ arguments, and his comments in the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* and his later essay on imitation can be read as conscious responses to Hume.

It is worth noting a few more contrasts that make Smith’s position in the history of ideas interestingly unusual. In 1712, Joseph Addison prized the naturalness of Chinese gardens over those of the British, which “instead of humouring Nature, love to deviate from it as much as possible. Our Trees rise in Cones, Globes, and Pyramids. We see the Marks of the Scissars [sic] upon every Plant and Bush.” Addison concludes by insisting “I would rather look upon a Tree in all its Luxuriancy and Diffusion of Boughs and Branches, than when it is thus cut and trimmed into a Mathematical Figure” (*Spectator* No. 414, 380). Alexander Pope, writing the following year, also skewered topiary in *The Guardian* (29 September 1713). He notes, “[h]ow contrary to this Simplicity is the modern Practice of Gardening; we seem to make it our Study to recede from Nature.... We run into Sculpture, and are yet better pleas’d to have our Trees in the most awkward Figures of Men and Animals” (496). Pope adds, as Kames would later, that “[p]eople of the common Level of Understanding are principally delighted with the little Niceties and Fantastical Operations of Art, and constantly think that *finest* which is least Natural. A Citizen is no sooner Proprietor of a couple of Yews, but he entertains Thoughts of erecting them into Giants” (447). He goes on to offer an ironic catalogue of examples for those who still have “this curious Taste.” Smith’s defence of the artform’s merits as late as 1780, then, seems even more anachronistic and unusual.

Smith does not say whether this same feedback loop of taste affects the literary arts, though given his remarks already cited, he would likely argue that literary taste is governed by a similar logic. One can imagine Smith contending, by analogy, that a good portion of the appeal of Homer and Virgil and the like rests on an exclusivity of intelligibility, that is to say, on the existence of a monopoly on understanding and appreciating them—an argument that still finds currency today. In an ironic twist, from this perspective, Homer would not be considered the apogee of literary greatness if, as many taste theorists claimed, he actually was admired by everyone at all times and places.<sup>18</sup>

## II

Bad, wrong, or corrupted taste, of which there were evidently far too many examples, troubled the taste theorists. Since they were, after all, arguing for a standard, they were compelled to reconcile the contradictory evidence somehow—Hutcheson, for instance, dismissed aberrations in taste with the association of ideas. As he is more cognizant of the socioeconomic determination of taste, Smith does not run into the same problem. His sociology of taste takes such aberrations into account, and he assigns them a more constitutive role. In this particular instance—that is, of the determining influence of socioeconomic factors on taste—he simultaneously buttresses his contention that taste is relative and socially determined, and that this relativity emerges through the mechanism of sympathy. In this sense, there is a standard of taste, though one that is dynamic and exists

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<sup>18</sup> This line of reasoning possibly influenced Gerard, who in 1780 notes that “universal approbation ... really amounts to no more than the approbation of a very few. Multitudes are excluded from the right of suffrage.... But in determining who are the persons entitled to exercise it [judgment], such difficulties must occur as cannot fail to render it in some degree uncertain” (240-241).

for all the wrong reasons.<sup>19</sup> Sympathy, the same phenomenon Smith memorably describes in the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* as responsible for social cohesion, is also responsible for the illusion of proper taste as well as its predictably cyclical and dynamic nature. In the end, sympathy is not only the greatest corruptor of our moral sentiments, as Smith asserts especially in the final amendments to his moral treatise, but also of our taste.

It is worth noting briefly that Smith's ideas here also complicate classical economics, of which he is considered a founder, especially its hypothesis of a rational, self-interested subject (*Homo economicus*). Indeed, Amartya Sen cites George Stigler (as one among many others) who describes rational choice theory as "Smithian" ("Uses" 263). Smith's observations on the relationship between class, taste, and sympathy, especially outside *Wealth of Nations*, however, problematize this rather glib assumption. For Smith, demand and desire are relational or dialectical, and, when it comes to matters such as taste and consumption, human beings are, as Smith demonstrates, often far from rational. These insights anticipate what Michael Shermer and others have recently discovered, namely, the inadequacy of classical economics to explain or predict even basic human behaviour. Shermer observes that the model of *Homo economicus*

holds that "Economic Man" has unbounded rationality, self-interest, and free will, and that we are selfish, self-maximizing, and efficient in our decisions and choices. When evolutionary thinking and modern psychological theories and techniques are applied to the study of human behaviour in the marketplace, we find that the theory

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<sup>19</sup> See also *Lectures on Jurisprudence*: "[r]arity also gives a preference to things otherwise equal, and makes things of no value be considerably esteemed. Tis from this principally that the gems get their value" (LJ(A) vi.15).

of *Homo economicus*—which has been the bedrock of traditional economics—is often wrong or woefully lacking in explanatory power. It turns out that we are remarkably irrational creatures, driven as much (if not more) by deep and unconscious emotions that evolved over the eons as we are by logic and conscious reason. (xviii)

This recognition has resulted in the burgeoning field of evolutionary economics, which attempts, using evolutionary psychology, to predict human behaviour when it comes to economic decisions, about which human beings are in fact habitually less than rational. Though Smith may give the impression that he is describing *homo economicus* in the *Wealth of Nations*,<sup>20</sup> the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* and “Imitative Arts” present humanity as irrational—aesthetically, economically, and morally. Indeed, as Forman-Barzilai notes, part of what makes Smith’s thought “so compelling, so much richer and more complex than the ‘rational man’ reading that dominated for so long, is his psychological sensitivity to ways that the human mind often deludes and destabilizes itself” (49).

Likewise, economic commentators have claimed that Smith “failed to grasp the significance of one major contemporary development: the spread of consumer goods to ‘middling and inferior’ households all over Britain” (De Marchi, “Accommodation” 18). In other words, their claim is that Smith neglected to account for consumption and the rise of consumer culture in his century. My assessment here, however, complements De Marchi’s own thesis that Smith, despite what such commentators have claimed, did in fact recognize

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<sup>20</sup> The most famous line apart from the infamous “invisible hand” passage that is often quoted is, “[i]t is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker, that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest” (WN I.ii.2).

the role of consumption. De Marchi argues that although Smith is somewhat reticent about this new phenomenon, he did not disparage it. There can be little doubt, however, that Smith is at least somewhat critical.

Smith's prescient insight into the relationship between class and taste, and the socioeconomic impetus behind it, was, as I have demonstrated, unique in his period. It was an insight not explored systematically until well into the following century. Veblen's study of conspicuous consumption and Simmel's analysis of fashion at the end of the nineteenth century,<sup>21</sup> along with Pierre Bourdieu's sociological study of taste in the twentieth, come to mind. Smith's sociological analysis of taste as outlined in this chapter thus squares neatly with his earlier remarks on the contingent nature of taste in *Theory of Moral Sentiments*.

Indeed, Smith's modern editors note that the imitation essay reveals a "remarkable insight

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<sup>21</sup> Georg Simmel, the German sociologist best remembered for his *The Metropolis and Mental Life*, seems to echo some of Smith's insights at the turn of the twentieth century: "the fashions of the upper stratum of society are never identical with those of the lower; in fact, they are abandoned by the former as soon as the latter prepares to appropriate them" ("Fashion" 543). Simmel elaborates:

Social forms, apparel, aesthetic judgment, the whole style of human expression, are constantly transformed by fashion, in such a way, however, that fashion—i.e., the latest fashion—in all these things affects only the upper classes. Just as soon as the lower classes begin to copy their style, thereby crossing the line of demarcation the upper classes have drawn and destroying the uniformity of their coherence, the upper classes turn away from this style and adopt a new one, which in its turn differentiates them from the masses; and thus the game goes merrily on. Naturally the lower classes look and strive towards the upper, and they encounter the least resistance in those fields which are subject to the whims of fashion.... Indeed, we may often observe that the more nearly one set has approached another, the more frantic becomes the desire for imitation from below and the seeking for the new from above. The increase of wealth is bound to hasten the process considerably and render it visible, because the objects of fashion, embracing as they do the externals of life, are most accessible to the mere call of money, and conformity to the higher set is more easily acquired here than in fields which demand an individual test that gold and silver cannot affect. (545)

He further notes that "[t]he elite initiates a fashion and, when the mass imitates it in an effort to obliterate the external distinctions of class, abandons it for a newer mode—a process that quickens with the increase of wealth" (541). Crucially, fashion "does not exist in tribal and classless societies" and "the more nervous the age, the more rapidly its fashions change" (541, 547).



into the social relativity of aesthetic norms,” an appraisal that should apply to his moral treatise as well (174). Smith’s remarks reveal not only his depth as an aesthetic thinker, but also his willingness to eschew convenient, providential explanations—this in contrast to, say, Burke or Kames. His “negative” insights reflect his own opinion that perhaps Bernard Mandeville, who argued cynically that private vices lead to public benefits, in fact “bordered on the truth” (TMS VII.ii.4.13-14), and they demonstrate that Smith was not sanguine like Hutcheson or Hume. Further, Smith’s account here complicates the eighteenth-century characterization of aesthetics as “disinterested,” that is, free from desire or personal interest. These insights, and especially the central place of sympathy in the corruption of aesthetic judgment, will be explored in greater depth in the following chapter.

## Chapter Four

### The (Aesthetic) Problems of Sympathy

Smith not only challenges the idea of a standard of taste but offers a dynamic account of the determining influence of socioeconomic class on taste. The latter is a consequence of the mutability of taste but is also an unfortunate by-product of sympathy, which, for Smith, is not quite “blind” like love or justice, and is in fact far more contingent than would initially appear. Indeed, Smith himself problematizes sympathy in several ways, either consciously or unwittingly; he makes it, for instance, contingent to some extent on age:

[w]e expect in old age, that gravity and sedateness which [are] ... both natural and respectable; and we lay our account to find in youth that sensibility, that gaiety and sprightly vivacity which experience teaches us to expect from the lively impressions that all interesting objects are apt to make upon the tender and unpractised senses of that early period of life.... The extreme coldness, and dull formality, which are pardoned in old age, make youth ridiculous. The levity, the carelessness, and the vanity, which are indulged in youth, render old age contemptible. (V.2.4)

Sympathy is, as we have seen, also contingent on class and to a certain extent on gender. Harkin notes that for Smith “the ability or inclination to feel intense sympathy for others, especially in scenes of distress, is a feminine response, while the ability to combine this with great self-restraint, to be a sensitive spectator of the distress of others even when the natural object of all spectatorial sympathy, is typically masculine” (“Sympathy” 179). Indeed, Smith makes this clear, as Harkin also notes, in his passage contrasting humanity and generosity. “Humanity,” Smith writes, “is the virtue of a woman, generosity of a man.”

Smith continues: “Humanity consists merely in the exquisite fellow-feeling which the spectator entertains with the sentiments of the persons principally concerned, so as to grieve for their sufferings, to resent their injuries, and to rejoice at their good fortune.” However,

[t]he most humane actions require no self-denial, no self-command, no great exertion of the sense of propriety. They consist only in doing what this exquisite sympathy would of its own accord prompt us to do. But it is otherwise with generosity. We never are generous except when in some respect we prefer some other person to ourselves, and sacrifice some great and important interest of our own to an equal interest of a friend or of a superior. (TMS IV.2.10)

This is not the place for an extended discussion of Smithian sympathy,<sup>1</sup> which would require another dissertation. This chapter, however, elaborates on the previous one by examining Smith’s nuanced and even sceptical account of sympathy, especially as it relates to aesthetics. Although sympathy is not mentioned in the imitation essay, it is ultimately the mechanism responsible for the corruption of aesthetic response.

Here, as elsewhere, Smith can profitably be contrasted with his peers, most notably his greatest intellectual influence, David Hume, from whom he inherited the concept of sympathy. He was also influenced by Hume’s account of sympathetic aesthetic pleasure.

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<sup>1</sup> Smithian sympathy has produced (and continues to produce) an enormous literature that I could not possibly summarize. For two recent accounts, see Forman-Barzilai’s *Adam Smith and the Circles of Sympathy* and Samuel Fleischacker’s “Response” and “Smith and Hume.” See also Harkin (“Sympathy”), whose nuanced reading warns against interpreting Smithian sympathy as some sort of strictly male homosocial bond. On the contrary, she insists such accounts “ignore Smith’s doubts about the pernicious aspects of sympathy ... [and] the unease pervading his study of sympathy, which for Smith is always at least potentially ‘excessive’.... Smith repeatedly defines sympathy as an essentially feminine tendency to imaginatively recreate the experience of others, an impulse at work in all kinds of social exchange, that requires certain mechanisms of control” (177).

As we will see, however, Smith picks up on a blind spot in Hume's description and offers a fuller account, one that, further, demonstrates Smith's lack of aesthetic optimism, or to borrow Charles Griswold's phrase, "skeptical aesthetics" (*Virtues* 345). Smith's reading is more consonant with the commercial society in which he lived and provides a prescient insight into consumer psychology.

## I

Hume articulates his influential conception of sympathy in his *Treatise of Human Nature* (1739)—a young Adam Smith was "severely reprimanded" for reading it during his Oxford days (qtd. in Phillipson 65). Hume describes the significance of sympathy in our moral and aesthetic life:

Upon the whole, there remains nothing, which can give us an esteem for power and riches, and a contempt for meanness and poverty, except the principle of *sympathy*, by which we enter into the sentiments of the rich and poor, and partake of their pleasures and uneasiness. Riches give satisfaction to their possessor; and this satisfaction is convey'd to the beholder by the imagination, which produces an idea resembling the original impression in force and vivacity. This agreeable idea or impression is connected with love, which is an agreeable passion. It proceeds from a thinking conscious being, which is the very object of love. (362)

Hume later argues for the centrality of sympathy in moral judgment, and accords it a significant role in the apprehension of beauty. He memorably describes the pleasure spectators feel in objects they do not possess: "[m]ost kinds of beauty are deriv'd from this

origin [of sympathy]; and tho' our first object be some senseless inanimate piece of matter, 'tis seldom we rest there, and carry not our view to its influence on sensible and rational creatures." He continues by offering a famous example of a man "who shews us any house or building." He

takes particular care among other things to point out the convenience of the apartments, the advantages of their situation, and the little room lost in the stairs, antichambers and passages; and indeed 'tis evident, the chief part of the beauty consists in these particulars. The observation of convenience gives pleasure, since convenience is a beauty. But after what manner does it give pleasure? 'Tis certain our own interest is not in the least concern'd; and as this is a beauty of interest, not of form, so to speak, it must delight us merely by communication, and by our sympathizing with the proprietor of the lodging. We enter into his interest by the force of imagination, and feel the same satisfaction, that the objects naturally occasion in him. (362)

Hume adds that the same principle extends "to every work of art," and he emphasizes again that since a beauty of utility can only concern the possessor, there is nothing "but sympathy, which can interest the spectator" (362-64). Thus, by ascribing our interest in objects we do not own to sympathy, Hume renders the spectacle disinterested, a swift move that extricates it from issues of ownership and desire. (I will return to this issue below.)

Having described sympathy, Hume then goes on in a famous passage to illustrate optimistically its prevalence, which he characterizes as an infinite regress of sympathy:<sup>2</sup>

the minds of men are mirrors to one another, not only because they reflect each others [sic] emotions, but also because those rays of passions, sentiments and opinions may be often reverberated. Thus the pleasure, which a rich man receives from his possessions, being thrown upon the beholder, causes a pleasure and esteem; which sentiments again, being perceiv'd and sympathiz'd with, encrease the pleasure of the possessor; and being once more reflected, become a new foundation for pleasure and esteem in the beholder.... [T]he possessor has also a secondary satisfaction in riches arising from the love and esteem he acquires by them, and this satisfaction is nothing but a second reflexion of that original pleasure, which proceeded from himself. This secondary satisfaction or vanity becomes one of the principal recommendations of riches, and is the chief reason, why we either desire them for ourselves, or esteem them in others. Here then is a third rebound of the original pleasure; after which 'tis difficult to distinguish the images and reflexions, by reason of their faintness and confusion. (365)

This infinite regress that Hume describes is, significantly, unproblematic. The rich man feels the sympathy of the spectator, which causes pleasure, and the spectator sympathizes with the rich man's good feeling, which in turn is reflected again, and so on *ad infinitum*.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> John Mullan also describes this process as an infinite regress: "in Hume's image, subject and object are different minds conjoined in an infinite regress of 'reflexions'" (47).

<sup>3</sup> Neil Saccamano has recently observed that, following Hume's logic, the owner's pleasure need not actually be present; the spectator merely assumes it is there. Hume's return to beauty in the treatise aims "to establish

In Mullan's words, "there is a series of endless reflections, diminishing and finally untraceable reverberations which constitute a mutuality of sentiments without distinction, a continuous passing from one 'mind' to another" (47). There is, furthermore, no room for resentment or covetousness in this account; it simply does not enter the equation.

Smith, by contrast (and he may have had this precise passage from Hume in mind), describes a far less "wholesome" exchange, which we witnessed in the previous chapter. The spectator sympathizes with the owner but does not rest there: he desires what the other has, and because of this he strives to possess it by working hard, saving up, and so on. The culmination of this process is reflected memorably in Smith's parable of the poor man's son:

The poor man's son, whom heaven in its anger has visited with ambition, when he begins to look around him, admires the condition of the rich. He finds the cottage of his father too small for his accommodation, and fancies he should be lodged more at his ease in a palace. He is displeased with being obliged to walk a-foot, or to endure the fatigue of riding on horseback. He sees his superiors carried about in machines, and imagines that in one of these he could travel with less inconveniency.... He is enchanted with the distant idea of this felicity. It appears in his fancy like the life of some superior rank of beings, and, in order to arrive at it, he devotes himself for ever to the pursuit of wealth and greatness. To obtain the conveniencies which these afford, he submits in the first year, nay in the first month of his application, to more fatigue of body and more uneasiness of mind than he could have suffered through the

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the spectator as the normative subject of aesthetic judging, and, somewhat paradoxically, to render unnecessary the pleasure of the owner as the original aesthetic sentiment" (48).

whole of his life from the want of them. He studies to distinguish himself in some laborious profession. With the most unrelenting industry he labours night and day to acquire talents superior to all his competitors.... [H]e makes his court to all mankind; he serves those whom he hates, and is obsequious to those whom he despises. Through the whole of his life he pursues the idea of a certain artificial and elegant repose which he may never arrive at, for which he sacrifices a real tranquillity that is at all times in his power. (TMS IV.1.8)

There is thus a far less wholesome and optimistic exchange that occurs in Smith's reading—his rhetoric here is indeed unusual in his corpus. The sympathy he describes here leads to the “universal toils of emulation” and suggests, among other things, that for Smith, “[h]uman life is naturally restless, driven not so much by fear (as Hobbes suggested), but by a longing for a species of beauty” (Griswold *Virtues* 124, 44). Smith's detailed and richer account provides a greater insight into consumer psychology, one in which economics, psychology, and aesthetics intersect.

Further, Smith here complicates the “aesthetic,” since it was typically cordoned off into a sacrosanct domain untouched by the quotidian or desire: lack of desire or “interest” was, in fact, its *sine qua non*. Eighteenth-century aestheticians tended to emphasize this “disinterestedness” even before Kant.<sup>4</sup> In David Porter's words, “[t]heorists from Shaftesbury to Kant argued that a pure experience of the beautiful required a state of transcendent aloofness from the yearnings of the flesh and the pull of ideological

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<sup>4</sup> Kant writes: “Taste is the ability to judge an object ... by means of a liking or disliking *devoid of all interest*” (CJ 211). The standard account of the pre-Kantian, British origins is Jerome Stolnitz's “On the Origins of ‘Aesthetic Disinterestedness,’” which traces the concept back to Shaftesbury (131).



attachments” (78-79). Indeed, Francis Hutcheson argues early in the century that our sense of beauty is “antecedent to and distinct from prospects of interest”:

it plainly appears, ‘that some Objects are immediately the Occasions of this Pleasure of Beauty....and that it is distinct from that Joy which arises from Self-love upon Prospect of Advantage’ .... Our Sense of Beauty from Objects, by which they are constituted good to us, is very distinct from our Desire of them. (*Inquiry* I.i.xv, 25-26)

Joseph Addison goes so far as to claim that the man of polite imagination “meets with a secret Refreshment in a Description, and often feels a greater Satisfaction in the Prospect of Fields and Meadows, than another does in the Possession” (*Spectator* No. 411, 369).<sup>5</sup>

Smith’s account inserts desire into what had been typically characterized as a blithe disinterestedness of an aesthetic economy, in which what should be an “aesthetic” moment is complicated or tarnished by desire. Hume, as we saw above, insists that “our own interest is not in the least concern’d” (362) when it comes to admiring the beauty of things we do not possess. In Smith’s account, by contrast, we do not disinterestedly look up to those above us as we do in Hume: we desire what they have, and what they have acquires value largely because they also desire it. Once they stop desiring something—topiary, for instance—no one else does.

Like Hume, Kames insists on an invisible hand of aesthetics, as it were: “[m]en of fortune, who possess palaces, sumptuous gardens, rich fields, enjoy them less than

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<sup>5</sup> The ideology of Addison’s aesthetics is difficult to pinpoint. See William Walker’s piece (“Ideology”) for a discussion.

passengers do. The goods of Fortune are not unequally distributed: *the opulent possess what others enjoy*" (292, emphasis added). Kames echoes Hume to an extent, and goes so far as to ascribe this aesthetic invisible hand to a providential wisdom, which again, offers another contrast with Smith:

Nature, in her scale of pleasures, has been sparing of divisions: she hath wisely and benevolently filled every division with many pleasures; in order that individuals may *be contented with their own lot, without envying that of others*. Many hands must be employed to procure us the conveniences of life; and it is necessary that the different branches of business, whether more or less agreeable, be filled with hands: a taste too refined would obstruct that plan; for it would crowd some employments, leaving others, no less useful, totally neglected. In our present condition, lucky it is that the plurality are not delicate in their choice. (720, emphasis added)

Kames and Hume, then, offer an unproblematic account that eschews social emulation, one that is, despite some of their assertions, optimistic about an order ultimately marked by a providential wisdom. Indeed, as Harkin notes, Kames's "vision of the field of aesthetic experience is as the privileged means [sic] by which the individual subject and entire classes are reconciled to their assigned places in the social structure," and the same may be said of Hume ("Theorizing" 183). Smith thus distinguishes himself from a long tradition in the eighteenth century that analogized the good and the beautiful, a tradition followed by Hume and especially Kames.<sup>6</sup> Hume's relatively unproblematic account of sympathy, though

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<sup>6</sup> Shaftesbury, an early exponent of such thinking, writes, "[w]ho can admire the outward beauties and not recur instantly to the inward, which are the most real and essential, the most naturally affecting and of the highest pleasure as well as profit and advantage?" (*Characteristics* 416).

appearing to avoid the complacent ideology of Kames, nevertheless—and oddly enough for a notorious sceptic—maintains a similar view, one that ossifies and perpetuates prevailing social distinctions and structures.<sup>7</sup> Though Smith’s discussion of our admiration for the rich and of the beauty we derive from sympathizing with the owners of things is undoubtedly indebted to Hume, he complicates it; his remarks on taste and sympathy can in fact be read as an extended gloss on Hume’s account. Hume does not really countenance the corrupting aesthetic potential of sympathy: this is Smith’s innovation.<sup>8</sup>

Sympathy, then, the same phenomenon that renders human beings benevolent is also responsible, according to Smith, for corrupting aesthetic sentiments.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, Smith himself argued in his final emendations to the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* that sympathy is the greatest corruptor of our moral sentiments:

[t]his disposition to admire, and almost to worship, the rich and powerful, and to despise, or, at least, to neglect persons of poor and mean condition, though necessary both to establish and to maintain the distinction of ranks and the order of society, is, at the same time, the great and most universal cause of the corruption of our moral sentiments. (I.iii.3.1)

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<sup>7</sup> Granted, one can argue, as Csengei has recently done, that Smith falls into the same trap: “sympathy creates the very social hierarchies and tensions it is meant to transgress and alleviate.... [It is] the founder of social differences and inequalities which themselves call for the operation of sympathy to alleviate the suffering that arises from them” (53, 57). However, Smith is at least aware of this tension, which I discuss in Chapter Seven.

<sup>8</sup> Hume does briefly consider the negatively infectious potential of sympathy: “[p]opular sedition, party zeal, a devoted obedience to factious leaders; these are some of the most visible, though less laudable effects of this social sympathy in human nature” (EPM V.ii). The remark is more of an aside, however, and involves sympathy on the social, not personal, psychological level.

<sup>9</sup> Of course, a corruption implies the existence of *some* sort of standard, which I discuss in Chapter Five.

Though Smith had expressed similar sentiments earlier (1762)— “[t]here is in human nature a servility which inclines us to adore our superiors and an inhumanity which disposes us to contempt and trample under foot our inferiors”—his remarks nearly thirty years later focus squarely on the corruption entailed by such a propensity (LRBL ii.90). Though sympathy is in principle reciprocal, here it is also unidirectional: we sympathize with those above us, but not with those below us. What Smith describes here might be characterized as a misfiring of sympathy, except that it occurs as a matter of course. Thus, in the same way that our “natural” and, to borrow Harkin’s word, “compulsive” sympathy with those above us corrupts our moral sentiments,<sup>10</sup> it also corrupts our taste or aesthetic judgment, an observation that provides yet another link between the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* and “Imitative Arts.” Further, the remarks added in 1790 throw “deep suspicion on the notion that whatever nature implants in us is good. We have a *natural* disposition to admire, to sympathize excessively with, the rich” (Fleischacker *Wealth* 112). For Smith, what is “natural” is not always good, a theme that will become more apparent below, and which provides a telling contrast with Burke, who “refused to accept that ‘nature’ could be morally neutral, rather than a wisely ordained system” (Lock *Burke* 98).

The preceding account suggests that Smith, unlike Hutcheson, Hume, and Kames, is not an aesthetic optimist.<sup>11</sup> His scepticism in aesthetics has (briefly) been noted by Griswold,

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<sup>10</sup> “The concept of sympathetic emulation of the wealthy in Smith is ... a two-term system, original and copy, lacking any mediating third term provided by the impartial spectator to limit or regulate its functioning” (184–85). Harkin also notes perceptively that such “disturbing sympathies” in Smith’s text “are not confined to the margins, but run all the way through Smith’s system” (“Sympathy” 186).

<sup>11</sup> Hume’s optimism is reflected most plainly in his essay “Of Refinement.” As Duncan Forbes has noted, “[t]his is Hume at his least sceptical: he had none of the doubts and misgivings which Adam Smith and all the

who strikingly, yet aptly, describes his aesthetics as “anti-Platonic,” one plagued by a “moral ambiguity of beauty” (*Virtues* 335).<sup>12</sup> The pursuit of beauty, a species of which motivates the poor man’s son, and “is often the secret motive of the most serious and important pursuits of both private and public life,” is hardly some Platonic ideal in Smith (TMS IV.1.7). In fact, as Griswold writes, “[u]nchecked, nature seems to turn beauty into glamor and then into moral decay” (*Virtues* 335).

This sceptical strain appears to characterize much of Smith’s thought and aesthetics, and concerns a broader set of issues.<sup>13</sup> In Smith’s formulation, sympathy, for instance, is motivated by a correspondence of sentiments, which, as we have seen, ultimately leads to naturally occurring, inevitable social inequality. Even the famous “Invisible Hand,” which was interpreted as a sign of providence for decades, is, as Rothschild has recently argued, “skeptical” (5).<sup>14</sup> Indeed, Rothschild notes that it was the “tragic delusion” of the “idea of a

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other leading thinkers of the Scottish Enlightenment had about the all-round benefits of commercial civilization. The progress of civilization is improvement on all fronts” (87-88).

<sup>12</sup> Beauty in Smith does not serve “as a continuous ladder stretching from the sensual to the most abstract and philosophical. The natural whole is [not] perfectly ordered” (Griswold *Virtues* 334).

<sup>13</sup> Other scholars have demonstrated Smith’s scepticism outside of aesthetics. Gavin Kennedy notes, for instance, that Smith “was not a Dr Pangloss ... figure believing that we live in the best of all possible worlds” (“Mandeville”). Lauren Brubaker similarly finds that Smith “is neither a naive optimist nor a resigned determinist” who is convinced that “Nature, not to mention the benevolent Author of nature, is going to need considerable human help to overcome the obstacles that unalloyed nature has erected” (171, 183).

<sup>14</sup> I cannot possibly summarize Rothschild’s cogent yet lengthy argument, but it should suffice to say that in both his major works, Smith’s view of the invisible hand is “one of mildly ironical (and self-ironical) condescension. He saw it as the expression of a system which soothes the imagination, and which might or might not correspond to relations in society.... The invisible hand is a sort of trinket, for Smith; it is not a discovery of inherent order. But its very beauty—its loveliness to the imagination—is thereby of political importance.... [T]he invisible hand is a way of persuading people, of appealing to their love of system.” Indeed, as she notes, the invisible hand in *Theory of Moral Sentiments* occurs between two passages on the love of system and the beauty of order (137).

providential order—the idea of which the invisible hand is supposed to be the expression—to which Smith was most opposed” (132, 131).<sup>15</sup>

Smith’s sceptical aesthetics ties into his discussion added in the final edition of *Theory of Moral Sentiments* of the “man of system,” a figure he contrasts with the legislator “whose public spirit is prompted altogether by humanity and benevolence, [and who] will respect the established powers and privileges even of individuals.” The man of system, on the other hand,

is apt to be very wise in his own conceit; and is often so enamoured with the supposed beauty of his own ideal plan of government, that he cannot suffer the smallest deviation from any part of it. He goes on to establish it completely and in all its parts, without any regard either to the great interests, or to the strong prejudices which may oppose it. He seems to imagine that he can arrange the different members of a great society with as much ease as the hand arranges the different pieces upon a chess-board. He does not consider that the pieces upon the chess-board have no other principle of motion besides that which the hand impresses upon them; but that, in the great chess-board of human society, every single piece has a principle of motion of its own, altogether different from that which the legislature might chuse to impress upon it. (VI.ii.2.17)

Such a man is so taken by the beauty of his own theory that he becomes inhumane and treats others without sympathy, even without consciously being tyrannical.<sup>16</sup> Smith’s suspicion of system building is at least in part a manifestation of his sceptical aesthetics.

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<sup>15</sup> He was, in fact, even “skeptical of the pure market economy” (Sen “Uses” 258).

In short, Smith did not, like Pope or Shaftesbury, believe that “whatever is, is right” (*Essay on Man* I. 294). He lacks their cosmic optimism, and this translates to his aesthetics as well. For this reason, Eagleton’s brief characterization of Smith is inaccurate or, at the very least, taken out of context. In a passage I will return to, Smith compares human society to the smooth operations of an “immense” and “beautiful and noble machine,” whose “regular and harmonious movements produce a thousand agreeable effects” (TMS VII.iii.1.2). Based on this, Eagleton argues that for Smith

[t]he whole of social life is aestheticized; and what this signifies is a social order so spontaneously cohesive that its members no longer need to think about it.... The aesthetic is in this sense no more than a name for the political unconscious: it is simply the way social harmony registers itself on our senses, imprints itself on our sensibilities. The beautiful is just political order lived out on the body, the way it strikes the eye and stirs the heart. (*Ideology* 37)

Smith, however, *is* aware of the “ideology of the aesthetic” to an extent that Hutcheson, Hume, and Kames were not, at least not explicitly. Kames, as we have seen, is convinced of the salutary power of the fine arts, or aesthetics in general. For Kames, in fact, the aesthetic is an independent and much-needed corrective to the excesses of economy and consumption. Smith is far less optimistic about such effects, and for him the relationship between the aesthetic and the good is far more problematic.

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<sup>16</sup> For further discussion of the “man of system,” see Griswold’s *Virtues* (334ff). Robert Mitchell notes that “it was clearly unsettling for Smith to recognize the ways in which the love of system could become fully self-referential, for it suggested a rather tenuous link between the good and the beautiful.... [T]he criteria by means of which he imagines his readers will be able to distinguish between good and bad – and real and ideal – systems, as well as real and ‘imaginary beauty’ is not so readily legible” (73).

In another twist, however, it is worth noting briefly that the aesthetic corruption via sympathy Smith describes is also necessary for economic growth. In Part IV of the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Smith engages directly with Hume on the subject of utility in beauty. In Hume's system, as we have seen, direct utility is considered a beauty, which a spectator can sympathize with, whereas Smith refines Hume's account and argues that what we admire is apparent or imagined utility, in other words, the *appearance* of utility. Smith writes that what pleases us "is not so much the utility, as the aptness of the machines which are fitted to promote it" (TMS IV.1.6). For this reason, to use one of Smith's examples, a watch "that falls behind above two minutes in a day, is despised by one curious in watches," this despite the fact that the same watch will still be very useful (IV.1.5). Smith argues, then, that we in our minds confound the utility of things with their *apparent* utility. Thus, a spectator is not immediately "impressed" by, say, a watch, in the same way that Hutcheson's spectator would be; rather, for Smith, there is a requisite imaginative leap that must occur. We like things not because we think their owners find them useful, as in Hume, but because we *think* they procure their owners happiness, as witnessed with the poor man's son. This observation has led Furuya to note recently that, while Hume's "sense of beauty would be satisfied with immediate utility, Smith's would provoke the production of more goods than is necessary to satisfy the minimal needs and immediate desire" (50). Indeed, the set-piece of the poor man's son cited above occurs in the same section where Smith first discusses the invisible hand.<sup>17</sup> Thus, sympathy, aesthetics, and political economy are connected.

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<sup>17</sup> That is, in works Smith published. The phrase "invisible hand" first appears in his posthumously published "History of Astronomy," and whether or not it is the same one as his more famous incarnations is debatable. For a discussion, see A.L. Macfie's "The Invisible Hand of Jupiter" and Emma Rothschild's *Economic Sentiments*.



It may be tempting here to link Smith to Alexander Pope. In his “Epistle to Burlington,” the fourth of his *Essays to Several Persons*, Pope describes and disparages the misuse of riches, notably by those who seem to have more money than taste, and squander their wealth tastelessly:

Is it less strange, the Prodigal should wast  
His wealth, to purchase what he ne’er can taste?

....

Yet hence the Poor are cloath’d, the Hungry fed;  
Health to himself, and to his Infants bread  
The Lab’rer bears: What his hard Heart denies,  
His charitable Vanity supplies. (3-4, 169-172)

Pope adds the following gloss to the passage: “[t]he *Moral* of the whole, where PROVIDENCE is justified in giving Wealth to those who squander it in this manner. A bad taste employs more hands and diffuses more Expence than a good one” (l.169, 594). He thus rehearses the Augustan *concordia discors*, or harmony from disorder, best expressed in his own formulation: “[a]ll discord [is] harmony, not understood / All partial evil, universal good” (*Essay on Man* I. 291-92).

As we have seen, however, though Smith articulates a similar invisible hand—his own example is “the proud and unfeeling landlord [who] views his extensive fields, and without a thought for the wants of his brethren, in imagination consumes himself the whole harvest that grows upon them”—he is not as optimistic about it, nor does he ascribe it to Providence (TMS IV.1.10). His nuanced and more complex account of sympathy with respect to beauty does, however, seem to contain a bit of Mandeville, who argued in his notorious *Fable of the*

*Bees* (1714) that private vices lead to public benefits. Smith did not dismiss him *tout court* as many others did, and thought that his system, “which once made so much noise in the world.... could never have imposed upon so great a number of persons, nor have occasioned so general an alarm among those who are the friends of better principles, had it not in some respects bordered upon the truth” (TMS VII.ii.4.13-14). In other words, as Smith was aware, Mandeville hit a nerve. By contrast, Hutcheson attempted to argue “against the Author of the *Fable of the Bees*” in his *Inquiry* (199, n.1), ascribing all of our motivations, including conspicuous consumption, to benevolent or virtuous sources.<sup>18</sup> Smith, who critiques his teacher’s views in Part VII of the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, is far less of an aesthetic optimist than he is, and thus synthesizes the two.

It is also worth noting again in connection with Smith’s scepticism Hume’s fairly optimistic account of the ubiquity of sympathy, what Paul Guyer aptly terms Hume’s unusually “magnificent profession of faith” (*Values* 63):

[Let us] take a general survey of the universe, and observe the force of sympathy thro’ the whole animal creation, and the easy communication of sentiments from one thinking being to another. In all creatures, that prey not upon others, and are not agitated with violent passions, there appears a remarkable desire of company, which associates them together, without any advantages they can ever propose to reap from their union. This is still more conspicuous in man, as being the creature of the

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<sup>18</sup> As Preben Mortensen argues, for Hutcheson the “pursuit of luxury and certain forms of conspicuous consumption, particularly the consumption of works of art, can be and often are guided by high moral principles and have beneficial effects for the individual as well as for society in general. There is, thus, no contradiction between what benefits the public and what benefits the individual” (163).

universe, who has the most ardent desire of society, and is fitted for it by the most advantages. We can form no wish, which has not a reference to society. A perfect solitude is, perhaps, the greatest punishment we can suffer. (*Treatise* 364)

Such passages suggest that Hume emphasizes the facility of sympathy. He goes on to illustrate the same using a telling metaphor: “[a]s in strings equally wound up, the motion of one communicates itself to the rest; so all the affections readily pass from one person to another” (575-76).<sup>19</sup> Though Fleischacker resists labelling Hume a thoroughgoing sympathetic “contagion” theorist—that is, one who sees “sympathy as a transfer of feelings that by-passes our cognitive faculties” (276)—he notes that Hume undoubtedly uses the language of contagion, and

he indeed revels in that language, talking frequently as if we simply ‘catch’ emotions from one another.... Other people’s emotions ‘infuse’ themselves into my mind; they ‘communicate’ themselves to me; I ‘find myself’ of the same humor as my neighbors, or have their feelings ‘thrown ... upon me.’ The language throughout these passages is passive, describing people among whom emotions travel whether they want those emotions or not, in the way diseases pass from one person to another. (“Smith and Hume” 276-77)

Further, Hume’s imagery and language “presents us as ... unable to help but be affected” by the sentiments of others. In the “minds of men are mirrors” passage in particular, “we stand

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<sup>19</sup> Hume writes again: “[s]o close and intimate is the correspondence of human souls, that no sooner any person approaches me, than he diffuses on me all his opinions, and draws along my judgment in a greater or lesser degree” (592).

there, passively reflecting one another's feelings, for Hume, rather than actively putting ourselves into their situations" ("Smith and Hume" 277).

This account can be opposed to Smith, who insists on the difficulty of sympathy—or as some commentators have noted, its virtual impossibility. David Marshall observes that Smith's treatise "must describe what it is like to want to believe in the fiction of sympathy, and what it is like to live in a world where sympathy is perhaps impossible.... [I]t turns out that sympathy is in many cases—in cases where it is needed most—unlikely; indeed, perhaps unnatural, perhaps impossible" (*Figure* 180-181, 190).<sup>20</sup> Indeed, Smith's language describing the sympathetic exchange is significant: he uses verbs such as "strive" and "endeavour," which suggest the difficulty of the act.<sup>21</sup> Marshall's qualification of "where it is most needed" is apt since the wrong kind of sympathy, that which is easy to come by and characterizes our admiration of the great and wealthy, happens far more easily—it is, in some sense, "compulsive" (Harkin "Sympathy" 184).

It is also worth noting that Hume, for all his scepticism, is, at least in his essay on taste, rather complacent in the "discovery" or founding of a standard; eventually, things will work out, hence his unoriginal argument for the test of time. Indeed, Sambrook also notes that in all his aesthetic writings, Hume "reveals indeed a strikingly confident belief in the

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<sup>20</sup> See also Thomas Keymer, who notes that Smith is "[c]onspicuously less sanguine" than Hume, and that there "lurks in Smith an anxiety of insufficiency, a fear that the emotional participation underlying this idealised model of sympathetic exchange might not be so easily natural" (579-80). John Mullan similarly notes that Smith's invocation of "Stoic self-command" can be read as "a point of weakness or a moment of resignation in Smith's text. By his own account, such control and renunciation require the exercise of exceptional discipline, and are liable to fail even the most scrupulous of their practitioners" (50).

<sup>21</sup> For this reason, Keymer adds, "Smith seems hortatory rather than merely descriptive in his account of sympathy, and instead of blandly celebrating its power he tends to regret its feeble and fugitive nature" (580).

universality of taste” (116-17). Hume concludes his essay on taste on such a sanguine note: “the difficulty of finding, even in particulars, the standard of taste, is not so great as it is represented.” Whereas scientific, philosophical, and theological systems and ideas can be and often are exploded, this is not the case with the fine arts: “Aristotle, and Plato, and Epicurus, and Descartes, may successively yield to each other: But Terence and Virgil maintain an universal, undisputed empire over the minds of men. The abstract philosophy of Cicero has lost its credit: The vehemence of his oratory is still the object of our admiration” (243). Smith, again in connection with his aesthetic scepticism, differs here. He not only argues against a standard of taste, but his injunction to the reader in “Imitative Arts,” marked by its plaintive, hortatory tone (“the next time you have an opportunity...”), suggests that even where he desires a standard of some kind, he was less than sanguine that it would prevail (I.16). This is an unusual rhetorical move in Smith’s corpus.

It is significant that Smith’s account of beauty, unlike Hume’s, resists (or attempts to resist) the pull of sympathy, which perhaps explains its explicit absence from the imitation essay. The problem of taste is, as Smith recognized, also the problem of sympathy. As Guyer has noted, Hume’s insistence on the strength of sympathy in the aesthetic realm presents a problem since

the strength of our pleasure in the sheer fact of agreement itself seems to threaten the collapse of true taste into mere trend or fashion.... So the question naturally arises, if our ‘ardent desire of society’ is so strong that solitude must destroy our pleasure in

any form of beauty, is there any reason why it should not also be strong enough to make fashion prevail over any genuine standard of taste? (*Values* 64)<sup>22</sup>

It appears that Smith avoids this objection and in fact likely thought of it as another blind spot in Hume, one that he pursues and challenges, and suggests yet another reason Smith denies a standard of taste.<sup>23</sup> In fact, the entire section of “Imitative Arts” quoted can be read as an extended gloss on Hume’s discussion of the pleasure spectators procure in viewing a house they do not own, and it also appears to resist Reynolds’ famous assertion that “in our lightest amusements, as well as in our most serious actions and engagements of life, we must regulate our affections of every kind by that of others” (Discourse VII, 132). To borrow from Smith’s moral vocabulary, the spectator in such cases is influenced by the partial spectator; Smith exhorts the reader, conversely, to heed the aesthetic impartial spectator, one that transcends the social and the economic. Smith’s normative rhetoric in “Imitative Arts” is, as mentioned earlier, unusual for him, but makes sense considering the piece is a late work (c. 1785) since he would also add his comments on the corruptible influence of rank and sympathy in the final edition of *Theory of Moral Sentiments* at around the same time (1790). That is to say, though the germ of this idea was arguably there in the beginning, Smith explicitly comments on it during the last decade of his life. As noted earlier, Smith

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<sup>22</sup> In his recent discussion of Hume, Saccamano comes to a similar conclusion: “[a]s a process whereby I come to feel moved as if by the communicated sentiments of others, sympathy troubles the singularity of ‘my’ taste.... [Thus] the sentiments of others become my own” (40).

<sup>23</sup> Guyer goes on to note that for Hume, “it is simply ... a fact that we will lose our taste for what would otherwise please us for the simple reason that others do not like it. There is no underlying standard for human nature, and thus for what we ought to find pleasing, to which we can appeal to distinguish our pleasure in sharing the genuine standard of taste from the pleasure of mere fashion” (*Values* 65).

evinces a greater normativity, both aesthetic and moral, towards the end of his life, one that will become clear in the following chapter.

## Chapter Five

### Beauty and Aesthetic Judgment

As we have seen, Smith is a relativist on taste. He is sensitive to the influences of class and history on taste and, to a certain extent, on morals. Following the previous section, the reader may wonder whether there are any “objective” measures of beauty or valid aesthetic judgments in Smith’s system, given his convincing and sustained attack on taste and its putative standard. The answer is that indeed, for all his relativistic tendencies, an unmistakable normative aesthetic current simultaneously runs through Smith’s *oeuvre*, one that, as we will see, becomes more pronounced towards the end of his life, though this current sits somewhat uneasily with the other, more sociological or anthropological one. This tension should come as no surprise since there are others in his thought, some of which we have already noted. For instance, Smith championed progress and believed that modern commercial society was better than any before it, but at the same time, he felt that certain laudable qualities, such as martial spirit and stoic fortitude, had been irrevocably lost in this development.<sup>1</sup> Fleischacker and Forman-Barzilai have both noted the tension between the cultural or anthropological in Smith’s moral thought and his universalism.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Harkin concludes that “it [is] possible to read Smith as a believer in history as progress towards commercial civilization *and* as a Rousseauvian elegist of a lost social harmony” (“Missing Primitives” 437).

<sup>2</sup> For instance, Fleischacker notes that it is precisely this “anthropological sensitivity that opens Smith to the charge that his moral philosophy is beset by the relativism with which philosophers generally charge anthropologists.... I don’t know that Smith has a good answer to these charges.... [since] the impartial spectator is constructed out of modes of judgment that seem essentially relative to a particular culture” (“Kultur” 5, 7). I return to this issue in Chapter Six.



Nevertheless, Smith makes it clear in several places that there are certain aesthetic judgments that are valid and timeless, and that are not or ought not to be influenced by factors such as scarcity or class.<sup>3</sup> He made this concession in his “retraction” in the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, though it was so heavily qualified that its force was blunted. The most obvious aesthetically normative moment in Smith’s corpus occurs in an exhortation to the reader in his “Imitative Arts.” There Smith enjoins the reader, after describing the rise and fall of the art of topiary in Britain, to correct his or her appraisal, as we have seen (I.16). Here Smith assumes, in effect, that certain aesthetic judgments are better or more valid than others. For this reason, the assessment of Smith’s modern editors that he “is not asking for a suspension of criticism but for a flexibility in relation to critical standards” in the passage is inaccurate since he enjoins the reader to correct his taste, an unusually normative, second-person injunction for Smith (*EPS* 174). He is not, then, a thoroughgoing relativist. In fact, Smith makes several aesthetic judgments of his own. He praises Voltaire (he refers approvingly to his *Mahomet*, and refers to “that beautiful tragedy of Voltaire, the Orphan of China” [TMS VI.ii.1.22]) and especially Jean Racine, the latter of which is an unusual move for an eighteenth-century Briton. He not only describes their works approvingly, but also explicitly commends Racine’s *Phaedra* in the final edition of the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* as “the finest tragedy, perhaps, that is extant in any language” (III.2.19).

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<sup>3</sup> Smith’s posthumous collection, *Essays on Philosophical Subjects*, begins with three essays—on astronomy, ancient physics, and ancient logic and metaphysics—that are, as the recurring subtitle notes, interested primarily in “[t]he principles which lead and direct philosophical inquiries.” Griswold notes in this connection that Smith “seems to assume that the principles of human nature are constant through time. The ‘principles’ that are ‘illustrated’ by the histories of natural science seem not themselves to be in history” (*Virtues* 352).

In a sense, Smith appears to want to have it both ways and seems to contradict himself since his remarks that challenged and problematized taste and its putative standard remained untouched through all editions of *Theory of Moral Sentiments*. It is more likely, however, that he effects a distinction between taste and more robust aesthetic judgments, which he often classifies under “beauty.” Smith here may have been influenced by some lesser known but influential French thinkers of the early eighteenth century, such as J.P. Crousaz and Père André, who distinguish among different types of beauty, including relative and absolute. Crousaz, whose *Traité du Beau* (1715) Smith owned, argues that “there is a beauty in relation to ideas, and one in relation to sentiments; the one is more fixed, the other varies more. The first grounds the truth of our judgments, the other, the eccentricity [bizarrerie] of our tastes” (56).<sup>4</sup> In his *Essai sur le Beau* (1741), Père André (Yves Marie) asserts that there are three types of beauty: “an essential beauty, independent of all institution, even divine,” “a natural beauty, independent of the opinions of men,” and finally, “a species of beauty of human institution, and that is arbitrary” (8). The first type of beauty embraces “geometrical beauty,” and includes regularity, proportion, and the like (20-22, translations mine).<sup>5</sup> The second includes physical or human beauty, while the third includes cosmetics and wigs, among other things. This line of thinking is reminiscent of Perrault in the late seventeenth century, who we already saw enacted a similar distinction between “positive” and “arbitrary” beauty.

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<sup>4</sup> “Il y a beauté par rapport aux idées, & beauté par rapport [sic] aux sentiments; celle-là est plus fixe, celle-ci varie davantage; la première fonde la vérité de nos jugemens, la seconde la bizarrerie de nos goûts.”

<sup>5</sup> “il y a un beau essentiel, & indépendant de toute institution, même divine,” “un beau naturel, & indépendant de l’opinion des hommes,” “une espèce de beau d’institution humaine, & qui est arbitraire”; “un beau géométrique.”

Another, more contemporary strand—and possible mutual influence—comes from Allan Ramsay, who makes a very similar distinction. He insists that taste, whose proper objects are “relative to the person only who is actuated by them, who is the sole judge of whether those feelings be agreeable” does not “admit of any dispute” (9-10). This he contrasts with judgment. Ramsay concludes by noting that when it comes to the arts, “either the distinction betwixt taste and judgment ... is false, or else taste is totally excluded from being a determiner in works of art, and must leave that task for judgment to perform” (54-55). Smith’s system, then, like those of some of his forbears, admits both arbitrary and normative aesthetic elements.

This normative strain in Smith, as noted earlier, became more acute over time. The imitation essay, including Smith’s unusual injunction to the reader, was composed sometime in the last decade of his life (c.1785). This essay was in fact the last piece of original philosophical writing Smith produced. Further, Smith made substantial additions to the final edition of the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1790) that include some aesthetically prescriptive statements. For instance, as already noted, he asserts there that Racine’s *Phaedra* is the greatest tragedy “in any language.” In the same edition and section, he also clearly articulates other preferences, such as that for Thomas Gray, “who joins to the sublimity of Milton the elegance and harmony of Pope, and to whom nothing is wanting to render him, perhaps the first poet in the English language, but to have written a little more” (III.2.19), while his praise of Voltaire’s *Orphan of China* occurs in Part VI, a fresh new section added to the final edition.

Such moments bespeak Smith’s desire to legislate aesthetic perception and experience to some extent. In such cases, he desires an aesthetic impartial spectator; indeed, his rhetoric in

the imitative arts essay, exhorting the onlooker to “correct” his or her appraisal, sounds as if it were lifted from Part III of the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*. Despite his compelling remarks on taste, then, Smith still *seeks* a beauty that, like his labour theory of value, resists the pull of time and history. Like Kant after him, Smith, for all his convincing and penetrating discussion on taste, ultimately desires “pure” aesthetic judgments (though their purity is debatable in the Kantian sense, since, as we will see, they rely largely on concepts).

Smith’s increasing normativity in aesthetics has an analogous logic in his ethics, one that follows a similar chronological trajectory. His remarks on the corruptive potential of socioeconomic class become more acute in the sixth edition of 1790. Scholars have demonstrated that Smith’s moral theory, which seems thoroughly social and transactional, becomes less so over the successive editions of his moral treatise. Smith’s insistence on praiseworthiness as opposed to mere praise and the judgments of others becomes increasingly replaced with the judgments of the impartial spectator, which itself becomes more “deified” and pure over time. Indeed, in the final edition he edited, Smith adds in a substantial emendation that a person “naturally dreads, not only to be hated, but to be hateful.... He desires, not only praise, but praise-worthiness; or to be that thing which, though it should be praised by nobody, is, however, the natural and proper object of praise” (TMS III.2.1). He qualifies this by insisting on the asocial nature of praiseworthiness: “[t]he love of praise-worthiness is by no means derived altogether from the love of praise. Those two principles, though they resemble one another, though they are connected, and often blended with one another, are yet, in many respects, distinct and independent of one another” (III.2.2). In other words, the judgments of real spectators are based on actual praise, whereas

those of the impartial spectator are predicated on praiseworthiness (Raphael and Macfie, “Introduction” 16).

The question that vexed Smith—Sir Gilbert Eliot’s objection, in fact<sup>6</sup>—was how conscience could ever differ from or rise above public opinion. Beginning with the second edition, Smith emphasizes how the impartial spectator is capable of more objective moral judgment, though it still has its beginnings in the judgments and views of others. In other words, Smith’s standard of morality begins with other people and ends with a more objective, abstract figure. By the final edition, Smith becomes even more sceptical of popular opinion, and adds that “the jurisdictions of those two tribunals” of actual and impartial spectators “are founded upon principles which, though in some respects resembling and akin, are, however, in reality different and distinct” (TMS III.2.32). Thus, Smith’s ethics were more social in the first editions, but by the final edition he edited, he increased the emphasis on the asocial nature of moral judgment.

Smith’s binary of praise versus praiseworthiness in ethics has an analogue in his aesthetics. That which is praised is merely so owing to social consensus, propriety, and the like, whereas the praiseworthy in both ethics *and* aesthetics transcends social norms. Indeed, Valihora observes that Smith’s earlier emphasis on propriety in his moral theory “gives way before the force of his desire to find absolute grounds for moral judgment.... Smith turns beyond the network of propriety that sustains social life in search of an absolute ethics,” one

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<sup>6</sup> Eliot’s letter has not survived, but we can infer his objection from Smith’s lengthy response (*Corr.* 40, 10 Oct. 1759).

that precedes social expectations (138-39).<sup>7</sup> In so doing, Smith resists Sir Joshua Reynolds's famous assertion that "in our lightest amusements, as well as in our most serious actions and engagements of life, we must regulate our affections of every kind by that of others" (Discourse VII, 132). This is especially clear in the increasing asocial nature of sympathy and impartial spectatorship, but also his removal of sympathy from the essay on the imitative arts. The desire for an ethics that transcends the social is mirrored in his later aesthetics.

Such, then, is the tension between the absolute and contingent in Smith's ethics and aesthetics. The two strands sit uneasily together, though the normative current is certainly there, and becomes more pronounced with time. The balance of this chapter will survey what are for Smith possible aesthetic judgments. Smith, as will become clear, insists on a cognitive basis for valid aesthetic experience; in fact, for him, *pace* Kant, valid aesthetic judgments are predicated on concepts. The cognitive basis of Smith's aesthetics also points up the coherence of his thought as it operates throughout his *oeuvre*: in his writings on meta-science, ethics, and literary theory. He resists many *topoi* of eighteenth-century aesthetic thought, including the (in)famous *je ne sais quoi* response ("I know not what"), as well as immediacy, a strategy used by many thinkers in an attempt to guarantee aesthetic purity. In short, for Smith, spectators must *know* why they are pleased. By denying inscrutability and explicating the cognitive process that occurs during aesthetic perception, Smith demystifies and democratizes aesthetic experience. Further, his aesthetics, grounded as it is in active cognition, is hostile to deception and to categories such as wonder, surprise, and novelty.

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<sup>7</sup> This issue will resurface in the discussion on tragedy. Fudge, whom I will return to, notes that Smith combats the spectre of relativism since there is "a naturalistic strand to Smith's thought that suggests that at least some of our aesthetic norms are universal" (140).

This chapter also considers some of Smith's scattered remarks, such as his criticism of mixed metaphors and lyric poetry, and concludes by tying in his aesthetics with his emphasis on tranquillity, which should be considered his master-concept after sympathy.

## I

Smith conflates the sensuous and the intellectual, imagination and understanding, a practice that occurs consistently throughout his corpus and especially characterizes his aesthetics.<sup>8</sup> Smith speaks on more than one occasion of the pleasure we receive when contemplating a great system, either an astronomical theory or a musical symphony. He describes, for instance, "[t]he beauty of a systematical arrangement of different observations connected by a few common principles" (WN V.i.f.25). This echoes a point he makes much earlier in his lectures on rhetoric. Speaking of what he calls the Newtonian method of philosophy (as opposed to the Aristotelian), Smith remarks, "[i]t gives us a pleasure to see the phaenomena which we reckoned the most unaccountable all deduced from some principle (commonly a wellknown one) and all united in one chain, far superior to what we feel from the unconnected method where everything is accounted for by itself without any reference to the others" (LRBL ii. 134). In the "History of Astronomy," Smith claims that (natural) philosophy "was fitted to sooth the imagination, and to render the theatre of nature a more coherent, and therefore a more magnificent spectacle" (II.12). In discussing the astronomical system of concentric spheres, Smith describes "the beauty of this system," and the "admiration, which so beautiful a system ... is apt to inspire" (IV.5).

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<sup>8</sup> Anne Janowitz, looking largely at the astronomy essay, also concludes that "[a]esthetic response is thus not to be separated off as distinct from other activities of reason and imagination" (14).

Smith describes society in similar terms:

Human society, when we contemplate it in a certain abstract and philosophical light, appears like a great, an immense machine, whose regular and harmonious movements produce a thousand agreeable effects. As in any other beautiful and noble machine that was the production of human art, whatever tended to render its movements more smooth and easy, would derive a beauty from this effect, and, on the contrary, whatever tended to obstruct them would displease upon that account. (VII.iii.1.2)<sup>9</sup>

Finally, in perhaps his most illustrative passage in this context, Smith compares a musical symphony to an intellectual system, and the analogous pleasure that obtains in both:

A well-composed concerto of instrumental Music, by the number and variety of the instruments, by the variety of the parts which are performed by them, and the perfect concord or correspondence of all these different parts; by the exact harmony or coincidence of all the different sounds which are heard at the same time, and by that happy variety of measure which regulates the succession of those which are heard at different times, presents an object so agreeable, so great, so various, and so interesting, that alone, and without suggesting any other object, either by imitation or otherwise, it can occupy, and as it were fill up, completely the whole capacity of the

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<sup>9</sup> In an interesting yet undeveloped point, Chandler briefly notes that Rousseau, in his essay on language, “maintains the priority of melody” whereas Smith privileges harmony, “which figures repeatedly in Smith’s analysis as the emblem and achievement of social intercourse in a world of sympathetic spectators in response to each other.... *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* is a theory of advanced society as aspiring to the kind of harmony that Smith would describe in the Imitative Arts essay as crucial to a musical concerto” (“Politics” 573).



mind, so as to leave no part of its attention vacant for thinking of any thing else. In the contemplation of that immense variety of agreeable and melodious sounds, arranged and digested, both in their coincidence and in their succession, into so complete and regular a system, the mind in reality enjoys not only a very great sensual, but a very high intellectual, pleasure, not unlike that which it derives from the contemplation of a great system in any other science. (“Imitative Arts” II.31)

These passages begin to suggest that beauty for Smith has an important cognitive, intellectual dimension; in fact, as we will see, valid aesthetic judgments in general for him are cognitive and not sentimental or intuitive.<sup>10</sup> This becomes clear especially in his posthumously published “Imitative Arts” and “History of Astronomy,” two works that bookend his career: the imitation essay was his last piece of original writing (c.1785), while the astronomy essay was among his very first, written sometime before 1758 (Ross *Life* 97).

It is worth noting how Smith’s ethics shares this cognitive dimension, an insight several scholars have pointed out. Griswold observes that for Smith

the emotions are in some way cognitive; beliefs are part and parcel of emotions, and beliefs may be true or false, adequate or inadequate. Smith could therefore speak of erroneous or inadequate emotions.... Crucially, the sentiments are ‘cognitive,’ in the sense that judgments form part of them.... Smith therefore speaks of emotions as judging.... The emotions are not mere ‘feels.’ (*Virtues* 42, 137)

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<sup>10</sup> I share this insight, among a few others, with Paul Guyer, who kindly sent me an unpublished paper (“Adam Smith’s Original Theory of Artistic Imitation”) while I was completing this chapter, though we arrived at our conclusions independently. Guyer’s paper has the added advantage of examining Moses Mendelssohn, whose ideas are strikingly similar to Smith’s, but of which Smith was surely ignorant.

He also notes Smith's "'cognitivist' (and arguably un-Humean) view of the emotions" (*Virtues* 240).<sup>11</sup> In the same vein, but in greater detail, Fleischacker aptly notes "[o]ne notable feature of the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* that its commentators have failed to point out," namely,

how much it restores to moral sentimentalism the [rationalist] language of Cudworth and Clarke and Wollaston. Smith describes passions as 'suitable or unsuitable,' 'proportionate or disproportionate,' 'fitted or not fitted' to their objects, compares moral approval with cognitive agreement, and invokes a 'correspondence' relationship between passions much like that traditionally held to obtain, for true statements, between thought and object. With his reinterpretation of 'sympathy,' Smith drives a wedge between the feelings we actually have and another set of feelings that we think we should have, and thus makes room, *within* moral sentimentalism, for the possibility that we can regard our own motives and reactions as 'right' or 'wrong.' ("Review" 922)<sup>12</sup>

Smith's ethics, then, has a firmly cognitive basis, which distinguishes him from someone like Burke or Hume, and his aesthetics follows the same logic. Judgments of beauty are

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<sup>11</sup> Griswold has buttressed his reading more recently by contrasting Smithian sympathy with Rousseauvian *pitié*. Smith's use of sympathy "carries the un-Rousseauan [sic] suggestion that the process is ... intrinsically cognitive.... It involves *understanding* the point of view and situation of the other." Smith also uses the term *conceive* "in a way that suggests it is synonymous with 'imagine,' as in 'to conceive or to imagine' ... so the imagination must in some sense be cognitive" ("Smith and Rousseau" 64-65).

<sup>12</sup> For similar readings of Smith, see Martha Nussbaum (*Love's Knowledge* 327), Elizabeth Bohls (44), A.L. Macfie (88ff), and Gloria Vivenza, the latter of whom observes that "the rational foundation" of Smith's ethics "is provided by the impartial spectator" (42).

sentimental insofar as they result in a pleasurable affect and are subjective, but rational insofar as they are the product of perception, judgment, and intellection.<sup>13</sup>

Smith's cognitivist aesthetics become clearer when we consider that *recognition* of some kind seems, in fact, integral to his aesthetics—the etymology of the term itself is quite apt in this context. This becomes clearest in his posthumous writings, especially “Imitative Arts,” the basic argument of which I will summarize in order to clarify Smith's position.

## II

In the essay, Smith seeks to investigate the nature of imitation in “what are called the imitative arts,” and especially how or why pleasure obtains in them. He speaks of the merits and beauty of imitation, which he distinguishes from mere copying: “though a production of art seldom derives any merit from its resemblance to another object of the same kind, it frequently derives a great deal from its resemblance to an object of a different kind, whether that object be a production of art or of nature.”<sup>14</sup> As examples, Smith lists the “painted

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<sup>13</sup> Smith would find at least one votary in the present day in Roger Scruton, who insists that “the experience of beauty ... is rationally founded” (197).

<sup>14</sup> Smith appears to have influenced Reynolds on this point. Reynolds writes:

we are not always pleased with the most absolute possible resemblance of an imitation to its original object.... [T]he pleasure we receive from imitation is not increased merely in proportion as it approaches to minute and detailed reality; we are pleased, on the contrary, by seeing ends accomplished by seemingly inadequate means. To express protuberance by actual relief, to express the softness of flesh by the softness of wax, seems rude and inartificial, and creates no grateful surprise. But to express distances on plain surface, softness by hard bodies, and particular colouring by materials which are not singly of that colour, produces that magick which is the prize and triumph of art. (Discourse XI, 193)

In a letter to Bennet Langton (12 Sept, 1782), Reynolds writes,

I find Adam Smith intends publishing this winter an essay on the reason why imitation pleases. The last day he was there the conversation turned upon that subject. I found it was a subject he had

cloth” of some “laborious Dutch artist,” whose painting is meant to “represent the pile and softness of a woollen one” (I.5). After examining sculpture, he concludes that “[t]he disparity between the object imitating, and the object imitated” is greater in painting than in statuary, and thence provides the touchstone of this theory: “the pleasure arising from the imitation seems to be greater in proportion as this disparity is greater” (I.6). It is for this reason that painters can create works that are “indifferent, or even offensive,” whereas sculptors cannot (I.7): “[t]hat one solid and coloured object should exactly resemble another solid and coloured object, seems to be a matter of no great wonder or admiration” (I.9). For the same reason, Smith tells us, we easily tire of artificial fruits and flowers, but not a comparable imitation in painting: “[a]rtificial fruits and flowers sometimes imitate so exactly the natural objects which they represent, that they frequently deceive us. We soon grow weary of them, however” (I.10).

Smith buttresses his point next by examining the art of tapestry. Though he acknowledges that a piece of tapestry might be “inferior” to a comparable painting, “[w]e take into consideration, not only the disparity between the imitating and the imitated object, but the awkwardness of the instruments of imitation; and if it is as well as any thing that can be expected from these, if it is better than the greater part of what actually comes from them, we are often not only contented but highly pleased” (I.12). This also explains why tapestry-weavers are proportionally less compensated than painters, yet their works come “commonly

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considered with attention. When I saw him afterwards I told him that my notions perfectly agreed with his, that I had wrote a great deal on detached bits of paper, which I would put together and beg him to look over. He said he could not, for the reason above mentioned: that he was about finishing an essay on the subject. (Hilles 155-56)

Discourse XI was delivered in 1784, two years after Reynolds’s letter.

much dearer to market” (I.13), which is why so few people can afford them. Smith then continues on to topiary (the same discussion we witnessed in Chapter Three):

When the yew-tree is presented to the eye in this artificial shape, the gardener does not mean that it should be understood to have grown in that shape: he means ... to imitate in a growing tree the ornaments of those precious materials: he means to make an object of one kind resemble another object of a very different kind; and to the original beauty of figure to join the relative beauty of imitation: but the disparity between the imitating and the imitated object is the foundation of the beauty of imitation. It is because the one object does not naturally resemble the other, that we are so much pleased with it, when by art it is made to do so. (I. 14)

Aesthetic pleasure, then, for Smith involves an act of intellection, and his language reveals that a (re)cognition is requisite for the perception of beauty. The suggestion is that the spectator must, if the pleasure is to be produced, recognize the ingenuity; if the ingenuity is not recognized, then the pleasure will not occur.

This emphasis on recognition distinguishes Smith from someone like Burke, a sensationist who insists on mere detection, not identification, of properties to produce the pleasurable affect. Burke writes:

Beauty hath usually been said to consist in certain proportions of parts. On considering the matter, I have great reason to doubt, whether beauty be at all an idea belonging to proportion. Proportion relates almost wholly to convenience, as every idea of order seems to do; and it must therefore be considered as a creature of the

understanding, rather than a primary cause acting on the senses and imagination. It is not by the force of long attention and inquiry that we find any object to be beautiful; *beauty demands no assistance from our reasoning*; even the will is unconcerned; the appearance of beauty as effectually causes some degree of love in us, as the application of ice or fire produces the ideas of heat or cold. (*Enquiry* III.ii. 129, emphasis added)<sup>15</sup>

Burke further suggests a more “instinctual” model of imitative pleasure: “we have a pleasure in imitating, and in whatever belongs to imitation as it is such, without any intervention of the reasoning faculty, but solely from our natural constitution, which providence has framed” (I.xvi, 95). Smith’s emphasis on recognition, by contrast, appears to be more Aristotelian. Indeed, Aristotle stresses the intellectual nature of imitation: the pleasure in it comes from the fact “that learning is highly pleasurable,” which is “why people enjoy seeing the reproductions: because in their viewing they find they are learning, inferring what class each object belongs to: for example that ‘this individual is a so-and-so’” (*Poetics* 48b5-19). Commenting on this passage, Gerard Else notes that “Aristotle sets a belief in the intellectuality of both the artist and the spectator or viewer.... [A]lthough not all of us have the special combination of abilities that makes the artist, we all respond—and respond *intellectually*—to his imitations” (129-30). This is in contrast to the Platonic view that the arts belong to the passions and the irrational. Smith’s essay can, in fact, be read as a modern elaboration of Aristotle’s ideas.

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<sup>15</sup> Burke attempted to render his aesthetics more cognitive in the second edition as his supplemental essay on taste introduces education and judgment. Still, though Burke does not predicate the response to beauty on a rational basis, “neither does he see it as a mere accident of sentiment; beauty always has its reasons, but they belong to providence” (Caygill 83).

Many other thinkers, like Burke, maintained the inscrutable, unconscious quality of aesthetic perception. Joseph Addison notes “[w]e are struck, we know not how, with the symmetry of anything we see, and immediately assent to the beauty of an object,” (*Spectator* No. 411, 369), while Francis Hutcheson insists that spectators do not need to be aware of, say, uniformity amidst variety in order to discern beauty:

the pleasure [of beauty] does not arise from any knowledge of principles, proportions, causes, or of the usefulness of the object; but strikes us at first with the idea of beauty: nor does the most accurate knowledge increase this pleasure of beauty.... We may have the sensation without knowing what is the occasion of it; a man’s *taste* may suggest ideas of sweets, acids, bitters, tho’ he be ignorant of the *forms* of the small bodies, or their motions, which excite these perceptions in him. (*Inquiry* I.i.xiii, I.ii.xiv, 34, 42)<sup>16</sup>

Hugh Blair echoes this view decades later: “objects strike us intuitively, and make a strong impression, when we are unable to assign the reasons of our being pleased” (10). A perceiving subject, then, according to this model, is blissfully unaware of the cause(s) of beauty. It is not the recognition of particular properties that causes beauty in such accounts; rather, beauty happens to accompany it, an account George Dickie, in his discussion of Hutcheson, aptly calls a “black box” approach (33).

Hume similarly contends that “beauty like wit, cannot be defin’d, but is discern’d only by a taste or sensation,” and continues, “beauty is such an order and construction of parts, as either by the *primary constitution* of our nature, by *custom*, or by *caprice*, is fitted to give a

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<sup>16</sup> George Dickie also notes that Hutcheson’s sense of beauty “is not cognitive at all” (11).

pleasure and satisfaction to the soul.... Pleasure and pain, therefore, are not only necessary attendants of beauty and deformity, but constitute their very essence” (299).<sup>17</sup> That which pleases, then, for whatever reason, is beautiful, an idea he shares with Dubos among others. As a result, virtually anything capable of pleasing would be considered beautiful; by consequence, “[t]here is therefore no *a priori* limitation upon the things that might become members of the class of ‘beautiful objects’” (Stolnitz 200). In fact, Hume goes so far as to suggest that whatever pleases cannot be wrong: if things “are found to please, they cannot be faults” (“Standard of Taste” 232). For Smith, on the contrary, what pleases *can* be wrong, as we saw in his discussion of class and taste. Beauty for Smith not only demands assistance from our reasoning, but is subsumed under it, and he thus resists the famous *je ne sais quoi* doctrine of aesthetic response promulgated by many others in the century. As noted in Chapter Two, Smith likewise seems to anticipate Kant’s distinction between the agreeable—that is, the *merely* agreeable—and true judgment of taste,<sup>18</sup> except that he finds the agreeable and taste far too similar.

Smith differs from his teacher and British predecessors here, though he seems to find the approach of J.P. Crousaz or Père André, theorists he almost certainly read, more congenial. These writers insisted on the firmly rational basis of proper taste. Crousaz argues that “something can be recognized as beautiful even if it does not please; for this reason, we do

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<sup>17</sup> Ralph Cohen astutely observes that in the essay on taste, Hume does not define taste, but “his implied definition of taste is considerably different from that in the *Treatise*, which defines taste as a sensation which pleases for unexplainable reasons” (271).

<sup>18</sup> Paul Guyer has recently done some much needed work on Kant’s Scottish influences. See his “The Psychology of Kant’s Aesthetics” and “Gerard and Kant.” Caygill suggests that Smith’s discussion of “the pleasure of perceiving the fitness or proportion of a means to an end apart from any consideration of the end” was a “phenomenon Kant later described as *Zweckmäßigkeit ohne Zweck*,” that is, purposiveness without purpose (85).



not define beauty as *that which pleases*” (9). Further, Crousaz continues, “proper taste makes us esteem by sentiment that which reason has approved, after it has been given enough time to examine and judge properly. The same good taste makes us reject, by a sentiment that displeases, that which the reason has condemned following a clear and judicious examination” (68).<sup>19</sup> André similarly observes that beauty is not “that which pleases at first sight to the imagination ... or organs of the body, but that which has the *right* to please by reason, and by reflection” (141, translations mine).<sup>20</sup> Smith finds such an approach more congenial, which is, in fact, reflected in his moral theory; his ethics, after all, emphasizes not what we feel, but what we ought to feel.

In short, the perception and appreciation of beauty is possible only through the “meddling intellect” for Smith, which provides a contrast with William Wordsworth. In one of his most famous passages, he writes:

Sweet is the lore which Nature brings;  
 Our meddling intellect  
 Mis-shapes the beauteous forms of things:—  
 We murder to dissect. (“The Tables Turned” ll.25-28)

Smith could not disagree more. In fact, it is the intellect, which Smith often conflates with imagination, that confers order and beauty on phenomena. Griswold notes that Smith makes

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<sup>19</sup> “une chose peut être reconnue pour belle, quoi qu’elle ne plaise pas, et que par conséquent on ne définit pas bien le Beau par *ce qui plait*”; “Le bon goût nous fait d’abord estimer par sentiment ce que la Raison auroit approuvé, après qu’elle se seroit donné le tems [sic] de l’examiner assez pour en juger sur de justes idées. Et ce même bon goût nous fait d’abord rejeter, par un sentiment qui déplait, ce que la Raison auroit condamné ensuite d’un examen éclairé et judicieux.”

<sup>20</sup> “non pas ce qui plaît au premier coup d’oeil de l’imagination ... ou des organes du corps, mais ce qui a droit de plaire à la raison et à la réflexion.”

it “abundantly clear that the beauty conceived by the imagination at the various levels is not, so far as we know, a passive assimilation of pre-existing form. The imagination is fundamentally creative.... Nature does not illuminate; our viewing of it does.... [N]ature does not come pre-sorted and organized into a coherent whole” (49, 54).<sup>21</sup> It is not the case that, for instance, the stars in the heavens are beautiful in themselves; our perception of them makes them so, hence Smith’s emphasis on (re)cognition. This projection of order explains, in part, the recurrence of one of Smith’s favourite metaphors across his works: the machine.<sup>22</sup> It is, as Griswold perceptively notes, not an organic, but a man-made contrivance: “[a] machine is designed to accomplish a certain end, whether the production of pins or the explanation of the movements of the celestial bodies. It is productive and expresses the fundamentally creative nature of the imagination” (“Imagination” 50).<sup>23</sup>

So far, Smith provides an interesting contrast with Kant, who “asserts that all judgments of beauty are *singular* judgments because the notion of beauty is not a concept” (Dickie 109). Indeed, Kant insists that “a judgment of taste is not a cognitive judgment (whether theoretical or practical) and hence is neither *based* on concepts, nor directed to them as *purposes*.... *Beautiful* is what, without a concept, is liked universally” (*Critique of Judgment* 209, 219). Kant’s famous definition of a proper aesthetic judgment as one free from concepts contrasts with Smith’s definition of beauty; *pace* Kant, Smith would argue that a

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<sup>21</sup> Rothschild also observes that “[o]rderliness for Smith is a quality which is ‘bestowed’ upon phenomena” (140).

<sup>22</sup> See “History of Ancient Physics,” 113-114; “History of Astronomy,” IV.19; TMS VII.iii.3.16, IV.2.1

<sup>23</sup> It is for this reason, Griswold adds, that “[t]he many ‘teleological’ or even, on occasion, ‘religious’ statements in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* must be understood in connection with this aestheticized, speculative outlook” (48).

true judgment of beauty is only possible with some determinate concept. A conceptually barren aesthetic judgment carries no weight for Smith. In the case of imitation, the concept for Smith is the recognition of an ingenious overcoming of disparity, a *difficulté surmontée*, and even the pleasure of sympathy for Smith relies on a concept: the consciousness of sympathetic concord (I will return to both below).

Smith shares this notion of a conceptual beauty with Allan Ramsay, who as we have seen, makes a similar distinction as Smith in his *Dialogue on Taste*: “to confound the objects of judgment with those of taste and feeling ... nothing can be more vulgar and unphilosophical.... Whatever has a rule or standard to which it may be referred, and is capable of comparison, is not the object of taste, but of reason and judgment” (9).<sup>24</sup> In other words, like Smith, Ramsay argues that taste is *mere* taste, and more robust aesthetic judgments must be conceptual. Interestingly, Smith’s injunction to the reader in “Imitative Arts” is also non-Kantian, since Kant insists that “there is no rule by which someone could be compelled to acknowledge that something is beautiful. No one can use reasons or principles to talk us into a judgment on whether some garment, house, or flower is beautiful” (215-216). This is, however, precisely what Smith attempts to do in the imitation essay, where he exhorts the reader to correct his or her negative appraisal of topiary (I.14).

Smith’s insistence on (re)cognition in aesthetics extends to his pronouncements on figurative language, which he generally shuns, at least in theory. It also partly explains his aversion to the ancient and modern rhetorical treatises as a “silly set of Books and not at all

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<sup>24</sup> Though Ramsay’s ideas appeared in print earlier (1755), it is difficult to determine whether he influenced Smith, or if their ideas had a mutual genesis, perhaps in conversation at the Edinburgh Society.

instructive” given their “consideration of these figures, and the divisions and subdivisions of them” (LRBL i.v.59). In fact, in his second rhetoric lecture, Smith begins by insisting that “[w]hat are generally called ornaments or flowers in language, as allegorical, metaphorical and such like expressions are very apt to make ones stile dark and perplex’d. Studying much to vary the expression leads one also frequently into a dungeon of metaphorical obscurity” (i.13). This is one of the reasons he took exception to Shaftesbury’s style. Metaphors must be carefully deployed, for Smith; they must be intelligible and rational, a view that again reveals the cognitive basis of true aesthetic perception and appraisal. He objects to the poetic license of someone like Nathaniel Lee, who “makes his Alexander say, ‘clear room there for a whirlwind or I blow you up like dust,” which is objectionable because “the objects compared are noways adequate[;] the Strength of A Whirlwind is a much more terrible object than the fury of even an Alexander.” For the same reason, he objects to several Homeric metaphors, such as “when he says, Diomed resembled an Ass driven by Boys” (i.66).

Most significantly, Smith objects to mixed metaphors, a view he shares with Aristotle and Quintilian, though he applies the same thinking to all tropes: “[m]etaphors should never be run and mixed together as in that case they can never be both just.” Shakespeare, he insists, is the guiltiest, as when he famously writes in Hamlet’s soliloquy, “to arm ourselves against a sea of troubles.” Smith objects: “[h]ere there is a plain absurdity as there is no meaning in ones putting on armour to stem the seas” (i.v.68).<sup>25</sup> He emphasizes, on the contrary, the “justness or propriety of metaphors” (i.v.67). On the same basis, Smith

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<sup>25</sup> He also objects to Pope’s emendation of “sea” to “siedge” since this is not an isolated fault of Shakespeare’s.

criticizes Pope, who “applies adjectives to substantives with which they can not at all agree, as when he speaks of the *brown horror of the groves*.... Brown joined to horror conveys no idea at all.—Thomson is often guilty of this fault and Shakespeare almost continually” (i.188). Smith would probably share Samuel Johnson’s famous criticism of the metaphysical poets: Johnson complains that in their works “[t]he most heterogeneous ideas are yoked by violence together” (“Life of Cowley” 348).

Smith emphasizes ease of intelligibility. He notes in his *Lectures on Jurisprudence* that “we find a pleasure in beholding an object which ... adds that other quality of being easily and distinctly comprehended on the first sight” (LJ(A) vi.13). For this same reason, “the gentle bendings of curvilinear [sic] figures are generally preferred to the abrupt and irregular angles of some” and “the constantly varying direction of the circle, which at the same time is always similar and easily conceived, is preferred to the more varied figures of the ellipse, parabola, and hyperbola, and the Archimedean spiral” (vi.14). Thus, it is safe to say that Smith would likely not be a votary of much (post)modern art.

Smith clarifies and corroborates his emphasis on recognition with his insistence that deception plays no part in our aesthetic experience. He suggests strongly that pleasurable aesthetic response is never unconscious, vague, inscrutable, mysterious, or indeterminate; it is, on the contrary, always clear and precise. He demystifies aesthetic experience, which ought to be predictable. Predictability, in fact, seems to be a desideratum of Smith’s, whether in aesthetics, ethics, or meta-science. Smith illustrates his view on deception by elaborating on the difference between artificial fruits and fruits that are reproduced on a two dimensional surface of painting:

Artificial fruits and flowers sometimes imitate so exactly the natural objects which they represent, that they frequently deceive us. We soon grow weary of them, however; and, though they seem to want nothing but the freshness and the flavour of natural fruits and flowers, we cannot pardon them, in the same manner, for thus wanting what it is altogether impossible they should have. But we do not grow weary of a good flower and fruit painting. We do not grow weary of the foliage of the Corinthian capital, or of the flowers which sometimes ornament the frieze of that order. Such imitations, however, never deceive us; their resemblance to the original objects is always much inferior to that of artificial fruits and flowers. Such as it is, however, we are contented with it. (“Imitative Arts” I.10)

Productions such as *trompe l’oeils* would bemuse Smith. He elaborates in the same essay that the “works of the great masters in Statuary and Painting ... never produce their effect by deception. They never are, and it never is intended that they should be mistaken for the real objects which they represent. Painted Statuary may sometimes deceive an inattentive eye: proper Statuary never does.”<sup>26</sup> He notes that artforms that “please by deception,” such as “the little pieces of perspective in Painting” or artificial fruits, “represent always some very simple, as well as insignificant, object; a roll of paper, for example, or the steps of a staircase, in the dark corner of some passage or gallery.” These, however, are “generally the works too of some very inferior artists” and “after being seen once, and producing the little surprise which it is meant they should excite, together with the mirth which commonly

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<sup>26</sup> Walter Payne Knight shares Smith’s insight here: “coloring statues to imitate life ... becomes offensive and disgusting to all experienced and intelligent persons: for such persons never look for deception” (103).

accompanies it, they never please more, but appear ever after insipid and tiresome.” By contrast, the “proper pleasure” we receive from these two imitative arts,

so far from being the effect of deception, is altogether incompatible with it. That pleasure is founded altogether upon our wonder at seeing an object of one kind represent so well an object of a very different kind, and upon our admiration of the art which surmounts so happily that disparity which Nature had established between them.<sup>27</sup> The nobler works of Statuary and Painting appear to us a sort of wonderful phaenomena, differing in this respect from the wonderful phaenomena of Nature, that they carry, as it were, their own explication along with them, and demonstrate, even to the eye, the way and manner in which they are produced. (I.15-16).

Deception, then, is incompatible with (re)cognition, and therefore cannot produce aesthetic pleasure. It is not merely the disparity between the imitating and imitated objects that somehow pleases, but the *consciousness* of it. Indeed, the passage on deception just quoted emphasizes the spectator’s awareness: it is “our wonder” followed by “our admiration” that produces this pleasure; the disparity between objects presupposes mental activity. Our awareness, in other words, of a disparity between object imitated and imitating object is a necessary condition of our aesthetic pleasure. De Marchi similarly observes that “[t]o be truly admirable, artifice must be understandable, not a matter of mystery or an object of wonder only” (“Ingenuity” 139). Thus, Smith would seem resist the famous Horatian prescription, *ars est celare artem*, that is, “the art is to conceal the art,” at least as far as aesthetic perception and judgment are concerned.

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<sup>27</sup> I examine some of the connections with this idea and Smith’s labour theory of value below.

Smith reiterates his position on deception when he discusses the dramatic unities. He argues that a playwright should preserve the unity of time, but at the same time he rejects prevailing critical arguments based on the notion of deception. He therefore attacks the critical view that failing to observe the unities destroys the illusion of reality. Smith insists that “in reality we are never thus deceived. We know that we are in the play-house, that the persons before us are actors, and that the thing represented either happened before or perhaps never happened at all.” He continues by noting that the “pleasure we have in a dramaticall performance no more arises from deception than that which we have in looking at Picture; No one ever imagined that he saw the Sacrifice of Iphigenia” (LRBL ii. 85-86). I will discuss the dramatic unities in more depth in the next section, but for now it is worth pointing out that Smith subscribes to the unities while denying that deception (or a need for *vraisemblance*) plays any part. Deception and ignorance play no part in one’s pleasurable aesthetic response, according to Smith, but are actually incompatible with it.

The same awareness or recognition that is seen in imitation extends to sympathetic pleasure. In his footnoted response to Hume in the second edition of the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Smith argues that there are two things to note in the sympathetic exchange. The first is “the sympathetic passion of the spectator” while the second is “the emotion which arises from his observing the perfect coincidence between this sympathetic passion in himself, and the original passion in the person principally concerned. This last emotion, in which the sentiment of approbation properly consists, is always agreeable and delightful” (TMS I.iii.1.9). In short, as Fleischacker notes, “sympathy *itself* need not be pleasurable, only the *consciousness of* sympathy is” (“Hume and Smith” 300). Even here, then, a recognition and awareness of some sort must occur; the pleasure of sympathy is predicated



on the *consciousness* of concord (a point I will return to). In the end, we do not merely sympathize with a person but are well *aware* of why we do so, whereas for Hume, Burke, and Kames, sympathy simply happens and is pleasurable for its own sake.

Smith's repudiation of *je ne sais quoi* is also significant since he thereby resists what Pierre Bourdieu terms the ideology of natural taste. Bourdieu writes,

The ideology of natural taste owes its plausibility and its efficacy to the fact that, like all the ideological strategies generated in the everyday class struggle, it *naturalizes* real differences, converting differences in the mode of acquisition of culture into differences of nature; it only recognizes as legitimate the relation to culture (or language) which least bears the visible marks of its genesis, which has nothing 'academic,' 'scholastic,' 'bookish,' 'affected' or 'studied' about it, but manifests by its ease and naturalness that true culture is nature. (68)

In other words, proper taste must just "happen" and cannot really be explained or taught. The *je ne sais quoi* "judgment," as Bourdieu has argued, has the advantage of justifying the dominant class's tastes as instinctual and beyond explanation or reason.

By contrast, Smith demystifies aesthetic experience, and in doing so, he democratizes it. While describing the conditions of imitative beauty, Smith speaks inclusively, using the first-person plural of "our wonder" and "our admiration." In addition, despite his insistence on the cognitive pleasure of, say, imitative ingenuity, he remarks that even an uneducated spectator can perceive the criterion of beauty:

The eye, *even of an unskilful spectator*, immediately discerns, in some measure, how it is that a certain modification of figure in Statuary, and of brighter and darker colours in Painting, can represent, with so much truth and vivacity, the actions, passions, and behaviour of men, as well as a great variety in other objects. The pleasing wonder of ignorance is accompanied with the still more pleasing satisfaction of science. We wonder and are amazed at the effect; and we are pleased ourselves, and happy to find that we can comprehend, in some measure, how that wonderful effect is produced. (“Imitative Arts” I. 16, emphasis added)<sup>28</sup>

Thus, even an unskilled spectator is capable of this aesthetic response that rests on a recognition of some kind. The aesthetic perception and pleasure of sympathy, which relies on a consciousness of concord, is also presumably attainable by most. By contrast, Archibald Alison, who promulgated an associationist theory, would later contend, “[n]o man, in general, is sensible to beauty in those subjects with regard to which he has not previous ideas. The beauty of a theory, or of a relic of antiquity, is unintelligible to a peasant. The charms of the country are altogether lost upon a citizen who has passed his life in town” (80).

In democratizing taste, Smith obviates the Humean council of judges—that is, that the standard of taste must rest on their shared judgment—or the idea of qualified critics, a proposal that goes back to Dubos, who is in fact less democratic than he appears (II.xxii-

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<sup>28</sup> It may indeed be objected that Smith goes too far in this direction. Peter Jones notes that Smith “omits to acknowledge the necessary assumption that everyone has to learn their repertoire of responses in a familiar tradition and culture, although his observations on different cultures entitles him to the admission” (“Aesthetics” 69).

xxiii). In this sense, Smith is far less of an elitist than his contemporaries. Furuya has recently made a similar observation:

For Smith, a modern commercial society appeared to be a place where not only good critics but also the vast majority of common people were constantly making the judgments of merit. Smith's new concepts of sympathy and an impartial spectator were to show that most of the common people were capable of reaching agreement about aesthetic judgments and achieving it impartially.... A standard of taste may spring, if it does, from sympathy and the universal psychology of beauty, not from educated taste and the agreement of informed critics, as argued by Hume. (52, 54)

Thus, regardless of one's class, culture, and (presumably) gender, the pleasure of imitation or the contemplation of, say, a scientific theory, arises from some consciousness or perception of ingenuity and order. This pleasure obtains "whatever the relativity of taste, and whatever the idiosyncratic feelings of the individual concerned" (Deleule 32-33, translation mine).<sup>29</sup> This Smith, one who democratizes aesthetic experience, is consonant with the Smith that has emerged in recent scholarship, one that is more liberal than his previous (and inaccurate) reputation as an unfeeling promoter of laissez-faire capitalism.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> "quelle que soit par ailleurs la relativité de la norme du goût, quelle que soit aussi l'idiosyncrasie passionnelle de l'individu concerné, le plaisir éprouvé se lie d'emblée à l'émerveillement suscité par la phénomène de la ressemblance et à l'admiration induite par la prouesse technique."

<sup>30</sup> Amartya Sen observes that Smith was "deeply concerned about ... inequality and poverty" ("Uses" 262). For more egalitarian and liberal readings of Smith, see Fleischacker (*Wealth*), Rothschild, and Darwall.

## III

Much of the eighteenth-century discourse of taste and beauty privileged immediacy as a guarantor of legitimate beauty or feeling. Joseph Addison, writing near the beginning of the century, notes that “[w]e are struck, we know not how ... and immediately assent to the beauty of an object, without inquiring into the particular causes and occasions of it” and “[b]eauty ... immediately diffuses a secret satisfaction and complacency through the imagination” (No. 411, 369; No. 412, 372). Hutcheson posits an internal aesthetic sense analogous to touch or sight that immediately discerns whether something is beautiful: “[t]his superior Power of Perception is justly called a Sense, because of its Affinity to the other Senses in this, that the Pleasure does not arise from any Knowledge of Principles, Proportions, Causes, or of the Usefulness of the Object; but strikes us at first with the Idea of Beauty” (*Inquiry* I.i.xiii, 34). John Gilbert Cooper describes taste as that

instantaneous Glow of Pleasure which thrills thro’ our whole Frame, and seized upon the Applause of the Heart, before the intellectual Power, Reason, can descend from the Throne of the Mind to ratify it’s [sic] Approbation either when we receive into the Soul beautiful Images thro’ the Organs of bodily Senses; or the Decorum of an amiable Character thro’ the Faculties of moral Perception. (3)

Alexander Gerard observes that taste “is a power which receives its perception *immediately*, as soon as its object is exhibited, previous to any reason concerning the qualities of the object, or the causes of the perceptions. It is a power which exerts itself *independent of volition*.” Although “[b]eautiful forms have uniformity, variety, and proportion,” he

continues, “the pleasure they give us is an immediate sensation, prior to our analysing them, or discovering by reason that they have these qualities” (III.i, 162).

Immediacy was thus a commonplace of eighteenth-century aesthetic thought, and was deployed as a means of countering disagreements and ostensibly legitimating existing tastes. Valihora observes that the judgment of taste or beauty for many theorists was in fact “not so much a judgment as the discernment of a natural fact. Because a judgment of beauty is unthought, it offers a much surer means of making judgments with which others will agree than any kind of rational appeal,” at least in theory (84).<sup>31</sup> Because such “judgments” are immediate,

they are not only certain, like intuitive knowledge, but somehow natural, and therefore they can be assumed to be shared. The immediacy of a judgment of taste offers a means of circumventing both the potential casuistry of reason and the habits of mind associated with the discourse of custom, which distort our connection to the natural. (85-86)<sup>32</sup>

Since the pronouncements of this immediate, putatively universal taste were pre-rational, they defied easy explanation or corrigibility. As with *je ne sais quoi*, immediacy has the

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<sup>31</sup> Luc Ferry similarly observes that though “the reduction of beauty to pure sentiment [should] lead to an absolute relativism, the inverse happens: it is because the expression of sentiment, if it be authentic, cannot mislead, that the Beautiful can be the object of a common sense to which science can not reasonably lay claim” (56).

<sup>32</sup> Noggle also emphasises how immediacy was used to counter corruptive influences on taste. Pope, for instance, “invokes immediacy in *The Epistle to Burlington* to support an anti-commercialist brand of civic-humanist judgment,” while “in Hume’s *History of England*, a notion of tasteful immediacy supports his narrative of Britain’s progress.... Pope understands immediacy as taste’s chief bulwark *against* the passionate mediation of the corrupting power of social fantasy and luxury” (9, 45).

consequence of inscribing a natural taste in persons while concealing its mode of acquisition, as Bourdieu argued, thus ossifying and perpetuating the *status quo*.

Smith resists this commonplace of eighteenth-century aesthetic thought, which perhaps explains what might be perceived as his antipathy to the very concept of taste witnessed earlier: the metaphor “taste” suggests unmediated, immediate, and even inscrutable pleasure, whereas real beauty for Smith is not mysterious, inexplicable, or immediate. Just as his ethics resists the immediate and spontaneous, so too does his aesthetics; he wishes proper aesthetic experience to be controlled, deliberate, and conscious. In fact, Smith’s resistance to the immediate characterizes much of his thought, including his master-concept of sympathy.

Ironically perhaps, introducing ratiocination into the process of aesthetic perception attenuates the immunity of aesthetic judgment from external corruption. If theorists such as Burke and Hutcheson argued for a pre-rational aesthetic response that simply happens without the perceiver’s consent, deviations become more difficult to account for since they should not occur. By contrast, Smith obviates this problem by suggesting the grounds for some kind of standard which at the same time accounts less problematically for corruption and aberrations; he denies the immediacy that was supposed to guarantee against deviations. Smith’s more rational basis provides a standard of beauty but, at the same time, allows within it the potential for corruption. In other words, if a spectator does not see the beauty in an imitation, for instance, it is not necessarily because the spectator’s judgment or perception is somehow incorrigibly corrupted, but that the person in question simply has not thought about it enough. If everyone honestly and seriously cogitated on a successful imitation, for instance, there would be no disagreement(s).

It must be stressed, however, that Smith is perhaps being hortatory here. The tone of the passage from “Imitative Arts” in which Smith implores the reader to correct his or her aesthetic appraisal (I. 16) suggests that it is wishful thinking on his part. Smith was by no means a utopian, either politically or aesthetically, and here, he reveals his aesthetic scepticism once again. The fact that he could not reconcile two things here—his normativity and consciousness of the intractability of social factors—perhaps explains why he never completed or published the essay on imitation.<sup>33</sup>

Following his disavowal of immediacy, Smith objects to novelty, one of Addison’s three sources of aesthetic pleasure, as a valid aesthetic category. The new and uncommon, Addison writes, “raises a pleasure in the Imagination because it fills the Soul with an agreeable Surprise, gratifies its Curiosity, and gives it an Idea of which it was not before possess” (*Spectator* No. 412, 372). Smith does not agree with Addison’s assessment. In his rhetoric lectures, Smith insists that “[n]ew objects are never agreeable in description merely from being new. There must be something else in them than mere novelty before they can please us much.” New objects that are really in front of us may be “somewhat agreeable” because “they may strike us with wonder; [t]he whole object is at once conceived; But in Discriptions, [sic] the Idea is presented by degrees; [t]he object opens slowly up so that the Surprise cannot be great at the novelty of the object.” He takes exception to Addison’s preference for Ovid, an author “who abounds more in descriptions of this Sort” than any other. In Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, Smith continues,

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<sup>33</sup> Harkin suggests that such tensions also likely explain the gap in Smith’s corpus, which “should be read not as a symptom of simple fatigue or incapacity, but rather as the sign of a struggle with the problems or contradictions in his own grand narratives of literature and history” (“Missing Primitives” 431).

every change that happens is described in all its stages; we hear of men with the heads and paws of Bears, women who are beginning to take root in the ground and their hair and hands sprouting into leaves. Mr Addison seems to be pleased with these descriptions, but to me they don't at all seem pleasing, both for the reason I already mentioned, and because they are so very much out of the common course of nature as to shock us by their incredibility. For my part, when I see Tithonus in a picture with the wings and legs of grasshopper, I feel no pleasure at seeing such an unnaturall and inconceivable object. (LRBL i.156-57)

Smith would also argue with Hobbes, who claims that “novelty causeth admiration, and admiration curiosity, which is a delightful appetite of knowledge,” (“Answer” 453) and unequivocally privilege the pleasure of cognition or science (in the etymological sense of *scire*, “to know”). Though the pleasure of novelty and surprise may exist, they are fugitive for Smith. This at least in part explains Smith’s scant comments on the novel. He derides the form because of its sole reliance on suspense: “[a]s newness is the only merit in a Novel and curiosity the only motive which induces us to read them, the writers are necessitated to make use of this method to keep it up” (ii.30).<sup>34</sup> This is in contrast to epics, whose plots are narrated in advance, and tragedy, which “can bear to be read again and again[. T]ho the incidents be not new to us they are new to the actors and by this means interest us.” The pleasure we derive from watching or reading a familiar play, in fact, “often grows by

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<sup>34</sup> It is tempting to speculate whether Smith would prefer Ann Radcliffe’s novels, in which wonder is followed by knowledge, over other practitioners of the Gothic novel, such as Horace Walpole, whose works rely on suspense and wonder.



Repetition” (ii.30).<sup>35</sup> The twin pillars of classical literature, then, differ thus from the novel. One should be cautious, however, in reading his remarks as a blanket condemnation of the genre since Smith also expresses some admiration especially for what we would call sentimental novelists, arguing that “[t]he poets and romance writers, who best paint the refinements and delicacies of love and friendship, and of all other private and domestic affections, Racine and Voltaire; Richardson, Maurivau, and Riccoboni; are ... much better instructors than Zeno, Chrysippus, or Epictetus” (TMS III.3.14).

Along with novelty, Smith disavows wonder and surprise as sources of aesthetic pleasure. As early as the “History of Astronomy,” he describes wonder in unflattering terms. When presented with an unaccountable, unfamiliar phenomenon, Smith writes,

the memory cannot, from all its stores, cast up any image that nearly resembles this strange appearance.... It stands alone and by itself in the imagination, and refuses to be grouped or confounded with any set of objects whatever. The imagination and memory exert themselves to no purpose, and in vain look around all their classes of ideas in order to find one under which it may be arranged. They fluctuate to no purpose from thought to thought, and we remain still uncertain and undetermined where to place it, or what to think of it.

It is this process, this “fluctuation and vain recollection” that constitutes “the sentiment properly called *Wonder*,” and which occasions

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<sup>35</sup> Erich Auerbach’s famous discussion in *Mimesis* of Homeric narrative emphasizes its lack of suspense as a narrative device: “the element of suspense is very slight in the Homeric poems; nothing in their entire style is calculated to keep the reader or hearer breathless” (2). Tragedies were likewise often if not always based on well-known mythico-cultural episodes; the audience would have known well in advance what would, for instance, befall Oedipus.

that staring, and sometimes that rolling of the eyes, that suspension of the breath, and that swelling of the heart, which we may all observe, both in ourselves and others, when wondering at some new object, and which are the natural symptoms of uncertain and undetermined thought. What sort of a thing can that be? What is that like? are the questions which, upon such an occasion, we are all naturally disposed to ask. (II.3)

Indeed, Harrison aptly summarizes wonder for Smith as “a malfunctioning of the imagination, which needs to operate with the smooth, easy, gliding efficiency of a well-oiled machine or a well-constructed system” (95).

Smith echoes his denigration of the sentiment of wonder in the *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres*. The first historians and poets

chose the marvellous for their Subject as that which was most likely to please a Rude and Ignorant People. Wonder is the passion which in such a people will be most easily excited. Their ignorance renders them Credulous and easily imposed on, and this Credulity makes them delighted with Fables that would not be relished by a people of more knowledge.... [W]hat has nothing to recommend it but its wonderfullness can no longer please than it is believ'd. (ii.61)

Samuel Johnson shares this equation of wonder with ignorance. He writes in *Rambler* 137, “[w]onder is a pause of reason, a sudden cessation of the mental progress, which lasts only while the understanding is fixed upon some single idea, and is at an end when it recovers force enough to divide the object into its parts, or mark the intermediate gradations from the

first agent to the last consequence.... [I]gnorance is often the effect of wonder” (417).<sup>36</sup>

This provides yet another contrast with Burke, for whom wonder, obscurity and the like characterize the sublime—in fact, Burke adds that a “clear idea is ... another name for a little idea,” a sentiment with which Smith would disagree (II.iv.106).<sup>37</sup> Unlike Burke but like Johnson, Smith criticizes wonder for its basis in ignorance. The uneasiness associated with wonder, as described by Smith, suggests further that his system disallows any aesthetics of pain, a point that I will return to in the following chapter (even Smithian sympathy with pain, in fact, becomes an unadulterated beauty).

Smith’s disavowal of wonder (with its ignorance) and the inscrutable in general is consonant with his uneasiness with the sublime. The experience of the sublime, at least of the unruly, Burkean variety, leaves no space for cognition or ratiocination. According to its theorizers, the sublime simply overpowers an otherwise passive perceiver; as Burke states, it “anticipates our reasonings, and hurries us on by an irresistible force” (*Enquiry* II.i, 101). In other words, it simply happens: there is no active cognition, a circumstance that is alien to Smith’s aesthetics. Addison, by contrast, embraces such experience, arguing that “our imagination loves ... to grasp at anything that is too big for its capacity. We are flung into a pleasing astonishment at such unbounded views, and feel a delightful stillness and amazement in the soul when at the apprehension of them” (No. 412, 371).

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<sup>36</sup> There is another connection here with Wordsworth, who later argued that “we must distinguish between wonder and legitimate admiration.... Wonder is the natural product of ignorance” (489-90).

<sup>37</sup> Frans De Bruyn makes a similar observation. For Burke, “wonder or astonishment [is] ... one of the chief concomitants of the sublime,” but which “approaches for Johnson too closely to ‘the dangerous prevalence of imagination’” (“Leviathan,” 209).

It would appear that this immediacy and unwilled, passive dimension of the sublime renders it unpalatable for Smith. As a result, he objects to sublime experience and by extension then-current theories of it. “Unconscious” aesthetic pleasure, of which the sublime is perhaps exemplary, is either undesirable or impossible for Smith. Indeed, it is only “when knowledge supplies the links between the objects [that] the irritation of sublimity resolves into the experience of beauty: knowledge produces beauty” (Janowitz 14). Wonder, then, is only useful, as it is in the imitation essay, insofar as it conduces to admiration, which is predicated on knowledge. In fact, based as it is on knowledge, “admiration gradually increases” whereas surprise and wonder are more “violent,” sentiments Smith’s aesthetics generally avoids (LRBL i.165).

Smith’s aesthetics, along with his thought in general, abhors the inscrutable and “gaps,” a recurring theme in his *oeuvre*. He describes the mind’s response to two unconnected objects in sequence: “[i]t naturally hesitates and, as it were, pauses upon the brink of this interval; it endeavours to find out something which may fill up the gap, which, like a bridge, may so far at least unite those seemingly distant objects, as to render the passage of the thought betwixt them smooth, and natural, and easy” (“Astronomy” II.8). He echoes this idea in his rhetoric lectures. In discussing narration, he insists that “[w]e should never leave any chasm or Gap in the thread of the narration even tho there are no remarkable events to fill up that space. The very notion of a gap makes us uneasy for what should have happened in that time” (ii.36).<sup>38</sup> Smith’s emphasis on smooth cognition also explains his preference for the dramatic unities, which I will discuss in Chapter Seven.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Smith corroborates these remarks in his *Lectures on Jurisprudence*: “[e]asy connection also renders objects agreeable; when we see no reason for the contiguity of the parts, when they are without any natural connection, when they have neither a proper resemblance nor contrast, they never fail of being disagreeable” (LJ(B) 208).

In connection with the preceding, Smith expresses distaste for poetry that is fragmented, especially that of someone such as Pindar. Smith takes exception to the “want of connection” in narration and especially passionate, lyric poetry (LRBL ii.36)—in fact, “[t]he higher the Rapture the more broken is the expression.” Smith continues by noting that “[a]ll the Lyric Poets are, in this way desultatory [sic], and Pindar the most raptorous [sic] of all is the most unconnected” (LRBL ii.121). Smith would deprecate such poetry since, as Vivenza aptly notes, his “methodical mind, which sought order and ‘connection’ in everything” is “struck by the vehement juxtapositions, the sudden transformations, the whimsically intersecting images” (167). In other words, such poetry would not be conducive to the smooth mental operation of a machine.<sup>40</sup>

Valid aesthetic judgments for Smith involve consciousness of some skill or *telos*, and this connects with his insistence that admiration is in fact *the* criterion of his aesthetics. We admire the moral skill, as it were, of the suffering agent. The ideal sympathetic exchange culminates in a recognition of harmony followed by admiration (an idea I will return to in the next chapter). Admiration is the “sentiment of complete sympathy and approbation,” of which the exemplary figure for Smith is Cato of Utica, who, “surrounded on all sides by his enemies, unable to resist them, disdaining to submit to them ... yet never shrinking from his misfortunes, never supplicating with the lamentable voice of wretchedness ... provides a

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<sup>39</sup> As Ian Duncan argues, Smith “cleaves to the neoclassical unities of time, space and action because they secure an internal, subjective unity for the reader” (49), a unity that presumably allows spectators to cogitate smoothly and judge.

<sup>40</sup> Smith’s position on the lyric would be consistent with literary history. Considered as a lower form of poetry for much of Western literary history, the lyric would become the paradigmatic literary form under the Romantics only a few decades later (Abrams 85).

spectacle which even the gods themselves might behold with pleasure and admiration” (TMS I.iii.1.13). We also admire the artist’s skill in surmounting difficulty to make a skillful imitation, or that of a philosopher or scientist whose theory that takes unaccountable phenomena and provides a pleasing, coherent account that soothes the imagination. In fact, the “Newtonian method” of philosophy Smith admired “is vastly more ingenious and for that reason more engaging,” and “gives us a pleasure” that the Aristotelian method does not (LRBL ii.133-134).

As has been noted briefly, *difficulté surmontée*, or overcome difficulty, is a principle that seems to characterize Smith’s aesthetics. The attribution comes from Smith’s first biographer, Dugald Stewart:

In accounting for the pleasure we receive from these arts, it had early occurred to him as a fundamental principle, that a very great part of it arises from the difficulty of the imitation; a principle which was probably suggested to him by that of the *difficulté surmontée*, by which some French critics had attempted to explain the effect of versification and of rhyme.<sup>41</sup> This principle Mr Smith pushed to the greatest possible length, and referred to it, with singular ingenuity, a great variety of phenomena in all the different fine arts. It led him, however, to some conclusions, which appear, at first view at least, not a little paradoxical; and I cannot help thinking, that it warped his

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<sup>41</sup> The phrase is, perhaps unsurprisingly, Voltaire’s, and it occurs in his exchange with La Motte over the merits of rhyme. Gerard also seems to have found it congenial: “[w]hen the conception of an object is attended with very considerable difficulty, the pleasure which we feel in the exertion of mind necessary for overcoming this difficulty, is increased by the joy with which we reflect on our success in having surmounted it” (10).

judgment in many of the opinions which he was accustomed to give on the subject of poetry. (III.14)<sup>42</sup>

It is worth noting that Stewart extends the touchstone to all the fine arts. Though he uses the term pejoratively—and suggests it is an undesirable Gallicism—his assessment seems accurate. Recall that Smith insists that the pleasure that arises from perceiving a successful and ingenious imitation is predicated on “our wonder at seeing an object of one kind represent so well an object of a very different kind, and upon our admiration of the art which surmounts so happily that disparity which Nature had established between them.” This sentence expresses *difficulté surmontée* in Smith’s own words, and is perhaps the precise passage Stewart had in mind.

This *difficulté surmontée* also suggests a link to Smith’s famous idea of the labour theory of value, the latter of which Karl Marx later adopted in his economic analyses, and which serves as another bridge between the “Imitative Arts” and the *Wealth of Nations*.<sup>43</sup> The idea holds that the amount of labour contained in an item largely determines its value and price. Similarly, the amount of labour that inheres in an imitation, for instance, will determine its beauty. Even Smith’s formulation of sympathy relies to an extent on an

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<sup>42</sup> Joseph Warton, who lived with Smith “many years in a state of intimacy,” also makes this connection. In a long note to Pope’s second epistle (to a Lady) on the subject of rhyme, he notes, “Dr. Adam Smith, as well as Fontenelle, thought that much of the pleasure we receive from the imitative arts arose from the difficulty of imitation. Voltaire also, in the preface to his Oedipus, talks of the pleasure arising from the *difficulté surmontée* with respect to rhyme” (III, 232). In the same discussion, Stewart goes on to note that Smith’s admiration for French dramatists resulted “from the general character of his taste, which delighted more to remark that pliancy of genius which accommodates itself to established rules, than to wonder at the bolder flights of an undisciplined imagination” (III.15).

<sup>43</sup> De Marchi also argues that “Imitative Arts” should be read as “a pendant” to *Wealth of Nations* (“Ingenuity” 147).

analogous logic. The ideal sympathetic exchange for Smith—unlike Hume or Burke—is characterized by its difficulty. The ideal exchange is laborious: the spectator must “endeavour” and “strive” to sympathize with the afflicted, while the latter must “flatten” the “sharpness” of what he or she feels (TMS I.i.4.6, 7). In short, the greater the difficulty of obtaining or proffering sympathy, the greater the beauty of the correspondence of sympathy. Smith uses admiration consistently to describe the paradigmatic sympathetic exchange and aesthetic response, which often results from an overcome difficulty, a point I will return to in Chapter Six.

Similarly, Smith’s somewhat anachronistic preference for rhyme—which, had Johnson known about, he “should have hugged him”—is at least partly explained by the same principle (Boswell 303). It was certainly Voltaire’s defence of it. In short, Smith wishes to invest the recognition of ingenuity (of, say, imitation) as a transhistorical standard since its pleasure occurs (or should occur) despite idiosyncrasies and vagaries of taste. This desire also underwrites Smith’s labour theory of value that, as Labio notes, he wanted to predicate “on a natural standard which countered the randomness of history” (138). However, as noted earlier, Smith perhaps recognizes that this is wishful thinking—he is aware that such a standard may not prevail. Further, it is significant to note that this beauty of imitation, this recognition of ingenuity, resists the pull of sympathy—as noted earlier, “sympathy” is not mentioned in the imitation essay. In so doing, Smith attempts to avoid the problems of sympathy in influencing aesthetic judgment that he read in Hume’s account, as noted earlier in Chapter Four.

It is worth noting, finally, that Smith’s emphasis on ease of intelligibility, clarity, connection, and the like leads to what should be considered his master-concept after



sympathy: *tranquillity*. His emphasis on the latter, in fact, provides another link between his ethics, aesthetics, jurisprudence, and meta-science. It recurs throughout his corpus, and no fewer than four-dozen times in his *Theory of Moral Sentiments* alone. Though Smith's debt to the Stoics has recently been questioned, there is no doubt that his ethics is suffused with tranquillity—the Stoic *ataraxia*; it is his ethical and aesthetic desideratum. Indeed, Smith tells us that happiness “consists in tranquillity and enjoyment. Without tranquillity there can be no enjoyment; and where there is perfect tranquillity there is scarce any thing which is not capable of amusing. But in every permanent situation, where there is no expectation of change, the mind of every man ... returns to its natural and usual state of tranquillity” (TMS III.3.30). The poor man's son examined in the previous section, who spends much of his life pursuing “the idea of a certain artificial and elegant repose which he may never arrive at ... sacrifices a real tranquillity that is at all times in his power” (IV.1.8).

Smith also notes that we are more likely to sympathize with someone who demonstrates equanimity and tranquillity: we are “more apt to weep and shed tears for such as ... seem to feel nothing for themselves, than for those who give way to all the weakness of sorrow.... The friends of Socrates all wept when he drank the last potion, while he himself expressed the gayest and most cheerful tranquillity” (TMS I.iii.1.14). Indeed, Smith goes so far as to argue in his jurisprudential theory that polygamy is undesirable not on grounds of disutility, but largely because it does not conduce to tranquillity: “[w]here polygamy takes place, there must both be a jealousy of love and a jealousy of interest, and consequently a want of tranquillity” (LJ(B) 112).

Further, he notes that the primary purpose of philosophy (including science) seems to be “restoring the mind to its tranquillity,” and that “the repose and tranquillity of the imagination is the ultimate end of philosophy.” Indeed,

[p]hilosophy, by representing the invisible chains which bind together all these disjointed objects, endeavours to introduce order into this chaos of jarring and discordant appearances, to allay this tumult of the imagination, and to restore it, when it surveys the great revolutions of the universe, to that tone of tranquility and composure, which is both most agreeable in itself, and most suitable to its nature.

(“History of Astronomy” II.12)

As we have seen, Smith’s essay on astronomy is primarily concerned not with the veracity of scientific and philosophical theories, but “how far each of them was fitted to sooth the imagination, and render the theatre of nature a more coherent and therefore a more magnificent spectacle” since “[n]ature ... seems to abound with events which appear solitary and incoherent with all that go before them, which therefore disturb the easy movement of the imagination” (II.12).

Most significantly in this context, the recurring theme of tranquillity also explains Smith’s aversion to the sublime and to the obscure and inscrutable, along with his preference for odes, elegies, and pastorals. Smith notes that “an Ode or Elegy ... which differ [sic] little from the common state of mind are what most please us” (LRBL ii.96). By the same logic, “[g]reat passions as they are long of being raised in the persons themselves so are they not to be raised in us but by a work of a considerable length.” For this reason, Smith continues, a “temper of mind that differs very little from the common tranquillity of mind is what we can

best enter into, by the perusal of a piece of a small length” (ii. 94-95). What Smith does here, as Vivenza notes, is not so much “express a preference for those genres so much as [provide] an exposition on the relation between time and affect” and adds accurately that that “great emotions, which belong to the more complex forms of composition, require a ‘crescendo’ of events and moods” (167). This is especially true of shorter works, and provides another link to the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, namely, the narrativity of sympathy (LRBL ii.95). Finally, Smith somewhat curiously manages to connect admiration with tranquillity, *the* criterion of his aesthetics: “[a] mind not ruffled by any violent passions, but calm and tolerably serene; filled with some degree of joy not so great as to withdraw the attention, is that state of mind in which one is most disposed to admiration” (i.162).

Such, then, is the normative aesthetic strain in Smith’s extant writings. Despite his remarks that challenge taste, there another current in his *oeuvre* that allows for valid aesthetic judgment and experience. The judgments of such are based, as noted, on some controlling concept, and as with much of his thought, Smith’s aesthetics resists the immediate and the inscrutable. As has been noted already, many of Smith’s explicit pronouncements are on tragedy, with which the following section engages.

## Chapter Six

### Adam Smith's Solution to the Paradox of Tragedy

The eighteenth century in Britain is not widely considered an age of dramatic greatness. There is a general sense that, apart from a handful of plays (mostly comedies), the eighteenth century did not produce much noteworthy drama. Despite this seeming critical truism, the eighteenth century can safely be called a great age of dramatic criticism and theory. The catalogue of theorists who contributed to dramatic and especially tragic criticism or theory after the Restoration of 1660 in Britain is impressive: Thomas Rymer, John Dryden, John Dennis, Joseph Addison, David Hume, Edmund Burke, Lord Kames, Alexander Gerard, and Samuel Johnson, among others. This is, of course, to say nothing of writers on the Continent or those, like Thomas Hobbes, who did not write on the drama but whose ideas were applied to it. Tragedy looms large in the eighteenth century.

Unlike many of his philosophically inclined contemporaries, Adam Smith never devoted a work to drama or tragedy. As noted, Smith requested much of his work be burnt after his death, which likely included the “Philosophical History of all the different branches of Literature, of Philosophy, Poetry and Eloquence” (*Correspondence*, 248, 1 November 1785, 287). Since his death, however, more of Smith's works have come down to us, including his *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres* and *Essays on Philosophical Subjects*. Neither of these, however, contains any significant discussion of tragedy or drama.

Nevertheless, dramatic theory and the theatre in general were never far from his thoughts. In his biographical memoir of Smith, Dugald Stewart mentions that he was

especially interested in “the history of the theatre, both in ancient and modern times,” and that drama and the theatre “were a favourite topic of his conversation, and were intimately connected with his general principles of criticism.” Furthermore, Stewart suggests that these topics were meant to be included in Smith’s completed essay on the imitative arts (III.15). *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, moreover, itself brims with allusions to the theatre and tragic drama. Indeed, a reader cannot help but be struck by the ubiquity of tragic references in Smith’s that work; it is, in fact, the genre he refers to most. As we will see, these comments in the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* are not mere tangents; these “tangents” are, in fact, significant, and it is possible to consolidate them into a coherent theory.

Tragedy also forms an integral part of Smith’s thought in general. Griswold is justified in underlining the importance of the literary and tragic allusions in *Theory of Moral Sentiments*. These are

not so much as mere examples or occasions for sympathy, but as expressing the type of understanding that goes on in sympathy. He can shift back and forth between literary models and real-life examples because they are fundamentally of a piece with respect to the narrative character of understanding others, in spite of the ocular, spectatorial model with which Smith leads. (“Smith and Rousseau” 75)<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Griswold also aptly notes that “there is a narrative dimension to sympathy analyzed in TMS,” though the text “tends to occlude that fact by advancing a non-narrativistic, ocular conception of sympathetic spectatorship with which the narrative dimension is in tension” (73). Rae Greiner argues against the view that sees that “the theater is the sympathy’s structural analogue” (“Nothingness” 898). On the contrary, “Smith’s cases provide speculative accounts of mental actions independent of authenticity claims and [are] founded instead on something like fiction, invented narratives detailing the possible or likely events that have led to an emotional response” (898-899). Smith’s text, then, “provides a theory of fiction” (896).

Indeed, as scholars such as Marshall have already pointed out, Smith's moral treatise itself—and the ethics it illustrates—is thoroughly dramatic. The model of the impartial spectator is, in fact, dramatic as well.

This section examines Smith's tragic theory, and it is divided into two chapters. The first describes Smith's solution to the problem of tragic pleasure, which was perhaps *the* aesthetic problem of the eighteenth century after taste. This "paradox of tragedy" was an aesthetic issue from antiquity onwards that reached its critical apogee in the eighteenth century, and Smith's oblique solution in significant ways innovates and improves on what others argued earlier in the century. The next chapter, divided into three parts, is devoted to Smith's relation to neoclassical dramatic theory. First, it examines his position on the (neo)classical unities of place and time. Smith, as we will see, is on the conservative side of the debate concerning whether the unities were in fact necessary or not. The chapter next discusses Smith's ideas on decorum and representations of pain, which involves a discussion of the body and Smith's eschewal of the somatic in his aesthetics. The chapter concludes with a discussion of Smith's repeatedly stated preference for high-mimeticism in drama—that is, the (neoclassical) idea that only kings and nobles should be tragic protagonists. This same discussion dovetails into the related ideology of sympathy, which was examined in part in Chapter Four, and which, as we will see, escapes Smith's egalitarian impulse. In short, as will become evident, though Smith appears to echo many neoclassical critical *topoi*, his reasons are unique.

I<sup>2</sup>

Eighteenth-century theorists vigorously debated the nature of humankind. Some, such as Mandeville (following Hobbes), held that human beings were innately self-interested and solitary creatures, whereas others, such as Francis Hutcheson, held that they were inherently good and sociable. Indeed, much of the moral writing in the period was a response to Hobbes and Mandeville. Many of these thinkers, from Hutcheson to Hume, and Burke to Smith, were concerned with this debate in one form or another. This debate often invoked the subject of tragedy, and specifically, our response to it. Though tragedy was a subject that had occupied the thoughts of many theorists since antiquity, the paradox of tragedy, that is, the question of how spectators derive pleasure from viewing distressing scenes, reached its zenith in the eighteenth century.

Given Smith's interest in drama and aesthetics, it does seem odd that he did not contribute to the question of the source of tragic pleasure. Scholars have pondered the absence of a Smithean solution to this problem. J.C. Bryce asks, "why does not Smith of all critics tackle the problem of the pleasure afforded by tragedy?" (Introduction 20). Gloria Vivenza similarly observes that "[n]owhere, if I am not mistaken, does Smith ... adequately treat the problem of the enjoyment afforded by tragedy" (164). This seems strange since

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<sup>2</sup> This chapter is a revised and expanded version of my paper, "Adam Smith's Solution to the Paradox of Tragedy," which was published during the early stages of my thesis in *The Philosophy of Adam Smith: Essays Commemorating the 250<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (2010). I have attempted to address some criticisms and objections and integrate a wider range of sources, some of which appeared as my article was in press. Vivasvan Soni's *Mourning Happiness* contains some discussion of Smith and tragedy, but his work reached my desk too late to be included in my final version. Nearly two years after I had written this piece, I discovered, with the help of David Raynor, Teddy Bruni's work on Hume, a little-known monograph written over fifty years ago which very briefly discusses Smith's answer to the question of tragic pleasure (69-70). I reached my conclusions independently of Bruni.

Smith's close friend David Hume contributed a famous solution to this problem, and the period during which Smith flourished was a particularly active one for the subject. Perhaps Smith's projected yet unrealized "Philosophical History" would have dealt with the problem. Regardless of the reason, we have no explicit statement from Smith on tragedy, apart from a few *obiter dicta*.

Despite this, I argue that we do have in Smith's writings an implicit theory of tragedy, including his solution to the paradox of tragedy.<sup>3</sup> We must turn to *Theory of Moral Sentiments* and construct one (in fact, the reader will discover more of Smith's dramatic theory there than anywhere else). Like Smith, Thomas Hobbes never wrote directly on tragedy, but this has not prevented posterity from constructing a "Hobbesian" tragic theory. The central concept in *Theory of Moral Sentiments* is "sympathy," the very concept that contains Smith's solution to the paradox of tragedy. It is the pleasure of mutual sympathy stressed in Smith's formulation that overcomes the negative emotions occasioned by distressing scenes. He differs from other noteworthy eighteenth-century critics by rejecting explanations based on self-interest and artifice or the spectator's consciousness of fiction. Smith dissolves the distinction between art and reality: his theory is hence better equipped to explain more immediate "tragedies," such as executions, while it also contains a pleasurable moral dimension. This chapter first traces the line of thought on the paradox of tragedy

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<sup>3</sup> Though scholars have overlooked Smith's contribution to tragic theory, this is not to say that they have completely neglected the dramatic dimension of *Theory of Moral Sentiments*. Jonas Barish observes that in that text, "we are in the theater" (245). David Marshall has demonstrated that Smith's spectatorial morality is structured dramatically (*Figure*). For brief discussions of Smith in a similar context, see the essays by Monika Fludernik and Julie Murray.



beginning with Hobbes, and then describes Smith's own theory while situating it in the debate, comparing and contrasting it to better known views in the eighteenth century.

Though Thomas Hobbes did not directly theorize on tragedy, his views have long been influential in that field.<sup>4</sup> Hobbes popularized the Lucretian "return upon ourselves," the pleasure inherent in the spectator's consciousness of immunity from perceived danger.<sup>5</sup> Lucretius opens the second book of his *The Nature of the Universe (De Rerum Natura)* thus: "[w]hat joy it is, when out at sea the stormwinds are lashing the waters, to gaze from the shore at the heavy stress some other man is enduring! Not that anyone's afflictions are in themselves a source of delight; but to realize from what troubles you yourself are free is a joy indeed" (60). Granted, Lucretius himself was not writing on tragedy, and this passage has been taken somewhat out of context, but it provided the source for one strain of thought on the subject of the problem of tragedy since the Renaissance. In a passage in his *Human Nature*, Hobbes uses the same example as Lucretius:

from what passion proceedeth it, that men take *pleasure* to *behold* from the shore the *danger* of them that are at sea in a tempest, or in fight, or from a safe castle to behold two armies charge one another in the field? It is certainly, in the whole sum, *joy*; else men would never flock to such a spectacle. Nevertheless there is in it both *joy* and *grief*: for as there is novelty and remembrance of our own security present, which is

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<sup>4</sup> Baxter Hathaway traces the first application of Hobbes's ideas to tragic theory to Paul Hamelius's remarks in *Die Kritik der englischen Literature des 17 und 18 Jahrhunderts*, published in 1897 (674). C.D. Thorpe in his *The Aesthetic Theory of Hobbes* applies the relevant passages to construct a Hobbesian tragic theory (143-44). In his survey of dramatic theory since antiquity, Marvin Carlson remarks on Hobbes's contributions (129).

<sup>5</sup> For the reception and use of the Lucretian doctrine in Europe from the Renaissance onwards, see Hathaway. The Lucretian explanation was adopted as early as 1586 by Malespini, and continued well into the eighteenth century, despite opposition from well-known dissenting voices.

*delight*; so there is also *pity*, which is grief; but the delight is so far predominant, that men usually are content in such a case to be spectators of the misery of their friends.

(IX.19, 51-52)

Hobbes thus emphasizes the “remembrance of our own security” as the delightful factor that overpowers the painful emotions. As one modern commentator has succinctly put it, Hobbes’s solution is “of the thank-God-it’s-not-me sort” (Feagin “Tragedy” 449).

Joseph Addison was the first eighteenth-century theorist of note to attempt an explanation of the pleasure derived from tragedy, and in many ways he follows the Hobbesian solution. Addison devoted several papers of *The Spectator* to tragedy in general (Nos 39, 30, 42, 44), but his solution to the paradox of tragedy appears in the ninth paper in the series, “The Pleasures of the Imagination.” Addison begins by asking why “such passions as are very unpleasant at all other times, are very agreeable when excited by proper descriptions.” He argues that the spectator’s pleasure does

not arise so properly from the description of what is terrible, as from the reflection we make on our selves at the time of reading it. When we look on such hideous objects, we are not a little pleased to think we are in no danger of them.... [O]ur pleasure does not flow so properly from the grief which such melancholy descriptions give us, as from the secret comparison which we make between our selves and the person who suffers. Such representations teach us to set a just value

upon our own condition, and make us prize our good fortune which exempts us from the like calamities. (No. 418, 393)<sup>6</sup>

Addison implicitly reinforces traditional hierarchies and, like Hobbes, emphasizes the spectator's security and "secret comparison" between his own situation and that of the sufferer. However, he argues that distance is necessary for this reflection and its concomitant pleasure to occur; the reflection would be impossible if the scene in question were too close to us in time or space. Pleasure in such instances would be impossible because "the object presses too close upon our senses, and bears so hard upon us, that it does not give us time or leisure to reflect on our selves. Our thoughts are so intent upon the miseries of the sufferer, that we cannot turn them upon our own happiness" (394).<sup>7</sup> What is important for Addison is the assumption that spectators (or readers) are conscious that what they are witnessing is a feigned representation. Thus, Addison tempers the Lucretian/Hobbesian emphasis on the self by arguing for the Aristotelian notion of the inherent pleasure of imitation: regardless of the object imitated, "any thing that is disagreeable when looked upon, pleases us in apt description" (392).

David Hume offered his solution to the problem of tragedy in his essay "Of Tragedy," which was published along with other essays in 1757. His solution to the problem of tragedy

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<sup>6</sup> Francis Hutcheson similarly argued that the best tragedies are those that occasion pity yet never make spectators repine at providence: "we see how unfit such Representations are in *Tragedy*, as make the perfectly Virtuous miserable in the highest degree. They can only lead the Spectators into *Distrust* of Providence, *Diffidence* of Virtue" (*Essay* I.iii.V.3, 73).

<sup>7</sup> Zuckert, however, argues that this is merely an ancillary pleasure: "it does not describe, and would not explain, our attraction to *experiencing* a performed tragedy" since it fails "to account for the spectator's intense engagement with the action *on stage* – and *not* with his own condition" (155).

is relatively simple: it is the eloquence or artistry of the drama that converts unpleasant emotions into pleasant ones. Hume writes:

The genius required to paint objects in a lively manner, the art employed in collecting all the pathetic circumstances, the judgment displayed in disposing them: the exercise, I say, of these noble talents, together with the force of expression, and beauty of oratorical numbers, diffuse the highest satisfaction on the audience, and excite the most delightful movements. By this means, the uneasiness of the melancholy passions is not only overpowered and effaced by something stronger of an opposite kind; but the whole impulse of those passions is converted into pleasure.... The passion, though, perhaps, naturally, and when excited by the simple appearance of a real object, it may be painful [sic]; yet is so smoothed, and softened, and mollified, when raised by the finer arts, that it affords the highest entertainment. (219-220, 223)

Hume offers two exceptions. First, like Addison, he argues that the “passion” cannot be converted if the spectator be “too deeply concerned in the events.” He offers the example of Lord Clarendon, who “hurries over the king’s [Charles I’s] death, without giving us one circumstance of it” for this very reason (223). The other is Nicholas Rowe’s drama *The Ambitious Stepmother*, a play that is “too bloody and atrocious,” and excites “horror as will not soften into pleasure” (224). Though he does not explicitly argue for the requisite

consciousness of fiction, as Addison does, Hume's emphasis on eloquence (or art) presupposes fictional representations.<sup>8</sup>

Edmund Burke's *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* appeared in the same year as Hume's essay. A comprehensive treatise on aesthetics, it nonetheless discusses tragic pleasure very briefly. Burke begins by noting that we are never "indifferent spectators" and that it is chiefly through sympathy that "poetry, painting, and the other affecting arts, transfuse their passions from one breast to another, and are often capable of grafting a delight on wretchedness, misery, and death itself." Burke takes issue with those theories that attribute the pleasure either to relief that the "story is no more than a fiction" or to the consciousness "of our own freedom from the evils which we see represented." He disagrees because such theorists mistakenly attribute such pleasure to "the reasoning faculty" when in fact the pleasure arises "from the mechanical structure of our bodies, or from the natural frame and constitution of our minds" (I.xiii: 91).

Unlike Addison and Hume, Burke maintains "the comparative weakness of the imitative arts," and contends that "we shall be much mistaken if we attribute any considerable part of our satisfaction in a tragedy to a consideration that tragedy is a deceit." In fact, he states unequivocally that the nearer a tragedy "approaches reality, the more perfect [is] its power." Thus, not only does he blur the distinction between art and reality, but he privileges the latter. In fact, in a bold passage Burke claims that the announcement of an execution during

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<sup>8</sup> Hume's essay has produced a vast literature. See Aaron Smuts, for instance, who argues that "Hume fails to give a satisfying account of this process of conversion," and he leaves "the basis of his explanation a mystery" (64).

“the most sublime and affecting tragedy,” would empty the theatre,<sup>9</sup> an idea with which neither Addison nor Hume could agree (I.xv: 93).

Burke argues that “we have a degree of delight, and that no small one, in the misfortunes and pains of others” (I.xiv: 92).<sup>10</sup> He goes further still by suggesting that “there is no spectacle we so eagerly pursue, as that of some uncommon and grievous calamity; so that whether the misfortune is before our eyes, or whether they are turned back to it in history, it always touches with delight” (I.xv: 93). Though it seems as if Burke is endorsing the Hobbesian/Lucretian view, this is not the case: he believes in the benevolent nature of this attraction since it is grounded in Providence, and it compels us never to be indifferent:<sup>11</sup>

[A]s our Creator has designed that we should be united by the bond of sympathy, he has strengthened that bond by a proportionable delight; and there most where our sympathy is most wanted, in the distresses of others. If this passion was simply painful, we would shun with the greatest care all persons and places that could excite such a passion. (92-93)

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<sup>9</sup> Rene Wellek takes issue with Burke here, noting that he “does not face the objection that the theater might also be emptied by a coronation or any other rare spectacle, or that viewing an execution might be an indulgence in cruelty and not sympathy” (118). W.P. Knight, who critiqued many of Burke’s ideas at the beginning of the nineteenth century, similarly asks, “is not the triumph as much of curiosity, as of sympathy; and would not the sudden appearance of any very renowned foreign chief or potentate, in the adjoining square, equally empty the benches of the theatre? I apprehend that it would” (315).

<sup>10</sup> It is important to note Burke’s distinction of delight, which is “the sensation which accompanies the removal of pain or danger” from “positive pleasure.”

<sup>11</sup> I do not discuss Lord Kames since his insistence that human beings “have ‘affection’ rather than ‘aversion’ to (some pains) ... challenges the very formulation of the problem of tragedy,” and he thus “in a way dissolves the problem” (Zuckert 152). I will, however, discuss some of the consequences of Kames’s approach in the next chapter.

Thus Burke's solution is more "benevolent" than those of Hobbes and Addison, and it considers art and the consciousness of fiction nugatory.

## II

Solutions to the paradox of tragedy predicated on self-love were no longer being offered by the second or third decade of the eighteenth century; they were replaced by more "sympathetic" and benevolent theories, of which Burke's is one (Wasserman 297). Smith's theory follows this "benevolent" trend of thinking on the subject. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Smith's solution to the problem of tragic pleasure is predicated on sympathy, not the (in)famous Lucretian "return upon ourselves." Like Burke in his *Philosophical Enquiry*, Smith takes as a given that all people, even the most selfish, are possessed of principles which interest them "in the fortune of others." We thus have a natural capacity for sympathy, which Smith uses in the broader sense of "our fellow-feeling with any passion whatever" (TMS I.i.1.5). However, because of the epistemological gap that exists between human beings, we can never "know" what another person feels: it is "by the imagination only that we can form any conception" of what the sensations are, say, of "our brother upon the rack" (I.i.1.2). It is important to note, however, that a spectator forms moral judgments based not on the emotions displayed, but the situation that led to them: "[s]ympathy, therefore, does not arise so much from the view of the passions, as from that of the situation which excites it." Thus, spectators are capable of "sympathizing" with the dead or the mentally challenged, and feeling sentiments of which those "sufferers" are incapable (I.i.1.10).

Though Smith uses the term sympathy in a broad sense, he expatiates on manifestations of distress and grief more than anything else: we are “more anxious to communicate to our friends our disagreeable than our agreeable passions ... we derive still more satisfaction from their sympathy with the former than from that with the latter” (I.i.2.3). This is because, according to Smith, sympathy is the only relief for one who is afflicted with grief or any other unpleasant emotion: “the sweetness of his [the spectator’s] sympathy more than compensates the bitterness of that sorrow.... The bitter and painful emotions of grief and resentment more strongly require the healing consolation of sympathy” (I.i.2.5). Generally speaking, Smith writes that “nothing pleases us more than to observe in other men a fellow-feeling with all the emotions of our own breast.... [The] correspondence of the sentiments of others with our own appears to be a cause of pleasure” (I.i.2.2). Because of the gap that exists between human beings, however, this sympathy can never be perfect; complete unison between the sentiments of the spectator with those of the sufferer can never be achieved (I.i.4.6). Though unison of sentiments is impossible, the sufferer nevertheless longs for the closest possible pleasurable “concord” (Smith’s word) of sentiments, and for this reason he attempts to “flatten” his passions so that a spectator may enter into them (I.i.4.7-8). Thus, Smith denies the possibility of empathy.

In *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Smith comes very close to saying that our experiences of real-life distress and tragedy are the same, or at least very similar: “[o]ur sympathy ... with deep distress, is very strong and very sincere. It is unnecessary to give an instance. We weep even at the feigned representation of a tragedy” (I.ii.5.3). On this note, Charles Griswold observes that “[f]rom the beginning, Smith compares human life to spectacles represented in plays” (*Virtues* 65). Further,



The sympathetic imagination is not solely representational or reproductive. It is primarily narrative, seeking to flow into and fill up another situation, and to draw things together into a coherent story.... All of this holds whether we are observing real persons or actors in the theater; Smith almost immediately introduces examples from the arts to illustrate our responsiveness to the situations of others. He implies that our sympathizing with imagined characters is the same kind of process as our sympathizing with 'real' people in everyday life. ("Imagination" 26).

Indeed, very early on in his description of sympathy, Smith implicitly conflates the two spheres: "[w]hatever is the passion which arises from any object in the person principally concerned, an analogous emotion springs up, at the thought of his situation, in the breast of every attentive spectator. Our joy for the deliverance of those heroes of tragedy or romance who interest us, is as sincere as our grief for their distress" (TMS I.i.1.4).<sup>12</sup>

In an energetic passage that articulates his anti-exhibitionist (or "stoical") preference, Smith writes,

[w]e are disgusted with that clamorous grief, which, without any delicacy, calls upon our compassion with sighs and tears and importunate lamentations. But we reverence that reserved, that silent and majestic sorrow, which discovers itself only in the swelling of eyes, in the quivering of the lips and cheeks.... It imposes the like silence upon us. (I.i.5.3)

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<sup>12</sup> Deidre Dawson here contrasts Smith with Marivaux, the latter of whom "draws an important distinction between actually witnessing an accident and merely reading about one. The soul suffers and feels sadness at the authentic scene of suffering, whereas feigned suffering elicits a 'compassionate interest without pain.'" Smith, by contrast, "attributes such great power to the imagination that no difference is admitted between actual suffering and the theatrical representation of suffering" ("Sympathy" 153).

This passage resembles something one would expect to find in a treatise on tragedy. Not only does Smith cite more literary texts than philosophical ones in *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (except in Part VII), but he frequently clarifies his moral theory using illustrations from tragedies, even when sympathy is not being discussed.<sup>13</sup> As David Marshall astutely notes, “whether we are confronted by a person or a text, we must face a fiction” (*Figure* 171).

Smith attenuates or dissolves the distinction between real and feigned spectacles, and stresses the pleasure of mutual sympathy. Thus the consciousness of fiction, much less imitation, does not account for the pleasure of tragedy or is at most irrelevant since this pleasure of “tragedy” also occurs in real life—this in contrast to Samuel Johnson, who argues that “[t]he delight of tragedy proceeds from our consciousness of fiction; if we thought murderers and treasons real, they would please no more” (“Preface” 312). Smith repudiates theories of tragic pleasure centering on the self, such as Addison’s or Hobbes’s, and tries several times to demonstrate that sympathy, which, as some would argue, itself may be pleasurable owing to considerations of self-love, is in fact completely selfless. In fact, Smith defends his construction of sympathy from charges of self-love. Offering the example of condoling with someone who had lost his only son, Smith insists that “I consider what I should suffer if I was really you, and I not only change circumstances with you, but I change persons and characters. My grief, therefore, is entirely upon your account, and not in the least upon my own. It is, therefore, not in the least selfish” (TMS VII.iii.1.1). Further, Smith notes that a “man may sympathize with a woman in child-bed; though it is impossible

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<sup>13</sup> See TMS I.ii.1.7-11, I.ii.2.3-4, I.ii.3.2, I.iii.2.2, I.iii.1.9, II.iii.3.5, III.6.12, VI.ii.1.21-22.

that he should conceive himself as suffering her pains in his own proper person and character” (TMS VII.iii.1.4). Smith cannot agree with the argument of self-love advanced by Lucretius, Hobbes, and Addison since “[w]e run not only to congratulate the successful, but to condole with the afflicted.... The plaintive voice of misery, when heard at a distance, will not allow us to be indifferent about the person from whom it comes. As soon as it strikes our ear, it interests us in his fortune, and, if continued, forces us almost involuntarily to fly to his assistance” (I.i.19, I.ii.3.5). Like Burke, Smith argues that human beings are never indifferent, but are instinctively compelled to be interested in the distresses of others and to attempt to relieve them using the only means available: sympathy.

Smith’s dialogue with Hume clarifies his position on the subject of tragic pleasure. Not only were they friends in regular communication with each other, but Hume made no secret of his objection to Smith’s “answer.” In a letter to Smith, Hume writes,

I wish you had more particularly and fully prov’d, that all kinds of sympathy are necessarily agreeable. This is the hinge of your system, and yet you only mention the Matter cursorily [once]. Now it woud [sic] appear that there is a disagreeable sympathy, as well as an agreeable.... It is always thought a difficult problem to account for the pleasure, receivd [sic] from the tears and grief and sympathy of tragedy; which would not be the case, if all sympathy was agreeable. An hospital woud [sic] be a more entertaining place than a ball. I am afraid ... this proposition has escapd you, or rather is interwove with your reasonings in that place. (*Corr.*, 36, 28 July 1759, 43)

It is worth noting Hume's invocation of the paradox of tragedy here, which could not have been far from Smith's mind in this context. Though Smith never mentions Hume's essay on tragedy in his works or correspondence, he almost certainly had read it.<sup>14</sup> Smith responded to Hume in a footnote in his second edition of *Theory of Moral Sentiments*:

It has been objected to me that as I found the sentiment of approbation, which is always agreeable, upon sympathy, it is inconsistent with my system to admit any disagreeable sympathy. I answer, that in the sentiment of approbation there are two things to be taken notice of; first, the sympathetic passion of the spectator; and, secondly, the emotion which arises from his observing the perfect coincidence between this sympathetic passion in himself, and the original passion in the person principally concerned. This last emotion, in which the sentiment of approbation properly consists, is always agreeable and delightful. The other may either be agreeable or disagreeable. (I.iii.1.9)

Smith devotes the second chapter of Part I of the work ("The Pleasure of Mutual Sympathy") to this concept, but Hume is correct to point out that the idea is implied rather than vigorously stated in the first edition. Smith's footnote thus clarifies and elaborates on what was already there.<sup>15</sup> This footnote in response to the objection of a friend is itself the

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<sup>14</sup> Hume informs Smith of the publication of his "Dissertations," including the essay on tragedy, and that Smith "ha[d] read all the Dissertations in Manuscript" (*Corr.*, 22, March 1757, 20).

<sup>15</sup> In a draft of the footnoted response to Hume, Smith offers a musical metaphor to clarify the pleasure of mutual sympathy, which again reveals the comprehensive aesthetic basis of his thought: "[t]wo sounds, I suppose, may, each of them taken singly, be austere, and yet, if they are perfect concords, the perception of their harmony and coincidence may be agreeable" (I.iii.1.9, n). Griswold also observes that "[t]he pleasure we take in mutual sympathy is understood by Smith aesthetically, as a disinterested attraction to harmony, concordance, system, and balance" (*Virtues* 121).

“hinge” on which Smith’s solution to the problem of tragedy rests. Thus, regardless of what one is witnessing, the consciousness and concord of sympathy is *always* agreeable. As Fleischacker has recently noted, Smith’s footnote to Hume reveals that “sympathy *itself* need not be pleasurable, only the *consciousness of* sympathy is” (“Smith and Hume” 300). In the same letter, Hume suggested that Smith respond to the objection only if it “appear[ed] to be of any weight” (43). Given his relatively substantial response, Smith clearly thought the addition was warranted,<sup>16</sup> and in fact he was convinced that it had “entirely discomfitted” [sic] Hume” (*Corr.* 40, 10 Oct. 1759, 49).

Hume’s solution to the problem of tragedy, which, as we have seen, hinges on eloquence, assumes that one is witnessing an artificial representation. As Alex Neill suggests, Hume’s essay fails to take into account “third-rate” tragedies (119). In other

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<sup>16</sup> David Raynor maintains that Smith’s footnote in response to Hume

does not meet Hume’s objection at all. Smith’s response simply makes explicit a distinction that is implicit in Hume’s objection, while confirming that what Hume calls ‘the Hinge’ of his alternative system is in fact central. But he offers no proof of it, so it remains unproven and implausible. In cases where both the communicated passion and its prototype are disagreeable, it is implausible to maintain that the observation of their correspondence, in and of itself, must always be agreeable. (“The Virtues” 242; “Hume’s Abstract”)

Fleischacker responds to Raynor in the same volume:

Raynor may be right about the inadequacy of Smith’s arguments for this claim [that all kinds of sympathy are agreeable], but I do not agree that it is untrue to experience. We quite often feel sad or angry along with another person, yet are simultaneously pleased to find that we have achieved this harmony of sentiments. It is this that explains the comfort we get from people who visit us when we are mourning.... As people principally concerned, we are relieved to find that others share our feelings; as spectators, we are pleased to find ourselves capable of sharing other people’s feelings. In both cases – in any achievement of sympathy – we enjoy the awareness that we have company in our feelings” (“Response” 247).

Fleischacker also argues, *pace* Hume and Raynor, that a hospital *can* be a more agreeable place than a ball: “[i]magine yourself walking through a hospital and feeling very much in synch with the suffering of the patients. Now imagine yourself at a ball while feeling very *out* of synch with the delight that other people seem to be having. Where would you rather be?” (248).

words, his formula cannot account for plays that are not well-written, nor can it account for “immediate” tragedies, such as real-life “tragedies.” For Hume, eloquence is the catalyst that converts or, to use his own word, “overpowers” the negative emotions and renders them pleasurable. For Smith, by contrast, art or linguistic considerations do not play a part: the concord of sympathy is what “overpowers” the unpleasant emotions. Smith may not advocate chasing ambulances, but his theory does explain the pleasure arising from viewing events that collapse the distinction between art and reality. Hume briefly concedes that this is possible in his discussion of Cicero, since the orator was relating painful events that really happened, but only because enough time had passed for the pleasure to occur. For Smith, the pleasure of mutual sympathy can occur in real life or in a feigned tragedy: his formulation is better equipped to explain the pleasure derived from traumatic narratives that are closer to spectators in time and/or space, such as war narratives or documentary tragedies.<sup>17</sup> In this Smith seems to be departing from Aristotle, for whom imitation is crucial since, following his model, witnessing the events of, say, *Oedipus* in real life would not be conducive to pleasurable affect (Heath 8).

As Smith dissolves the distinction between art and reality, or distance and immediacy, there are no exceptions to the pleasure that sympathy can afford. Addison claimed that the “secret comparison” spectators make is precluded when a scene is immediately before them, and, as noted earlier, Hume also argued that the painful passions cannot be converted into pleasure if the spectator be “too deeply concerned in the events.” This, however, does not

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<sup>17</sup> Stacie Friend has recently challenged the assumption that “it is a prerequisite of our taking pleasure in tragedy that the story be either fictional or, if non-fiction, then non-transparently represented (as by actors).... [D]ocumentaries—in particular, non-fiction films that do not use actors—could produce tragic pleasure” (184). Smith’s solution anticipates such arguments.

pose any problem in Smith's formulation. In fact, many of Smith's examples demonstrating sympathy press closely, including that of our brother on the rack (TMS I.i.1.1), and a man whose leg had just been blown off by a cannon shot (III.3.26). The spectator's first impulse in these cases, according to Smith, is not immediate compassion or even horror, but a deliberate process to determine whether the manifested emotions of the sufferers are apt. Like Burke, Smith also uses examples of public executions (I.iii.2.10),<sup>18</sup> at which responses of sympathy are entirely possible, something that is precluded by Addison's and Hume's solutions.

The aesthetic relation between *Theory of Moral Sentiments* and Burke's *Philosophical Enquiry* has not been explored in any detail.<sup>19</sup> Burke not only received a gift of *Theory of Moral Sentiments* from Hume soon after its publication, but he later expressed his thanks for the gift and for the privilege of Smith's acquaintance (*Corr.*, 38, 10 September 1759). In addition, in 1759 in the *Annual Register*, a periodical Burke founded and edited, appeared an effusive review of Smith's work that has been unanimously attributed to Burke. The review praises Smith's system as "one of the most beautiful fabrics of moral theory, that has perhaps ever appeared" (77-78). Unfortunately for the history of aesthetics, neither Burke's letter to Smith nor his review makes any connection to his or any other aesthetics. What is

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<sup>18</sup> Hutcheson remarked that "people are hurry'd by a natural, kind Instinct, to see Objects of Compassion, and expose themselves to this Pain when they can give no reason for it; as in the Instance of publick Executions. This same Principle leads men to Tragedys [sic]" (*Inquiry* II.5.8, 160).

<sup>19</sup> James Boulton points briefly to a possible connection, stating that Smith's construction of sympathy "echoes Burke, though giving greater prominence to the term 'imagination'" (xlii). Wasserman observes that "Burke's explanation was occasionally modified, and sometimes it was blended with others; but it served Adam Smith ... and many others" (299-300). Walter Hipple mentions explanations grounded "on an instinctive delight in compassion—a notion advanced by Burke [and] Adam Smith" among others (50). For a more sustained discussion, see Luke Gibbons's *Burke and Ireland*, which contrasts Burke's and Smith's constructions of sympathy vis-à-vis colonialism and the Gaelic anxiety of conforming to Britishness.

significant, however, is the conclusion of Burke's review: it reproduces in whole the first chapter of *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, "Of Sympathy," so that readers may observe "the basis of [Smith's] theory" (78). Burke was clearly impressed by Smith's account of sympathy, a topic Burke had also written on in his very brief exposition on tragedy in his *Philosophical Enquiry*. Whereas Burke had spent perhaps two pages on the subject in his discussion of tragedy, without going into any detail as to the mechanism of sympathy, Smith expatiates on this concept, which ends up correcting and elaborating on Burke's own exposition.

Smith's treatment appears at first glance to be very similar to Burke's. Hipple, after all, groups Burke and Smith together, given their insistence on "instinctive delight." This characterization of Smith is inaccurate, however, since his formulation of sympathy is far more complex; Burke's solution, though grounded in sympathy, is more mechanistic. It is unclear whether Smith had Burke's aesthetics in mind while he was writing *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, though the possibility is a very likely one.<sup>20</sup> Smith's solution to the problem of tragedy, like Burke's, is predicated on the pleasure of sympathy, but his construction of the concept is far more elaborate and less mechanistic.

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<sup>20</sup> If a letter written by Dugald Stewart to one of Burke's biographers, James Prior, is to be trusted, Smith "expressed at Glasgow upon the publication of Burke's book on the *Sublime and Beautiful*, that the author of that book would be a great acquisition to the College if he would accept of a chair" (Prior 37). Bonar's catalogue of Smith's library lists the ninth edition of Burke's *Philosophical Enquiry* of 1782. However, this need not prove that Smith was not familiar with the work earlier: Smith's library contains none of the novels of Samuel Richardson or Marie-Jeanne Riccoboni, yet he speaks highly of their moral fictions (TMS III.3.14).



Smith differs from previous sympathy theorists by insisting that sympathy, even in our narrower sense of compassion, is not an automatic, “knee-jerk” reaction.<sup>21</sup> Abbé Dubos, for instance, who was well-known in Britain, wrote that

[w]e are moved by the tears of a stranger, even before we are apprized of the subject of his weeping. The cries of a man, to whom we have no other relation than the common one of humanity, make us fly instantly to his assistance, by a mechanical movement previous to all deliberation. (I.30)

These theorists argued that, in Smith’s words, sentiments are “transfused from one man to another, instantaneously, and antecedent to any knowledge of what excited them in the person principally concerned” (TMS I.i.1.6). Indeed, sympathy for Burke is “antecedent to any reasoning, by an instinct that works us to its own purposes, without our concurrence” (I.xiv, 93). Conversely, Smith’s moral theory is less “instantaneous,”<sup>22</sup> and takes into

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<sup>21</sup> For Rousseau, by contrast, “the work of sympathy involves the inevitability of the audience’s imitation of the emotions that are represented in the work. Confronted with a spectacle of pathos, the audience has no choice but to mimic it” (Chandler “Politics” 573), a position Smith challenges.

<sup>22</sup> It has been objected to me that I disallow any immediate sympathy from Smith’s system. It is true that Smith makes some allowance for it early on in the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*—namely, the illustration of the reaction of spectators while watching a tightrope walker and viewing surgical instruments. This is a fair point, but Smith distinguishes this—what we may call an instinctive, gut reaction—to imaginative sympathy. Smith does not concern himself with the first kind. He mentions it in passing, never to return to it, which is also reflected in the fact that most discussions of Smithian sympathy elide it. In short, Smith does not consider immediate sympathy a considerable part of our moral existence.

I am in agreement with Fleischacker, who argues that, although Smith

concedes that the ‘sympathy-as-infection’ theory accounts well for certain cases of sympathy. But the next few paragraphs go on to criticize the infection view, arguing, first, that it does not hold at all for many passions—the behaviour of a furious person does not inspire us to join him in his fury—and, second, that even when an emotion does seem to be passed along infectiously, the best explanation of what is going on is that the other person’s expressions of grief or joy suggest to us that they have met with good or bad fortune, and we feel grief or joy because we imagine ourselves meeting with similar

account the mediating function of the imagination. As Valihora notes, for Smith “spontaneous feeling must be subject to reflection and judgment before it can properly be said to be the ground of morals. The agent must go through various degrees of imaginative abstraction from immediate circumstances” (157). Forman-Barzilai similarly notes that Smithian sympathy is “not an innate human disposition that discharges mindlessly and spontaneously like Grotius’ *appetitus societatus* or Rousseau’s *pitié* or the *moral sense* of Shaftesbury and Hutcheson” (62). Sympathy, then, is only possible through an act of the imagination since it is only thus that we can come close to bridging the epistemological gap that exists between human beings.

Smith’s emphasis on “imagination,” however, should not obscure the rational component of his construction, as noted in the previous chapter.<sup>23</sup> His requisite act of the imagination entails a process of determining whether the sentiments on display seem fit for their object. Smith, in fact, equates sympathy with approbation: “[t]o approve of the passions of another, therefore, as suitable to their objects, is the same thing as to observe that we entirely sympathize with them” (TMS I.i.3.1). As approbation is commensurate with

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fortune. Even in these cases, therefore, we are really projecting ourselves into other people’s situations, rather than merely adopting the emotions they seem to be experiencing.... We could not have a clearer indication that Smith’s consideration of the sympathy-as-infection theory is merely part of his case for his opposing sympathy-as-imaginative-projection theory. (*Wealth* 9-10)

Fleischacker has even more recently noted that “Hume mentions ‘one, who is present at the cruel execution of the rack’ as an example of a case in which the impressions we derive from our immediate observations will overwhelm us, preventing us from a more imagination-based sympathy [T 388]. So Smith’s claim that even *here* we need to imagine ourselves in the place of the sufferer in order to share his feelings appears to be a direct rejection of Hume’s view” (Fleischacker, “Smith and Hume” 277). D.D. Raphael also notes that spontaneous sympathy in Smith “is a fairly unusual phenomenon. On most occasions imagination is a prerequisite for sympathy” (*Impartial* 13).

<sup>23</sup> Fleischacker, as noted, observes that Smith’s moral treatise “restores to moral sentimentalism the [rationalist] language of Cudworth and Clarke and Wollaston” (“Review” 922).

sympathy, it is therefore subject to the same pleasure as sympathy.<sup>24</sup> As mentioned earlier, Smithian sympathy requires a knowledge of facts and context to reach such a decision, which is more important than any manifestations of emotion. It is for this reason that sympathy, even in Smith's sense, is very broad, and in a way Smith himself recognized: a spectator is capable of sympathizing with someone's grief, for instance, even if the sufferer does not really feel any (recall the possibility of sympathizing with the dead). Thus, Smith's construction of sympathy is more deliberate, conscious, and mediated than Burke's: it requires an act of judgment and distance.

Sympathy is also central to a judgment of a "good" tragedy. A tragedy that exhibits extravagant or exorbitant emotions without reason would not only be improper, but artistically unsound. For Smith, a "well-written" tragedy would need to provide a sufficient context and set of circumstances to correspond with the emotions they are supposed to produce, an objective correlative, to borrow T.S. Eliot's famous phrase. In the same way that a spectator would judge the passions of a real-life sufferer, a spectator would likewise judge the passions of, say, Hamlet, and determine whether the sentiments felt and expressed are appropriate. This decorum of emotion at least partly explains Smith's preference for certain tragedies over others, such as those of Voltaire and Racine, and provides a better answer to the question of why he preferred their dramas than the tautology that Smith liked

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<sup>24</sup> The charge of equivocation goes back to the nineteenth century: J.A. Farrer in *Adam Smith* (1881) complained that "an equivocal use of the word 'sympathy' lends all its speciousness to the theory he [Smith] expounds.... The first meaning is fellow-feeling, the second praise or approval" (196, cited in Raynor "Virtues," 239). Thomas Brown, in his *Lectures on Ethics*, similarly complained that sympathy is often used "to signify a mere participation of the feelings of others; but it is also frequently used as a significant of approbation itself" (165, cited in Raynor "Virtues" 239).

them because he had neoclassical tastes.<sup>25</sup> Smith's preference for them, then, is not merely a curiosity of literary history—though it was uncommon for a mid-eighteenth-century Briton<sup>26</sup>—but it coheres with his aesthetics. The restrained—one might even say “stoic”—nature of such plays as *Phaedra* appealed to him since they facilitate sympathetic exchange, as do the unities of time and place, as I will demonstrate below.

Although Smith's relation to Stoicism<sup>27</sup> is debated, it is safe to say that his tragic poetics is fairly stoic, or at least neo-Stoic. It is worth remembering again that he

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<sup>25</sup> Ian Simpson Ross asked me to pursue just this question (private correspondence).

<sup>26</sup> The reception of Racine in eighteenth-century England was indeed remarkably silent. F.Y. Eccles admits that, while Racine was undoubtedly read, “deliberate judgments upon his works are scarce” (19). Even Samuel Johnson, Eccles notes, “the greatest English critic of the eighteenth century hardly mentions Racine” (22). Wheatley and Canfield focus on English adaptations of Racine, which reached a peak in the first quarter of the century. Even then, however, the adapters themselves seemed compelled to apologize for their work.

Further, by 1760, Shakespeare had become the undisputed national poet—Smith's silence on him is therefore significant—and by the same time, Voltaire had become the lightning-rod of anti-Gallic British literary criticism. For further discussion of Shakespeare in the eighteenth-century, see *The Culture of the Seven Year's War*, ed. Frans De Bruyn and Shaun Regan (forthcoming) and Brian Vickers's always useful and convenient *Shakespeare: the Critical Heritage*, vol. 3-6.

<sup>27</sup> Smith's relation to Stoicism is the subject of scholarly debate, but that is beyond the scope of this dissertation. However, a brief note is warranted. Vivienne Brown, for instance, writes, “[t]he ultimate break with Stoicism in the *TMS*, however, is based on a denial of the coincidence of reason and nature; *TMS* counterpoises nature to reason, and it is this opposition that lies at the basis of the rejection of the Stoic philosophy in Book VII, despite the deeply Stoic tone of much of the book” (“Dialogic Experience” 258). Fonna Forman-Barzilai observes that

Smith's orientation to Stoicism, in Section Vi.ii of the *Moral Sentiments*, is complex indeed.... He managed to combine Stoic ideas of providential order with an explicit *rejection* of the Stoic cosmopolitan agenda, grounding this rejection in a full embrace of Stoic *oikeiosis* as an empirical fact. In other words, because people were naturally inclined and best suited to care for their own, and were essentially incapable of extending that concern fruitfully toward grander departments, Smith rejected the Stoic cosmopolitan agenda, yet embraced the Stoic “conviction” that while each cares for his part, God minds the happiness of the whole. (132)

Leonidas Montes similarly observes that in Smith's ethics “[t]here is a sort of sympathetic gradient, whereby sympathy decreases with emotional distance” (“Eclectic” 42). He also acknowledges *oikeosis* as the Stoic concept that had the greatest influence on Smith. Although he changed his attitude, especially in the final

emphasizes an actor's reaction to pains and not the pains themselves. The ideal sympathetic exchange for Smith culminates in admiration, which is "complete sympathy and approbation, mixed and animated with wonder or surprise." Smith illustrates this idea using the example of Cato Uticensis, as has been noted. Smith insists that sympathy is not mere compassion: for proper sympathy to occur, approbation and ideally admiration must be present.<sup>28</sup> By contrast, in the sympathetic theories of other thinkers such as Burke, "sympathy" is roughly synonymous with compassion. Smith's emphasis on admiration here recalls its recurrence in his other works: we "admire" systems, theories, and successful imitations, as has been noted. For this reason, Stock's observation that "Smith believe[s] that it is sympathy, rather than admiration, which tragedy is to evoke" is not entirely true (37). This is especially since admiration and ideal sympathy are virtually indistinguishable in Smith's theory, and as we have seen, admiration seems to be, in fact, *the* criterion of Smithian aesthetic and moral response.

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edition, Smith "remained influenced by the Stoics (especially in terms of sympathy and *oikeiosis*)" and he "heavily relies upon the Stoic concept of *oikeiosis* for developing his conception of sympathy (47, 50). Emma Rothschild convincingly notes that despite his sympathy with Stoic ideas of virtue, Smith "disliked the Stoics' indifference to consequences and circumstances.... He rejected Stoic views of evil (as part of a universal order), of suicide, of astronomy, of paradoxes of truth and honor, and of the happiness of the wise man. The Stoic wise man is for Smith a prig and a 'coxcomb,' who consoles himself with the 'complete enjoyment of his own self applause'" (132).

Despite all of this, it is safe to say that Smith's tragic poetics is what we may characterize as neo-Stoic, or, following Rothschild and Montes, "eclectic[ally] Stoic" (*Sentiments* 130, "Eclectic" 30; one can also follow Vivenza's conclusion that his is a "mitigated Stoicism"). It is for these reasons that that I use the term "stoic(ism)," though carefully.

<sup>28</sup> Smith's privileging of admiration is somewhat anachronistic; its prime in dramatic theory was the seventeenth century, given impetus largely by Corneille. In his preface to *Nicomede*, he informs the reader, "there is no attempt to inspire pity by an excess misfortune, but the play's success has demonstrated that heroic steadfastness, inspiring admiration in the mind of the spectator, can give as much pleasure as the pity which our art obliges us to solicit" (qtd. in Howarth et al., 260). This idea would return in the nineteenth century with W.P. Knight and Schiller in Germany (Wellek 119).

Part of Smith's tragic theory rests on the ideal sympathetic exchange, which culminates in not just approbation, but admiration, the *ne plus ultra* of moral beauty.<sup>29</sup> This moral beauty, as it insulates tragedy from the vagaries of custom, in part explains Smith's privileging of tragedy, and this moral beauty also explains the universal appeal of tragedy for Smith. He argues that the contingency of taste he had been maintaining in Part V of *Theory of Moral Sentiments* does not apply to moral judgment: this is, in fact, the role that chapter two of Part V plays, and it is a crucial one. In fact, the primary function of Part V is to demonstrate that moral judgment appears to be the sole domain that is not affected by custom and habit, or at least not significantly distorted by them. There he insists that the behaviour and conduct of Nero and Claudius are "are what no custom will ever reconcile to us, what no fashion will ever render agreeable; but the one will always be the object of dread and hatred; the other of scorn and derision." Although our sense of taste and beauty may easily be affected by custom, habit, and education, "the sentiments of moral approbation and disapprobation are founded on the strongest and most vigorous passions of human nature; and though they may be somewhat warped, cannot be entirely perverted" (V.2.1).<sup>30</sup> This

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<sup>29</sup> Valihora similarly observes that Smith's ethics "exacts not sympathy but admiration" (138-39).

<sup>30</sup> Citing this same passage, Fudge also notes that Smith "argues that there is an important distinction between beauty in the arts ... and morals. The first of these is entirely under the influence of custom and fashion.... But despite this relativity, Smith claims that there are certain aesthetic principles that are not subject to such cultural influences.... While custom and fashion also have some influence on the 'beauty of conduct,' this influence is much less than in the arts" (143-44). "Evolutionary principles," he concludes "prevent moral beauty from being entirely relative" (144).

Fleischacker notes, "the notion that morality might vary in accordance with culture was not widely accepted in Smith's time, [so] the mere fact that he devotes a major division of his book to the subject is remarkable. Still, the concession Smith makes to the role of culture here is a moderate one, which need not raise any specter of relativism. He condemns infanticide as a perversion of morality, even though it has been approved by whole cultures.... Cultural variation in morals is so much as possible only within fairly narrow bounds; it never amounts to more than a matter of emphasizing one virtue over another, of what we might call the "shading" in

passage supports the idea of a timeless moral beauty and also reveals why tragedy plays such a key role in Smith's ethics and aesthetics. Habit and custom, Smith reminds us, do not significantly affect morality; it may temporarily be skewed (as in the case of infanticide in ancient Athens) but never entirely perverted.

Tragedy for Smith, more so than any other art form, has a transhistorical and transcultural appeal since it is predicated on immutable moral beauty,<sup>31</sup> which at least in part explains its prominence in the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, a work of philosophy.<sup>32</sup> If there is any doubt about this, one need only refer to Smith's appraisal of Racine. Smith insists that "Phaedra [is] the finest tragedy, perhaps, that is extant in any language" (III.2.19). It is worth noting that this remark occurs in the final edition Smith authorized, in a chapter dealing with "the love of Praise, and of that of Praise-worthiness." Smith's language is curiously significant: *Phaedra* is the greatest play extant in *any* language; he does not qualify his declaration. Despite the complex nature of Smithian sympathy and the impartial spectator—and the issues that beset them<sup>33</sup>—Griswold, Sen, Pitts, and others, read Smithian

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our picture of how human beings should live.... [W]e might say that Smith is a cultural *pluralist*, but not a *relativist*" ("Kultur" 6).

<sup>31</sup> Fudge also observes that, despite the threat of aesthetic-moral relativism, there is, however, "a naturalistic strand to Smith's thought that suggests that at least some of our aesthetic norms are universal.... [These] serve to rescue Smith from thoroughgoing relativism and the charge of arbitrariness" (140). Fudge's essay, which reaches some of the same conclusions as I do, appeared while I was revising this chapter. It does not discuss tragedy, however.

<sup>32</sup> The transcultural nature of Smithian (impartial) spectatorship is widely contested. For a useful and recent summary of arguments, see Fonna Forman-Barzilai's *Adam Smith and the Circles of Sympathy*.

<sup>33</sup> Amartya Sen reads Smith globally: it is "the limitation of reliance on parochial reasoning, linked with national traditions and regional understandings, that Adam Smith wanted to resist. He did so by using the device of the impartial spectator" (*Justice* 403-404). Smith's insistence on this distanced scrutiny is meant to combat "not only the influence of vested interests, but also the captivating hold of entrenched traditions and customs" (404). Griswold writes that while the "impartial spectator is rooted in time and place," Smith "clearly

spectatorship and sympathy as ultimately capable of detachment from their particular historical or cultural situatedness. This reading aligns neatly with the status and importance of tragedy in Smith's *oeuvre* that I have distilled here.

A Nero will *always* be detestable, Smith argues, and Cato Uticensis is and always will be a morally beautiful spectacle—it is also moral beauty that renders some historical writing, especially that of Thucydides and Tacitus, better than the “cold narration” of modern historians. Despite his consciousness of changing norms and mores, then, Smith seems to suggest that a proper tragedy—one about, say, Cato—resists the “specter of relativism” (Fleischacker “Kultur” 6). It is also significant in this context that Smith demonstrates a sympathetic admiration for Native Americans, whose “heroic and unconquerable firmness” he describes in great and approving detail:

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assumes that custom need not interfere with our ability to grasp the truth about different societies or individuals. He assumes a basic transparency of human beings to each other” (349, 350). The examples of his sympathizing with Native Americans and enslaved “negro[es] from the coast of Africa” demonstrate “his obvious ability to stand at a critical distance from the mores of his own time and of earlier periods, as well as to enter into the situation of someone who is quite differently placed” (350). Broadie also resists the sociological reading of Smithian moral judgment: the impartial spectator “can, and occasionally does, speak against established social attitudes.... The impartial spectator cannot simply be a repository of social opinion, nor is it possible to reduce the judgment of the impartial spectator to the judgment of society, even where those two judgments coincide” (“Sympathy” 180).

Fleischacker, however, resists such readings and asks, for instance, “[h]ow are we supposed to *tell* whether our society is bigoted or not?... It is no more obvious how we would be alerted to other kinds of moral corruption, such as the sort that led, in Smith's view, to the acceptability of infanticide in the Greek world” (“Kultur” 13–14). It is, furthermore, “precisely this anthropological sensitivity that opens Smith to the charge that his moral philosophy is beset by the relativism with which philosophers generally charge anthropologists.... I don't know that Smith has a good answer to these charges.... [T]he impartial spectator is constructed out of modes of judgment that seem essentially relative to a particular culture” (“Kultur” 5, 7). Forman-Barzilai has recently insisted that “Smith's thoughts about *care* and *judgment* operate within remarkably narrow spatial limits,” whether affective, geographical, or cultural (5). Pace Sen and others, she contends that Smithian conscience or the impartial spectator is “in important was continuous with his sociological account of sympathy and, as such, falls flat as a cosmopolitan device for getting us beyond ourselves” (15).



Their magnanimity and selfcommand ... are almost beyond the conception of Europeans.... When a savage is made prisoner of war, and receives, as is usual, the sentence of death from his conquerors, he hears it without expressing any emotion, and afterwards submits to the most dreadful torments, without ever bemoaning himself, or discovering any other passion but contempt of his enemies. While he is hung by the shoulders over a slow fire, he derides his tormentors, and tells them with how much more ingenuity he himself had tormented such of their countrymen as had fallen into his hands. After he has been scorched and burnt, and lacerated in all the most tender and sensible parts of his body for several hours together, he is often allowed, in order to prolong his misery, a short respite, and is taken down from the stake: he employs this interval in talking upon all indifferent subjects, inquires after the news of the country, and seems indifferent about nothing but his own situation.

(TMS V.2.9)

Smith's admiration for what was to him a foreign culture transcends time and space, and is reminiscent of his assessment of Cato.

We have already seen how Smith becomes more ethically normative through the successive editions of *Theory of Moral Sentiments*. As Fonna Forman-Barzilai notes, through the subsequent editions of the work, Smith became "increasingly anxious about relying on the socialized conscience to secure social order.... He worried that it too easily devolves into mere conventionalism.... [and] decided that his articulation of conscience needed clearer *independence* from the relativity of social attitudes" (16, 93). This explains

his revisions and his increasing emphasis on asocial conscience.<sup>34</sup> Whether satisfactory on a theoretical level or not, this logic also underpins Smith's greater drive towards aesthetic normativity; it is, in other words, part and parcel of the same phenomenon. In fact, as Valihora has observed, the move of the impartial spectator towards greater asocial objectivity "demands a turn to works of art, because they offer a vehicle for standards of value beyond those of propriety" (144).

In this connection, it is worth stressing again the difficulty of sympathy for Smith. Indeed, Smith's language reveals the labour intensity behind the sympathetic exchange—he uses verbs such as "strive" and "endeavour" to characterize the process: "the spectator must ... *endeavour*, as much as he can, to put himself in the situation of the other.... and *strive* to render as perfect as possible, that imaginary change of situation" (TMS I.i.4.6, emphasis added). In this sense, when sympathy is possible at all—it is, as many readers have noted, virtually impossible—it is the result of some *difficulté surmontée*, the same principle we witnessed in the previous chapter that grounds his admiration of successful imitation, among other aesthetic phenomena.<sup>35</sup> This finds an analogy with Smith's labour theory of value from his *Wealth of Nations* and aesthetics in general. Tragic beauty, then, like that of an ingenious imitation or theory, is the result of some overcome difficulty, and is therefore timeless.

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<sup>34</sup> Hanley, too, notes how Smith goes to great lengths "to explain how moral agents – and particularly those who live in 'corrupt' societies governed by flawed social norms – might develop a capacity to act independently of public opinion" (*Virtue* 44).

<sup>35</sup> As John Radner observes, Smith "stresses more emphatically than Hume the deliberate effort responsible for sympathy.... Sympathy depends upon deliberate mental efforts" (200-201, 203) while Fudge notes that self-command, the virtue Smith prized above all others, derives its value "from its difficulty of attainment, which inspires in us a feeling of wonder and admiration" (139).

Smith here follows his “never to be forgotten” (*Corr.*, 274, 16 November 1787, 309) teacher Francis Hutcheson, who remarked that

another strong reason of this [the attraction to tragedies], is the moral Beauty of the Characters and Actions which we love to behold. For I doubt, whether any Audience would be pleas’d to see fictitious Scenes of Misery, if they were kept strangers to the moral Qualitys of the Sufferers, or their Characters and Actions. As in such a case, there would be no Beauty to raise Desire of seeing such Representations, I fancy we would not expose our selves to Pain alone, from Misery which we knew to be fictitious. (*Inquiry* II.5.8)

Hutcheson then argues that it is because of this attraction to moral beauty that people flocked to see the gladiators. Smith would likely agree with Hutcheson that our pleasure derived from literature is primarily moral.

Smith’s emphasis on admiration, in fact, distinguishes him from such sentimentalist writers as Pierre de Marivaux and Marie Riccoboni, with whom he silently engages in *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, as Neven Leddy and Deidre Dawson have noted. Indeed, Smith praises them in the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, suggesting that they are in some respects “much better instructors” than the Stoic philosophers (TMS III.3.14). However, he differs from these sentimentalist writers in notable ways. For Marivaux, the man within the breast is female, and unlike Riccoboni, Smith emphasizes the stoic aspects of sympathy: self-command, virtue, and the like. Further, Riccoboni offers a gendered distinction of

sympathy and virtue—namely, that women are more capable of self-command than men,<sup>36</sup> whereas Smith's impartial spectator and the virtues he enumerates are, as Marshall has noted, "masculine."<sup>37</sup> Though Smith acknowledges the pedagogical potential of the authors of what we call sentimental fiction, it is significant that this point is not elaborated. In other words, his praise is almost a passing comment, and, more importantly, he does not draw illustrations of his moral theory from these works; he almost exclusively draws them from neoclassical and sometimes classical tragedy. It is indeed curious that a theorist like Smith who had such an influence on the subsequent discourse of sensibility, and who was clearly influenced by the French sentimentalists, would not refer to sentimental fiction more; he prefers, in almost all cases, to refer to (neo)classical tragedy.<sup>38</sup>

Like Hutcheson, then, Smith does not merely privilege pity or compassion, but unlike many of his contemporaries, emphasizes the morally constructive function of tragedy. As a modern reader, Hathaway bemoans the eighteenth-century

patent concern with empirical psychologizing. The average critic then was so intent upon discovering the spectator's reaction to a work of art that he lost sight of the work of art itself. Especially he lost sight of moral problems ... [I]t did not often

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<sup>36</sup> Riccoboni, however, "approaches stoic self-control as a masculine prerogative, which she undermines with the claim that it is women and not men who are better able to control their passions" (Dawson 171).

<sup>37</sup> Elizabeth Bohls suggests, not without warrant, that in Smith's ethics, "[w]omen do not make good impartial spectators because femininity is aligned with all that must be superseded on the way to higher morality" (44). See also Maureen Harkin's "Sympathy."

<sup>38</sup> This could perhaps be partly explained by Eagleton's cheeky remark: "[g]reat-hearted, public-spirited actions are the monopoly of men. Like Burke, Smith sees the need to temper the sweetness of sympathy with a dash of testosterone. The feminine values are all very well in their place, but one needs to know where to draw the line between soft-heartedness and emasculation" (*Trouble* 68).

occur to him that our pleasure from tragedy is somehow connected with our attitudes toward the moral problems to which we are introduced by a tragedy. (688)

Smith's solution, though based on sympathy, avoids this problem by adding a pleasurable moral dimension that was lacking in previous formulations such as Burke's. Rene Wellek complains that for Burke "[q]uestions of structure and even meaning become irrelevant: the drama as drama is destroyed" (118). For Smith, questions of structure are in a sense "destroyed" since his solution to the problem, like Burke's but unlike Hume's, does not rest on any strictly aesthetic considerations—that is, tragedy is not viewed as a discrete form of experience divorced from the quotidian. Wellek is right to point out that Burke's solution has no place for the meaning of a tragic spectacle. Smith's may appear at first glance to suffer the same fault, but as we have seen, he emphasizes a stoic moral dimension that is absent from Burke's account. Thus, Smith "destroys" drama as drama, and questions of structure are perhaps irrelevant, but his solution by no means ignores meaning.

Smith's solution is still relevant in current debates on tragedy. Interestingly, contemporary arguments on the subject sometimes unwittingly tend to repeat Renaissance and eighteenth-century ideas. Stacie Friend, for instance, recalls Burke, and Susan Feagin's famous meta-response solution was already present in Castelvetro and Hutcheson, the "Oh, look how moral I am" response, to use Zuckert's rendering (156). Castelvetro, in his influential commentary on Aristotle's *Poetics*—infamous for its advocacy of the dramatic unities—argues that one of the pleasures of tragedy is what he calls "indirect pleasure," which is generated when "feeling displeasure from the misery of another that has come on him [a character] unjustly, we realize that we ourselves are good, since unjust things

displease us; this realization is a very great pleasure to us” (qtd. in Gilbert 351). Hutcheson alludes to the same when he writes, “we are not immediately excited by Compassion to desire the Removal of our own Pain: we think it just to be so affected upon the Occasion, and dislike those who are not so” (*Inquiry* II.5.8, 160). In a sense, Smith’s solution also involves a meta-response. The pleasure for Smith resides in second order feelings: a feeling about a feeling, or a response to a response, though perhaps not a self-gratulatory one.<sup>39</sup>

Smith’s solution to the problem of tragedy, satisfactory or not, has been overlooked by literary-aesthetic history, and it seems to have escaped even his contemporaries.<sup>40</sup> Smith formulated his own theory, which elaborates on Burke’s brief exposition, and which also fits into the debate at the time: Smith can be situated in one of two lines of thought on the subject during the century, namely, the “benevolent” line, which was predicated on sympathy. He does not, however, merely follow his predecessors. The uniqueness of his solution lies in his more complex construction of sympathy, which requires the mediation of the imagination and ratiocination. In some ways, as noted, Smith’s solution has greater explanatory power than those of his contemporaries. Again, why Smith never wrote a piece devoted to the subject, or, if he did write such a piece, why it has not survived, remains unclear. What is clear is that such ideas were never far from his mind, and we can infer from writings published in his lifetime his solution to the eighteenth-century paradox of tragedy.

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<sup>39</sup> Fleischacker has also very recently noted that this is “a second-order feeling *about* the two first-order feelings.... The Smithian *awareness* of sympathy is a sui generis feeling of human solidarity. As such, it is always agreeable” (“Hume and Smith” 302).

<sup>40</sup> That is, except for Gotthold Ephraim Lessing and Johann Gottfried Herder. I discuss their reception of and dialogue on Smith in the next chapter.

## Chapter Seven

### Neoclassical Dramatic Theory and Adam Smith

Smith thus had his own contribution to the pressing eighteenth-century debate concerning tragic pleasure. He also had much to say on the controversies surrounding other aspects of dramatic theory. The three main issues in dramatic and especially tragic theory of the eighteenth century concerned the unities of time and place, representations of violence and physical pain, and characterization—that is, which characters most befit a tragic representation. Smith argues in favour of the dramatic unities, against representations of physical pain and violence, and in favour of high-ranking tragic protagonists. These combined represent a traditional neoclassical position. Again, though Smith may appear to be echoing received opinion, some of his characteristic ways of thinking we have already seen are at work here as well. As will become evident, he offers his own unique justification for them. The justification rests, as it does with tragic pleasure, on Smith's master-concept of sympathy, and especially the epistemology of it. His explanation, furthermore, coheres with the rest of his aesthetics.

#### The Dramatic Unities

The rediscovery and translation of classical Greek texts in sixteenth-century Europe provided the impetus for a renewed interest in literary theory. Among such discussions, theorists began to contemplate and devise rules for dramatic representations. Many of these rules were based on the practice of the ancient dramatists, and in many cases these theorists

thought they were following Aristotle. In fact, however, many of their strictures, especially the unities of place and time, are nowhere to be found in Aristotle. This error goes back at least as far as Castelvetro (1570), whose formulation nevertheless “endowed the doctrine with high authority for over two hundred years” (Habib 243). Though based on a misreading, the unities were widely disseminated and influential. By unity of time, critics argued that the action of a drama should represent a duration no greater than twenty-four hours, and by unity of place, they asserted that a play should not “unrealistically” change locales—it is best, they argued, to keep the action to one city or even building.

The unities had many votaries in the eighteenth century, of whom Voltaire is perhaps the most outspoken major one. Against his rival Houdar de la Motte, who wished to abrogate them, Voltaire refers to the unities as “wise dramatic laws” and “the fundamental laws of the theatre” (“Preface to Oedipus” [1730] 43, 21). He sees the unities of time and place as logical consequences of the unity of action, both of which are based on reason, good sense, and probability: “the mind is incapable of comprehending several objects at the same time.... For the same reasons, the unity of place is also essential.... If the persons represented are at Athens in the first act, how can they get to Persia by the second?” (44-45). He also justifies the unity of time by insisting that if there is a long gap in the action, “the poet ... must give me an account of what passes during that time, for my business there is to be informed of every thing that happens, and nothing useless should happen” (46).

Such arguments for the unities were commonplace in England as well, though they were challenged to a greater extent there than in France. A current that rejected the unities in England goes at least as far back as George Farquhar’s attack in his *Discourse upon Comedy* (1702). In fact, such attacks multiplied during the middle of the century, and received



perhaps their most famous criticism in Samuel Johnson's "Preface to Shakespeare."<sup>1</sup>

Johnson argues that the unities, which have "given more trouble to the poet than pleasure to the auditor," are mistakenly assumed to be necessary for maintaining verisimilitude (310). He responds by insisting that "[i]t is false, that any representation is mistaken for reality; that any dramattick fable in its materiality was ever credible, or, for a single moment, was ever credited.... The truth is, that the spectators are always in their senses, and know, from the first act to the last, that the stage is only a stage, and that the players are only players" (311). Since spectators are not deceived and are in fact capable of suspending their disbelief, then, the unities of time and place are unnecessary. It did not hurt, moreover, that Shakespeare triumphed in spite of them.

It is important, however, not to overstate the finality of Johnson's famous criticism, which traditional literary histories tend to think of as the nail in the coffin for the unities. Brian Vickers warns against such an interpretation since "the issue was by no means dead" by 1765 (vi. 10). Indeed, he finds that defences of the unities continued well up until the end of the century (vi.10). He cites, among many others, Francis Gentleman, who in 1773 criticized *Cymbeline* owing to its "monstrous breaches of dramatic unity," while as late as 1801, Arthur Murphy complained about *The Winter's Tale* since the "rules of time and place are [there] totally violated" (qtd. in Vickers vi. 10). To this list he adds Edward Taylor, John Stedman, and Hugh Blair, among others (vi. 11). In short, although attacks on the unities became more pronounced by mid-century, there were enough conservative arguments produced to counter them. By mid-century, then, the issue was very much unsettled.

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<sup>1</sup> In a quotation that has circulated widely, Smith is said to have considered Johnson's preface "the most manly piece of criticism that was ever published in any country" (qtd. in Ross *Life* 354). The only source for this, however, is Seward's *Anecdotes of Distinguished Persons*, published seven years after Smith's death.

Smith is very much on the conservative, neoclassical side of this debate, to such an extent that Brian Vickers finds it “disappointing” to find him “in effect reaffirming the concept of the Unities after the fresh and cogent criticisms of it” (iv. 15).<sup>2</sup> In his *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres* (1762), Smith, like Johnson, argued against the supposed necessity of maintaining dramatic illusion since “in reality we are never thus deceived” (LRBL ii. 85). On the contrary, we “know that we are in the play-house, that the persons before us are actors, and that the thing represented either happened before or perhaps never happened at all.” That the effect of plays that do not observe the unities “may still be very considerable” proves for Smith that “it is not deception which gives us the pleasure we find in these works and in fact we never are deceived for one moment” (ii. 89).

Though he shares Johnson’s view that spectators are not deceived, thus rendering issues of verisimilitude or *vraisemblance* unnecessary, Smith nevertheless departs from him and defends the unities by providing an epistemological objection.<sup>3</sup> Smith defends the unity of time by arguing that we experience “uneasiness ... in being kept in the dark” when in a scene “there is supposed to have passed three or four years since the last was before us.” In such cases, “we immediately become uneasy to know what has happened during that time. Many important events must have passed in that time which we know nothing of,” a circumstance consonant with his objection to gaps we saw in Chapter Five (LRBL ii.86). Naturally, he condemns Shakespeare, who “supposes often that three or four years have

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<sup>2</sup> Vickers notes, however, that when it came to the theatre itself, “the older Neo-classic concept of the Unities [was] still in undisputed possession” (16).

<sup>3</sup> By contrast, Lord Kames, writing in the same year Smith was lecturing, insists that “[w]hile the dialogue goes on, a thousand particulars concur to delude us into an impression of reality ... [T]he spectator once engaged, is willing to be deceived, loses sight of himself, and without scruple enjoys the spectacle as reality” (*Elements* 666).

elapsed betwixt one scene and another” while Racine, whom he admired, “never supposes more time to have been taken up in the actions than in the representations” (LRBL ii. 85). Smith justifies the unity of place on the same basis since its absence conduces to the same uneasiness. Shakespeare, he observes, often breaks the unity of place, having one scene in France and the following one in England, for instance. In such cases, “the distance is so great that we are anxious to know what has happened in the interval betwixt them. The best way, surely is to fix the action to one place if possible, as Racine and Sophocles have done, and if that is not possible we should make the distance as little as possible[,] confining the action to the same house or thereabouts” (ii.89). In this view, then, Smith seems to endorse the unities fairly unproblematically, and thus seems to resemble his more staunchly neoclassical French contemporaries, notably Voltaire; he appears to be reacting to the then new voices that argued against the unities.

However, his reasoning on and defense of these unities are different. Smith’s justification is not whimsical, and in fact coheres with the rest of his aesthetic and moral system; it is predicated neither on the psychological nor on precedent nor the verisimilar, but on the epistemology of sympathy. Smith makes it clear, as we have seen, that sympathy is based not on the emotions displayed, but the facts; his version of sympathy, unlike those earlier in the century, which espoused a “contagion” model, is not characterized by unmediated response. In his model, the spectator views the distress, then determines whether she can approve of what she sees based on the circumstances. In other words, sympathy is contingent on knowledge, and as a result, circumstances, facts, and context are crucial. It is for this reason that Smith discounts violations of the unities of time and place

since they both have the disadvantage of occluding the sympathetic process, a crucial point he underscores in the following passage from the same lecture:

in tragedy or epic poetry the chief art does not consist in displaying the characters; but in shewing in what manner the chief persons in whom we are chiefly concerned acted in lamentable or difficult circumstances, and how at last they were either in the 1<sup>st</sup> altogether oppressed by their misfortunes or extricated themselves from them. The unity in comedy consists in the characters, whereas in tragedy or epic poetry it consists chiefly in managing the circumstances. (ii.83)

Smith's epistemology of sympathy makes it clear, as has been noted, that sympathy "does not arise so much from the view of the passions, as from that of the situation which excites it," and it is for this reason that spectators are capable of "sympathizing" with the dead and the senile (I.i.1.10). Further, Smith writes that our sympathy, before we are aware of its cause(s), is "always extremely imperfect." He continues:

General lamentations ... create rather a curiosity to inquire into his [the sufferer's] situation, along with some disposition to sympathize with him, than any actual sympathy that is very sensible. The first question which we ask is, What has befallen you? Till this be answered, though we are uneasy both from the vague idea of his misfortune, and still more from torturing ourselves with conjectures about what it may be, yet our fellow-feeling is not very considerable. (TMS I.i.1.9)

Smith continues by noting that a spectator wishing to sympathize with someone must "bring home to himself every little circumstance of distress which can possibly occur to the sufferer. He must adopt the whole case of his companion with all its minutest incidents"

(TMS I.i.4.6). Smithian sympathy is thus predicated on knowledge, a knowledge that is impeded by a violation of the unities.

John Lothian, who discovered the student notes of Smith's rhetoric lectures, suggests that Johnson would brush off Smith's objection to abrogating the unities: his "answer to Smith would in all probability have been, 'Why bother about what happened in the intervals. If they had been important they should have been recorded'" ("Adam Smith" 7). Without full knowledge of the circumstantial context, however, spectators are unable to render accurate sympathetic judgments. It is for this reason that Smith objects to being "kept in the dark." Smith's discussion of the epistemology of sympathy and the unities demonstrates that the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* and *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres* are indeed, as aptly described by its modern editor, "two halves of one system" (Bryce 19).

Smith's arguments for the unities, then, do not rest on notions of credibility or some *ipse dixit*—recall that he has little patience for the test of time or ancient authorities. For this reason, Vivenza's assessment of Smith on this score is inaccurate. "Smith," she writes, "echoes the approach of sixteenth-century critics, which should not surprise us if we recall that the unities do not appear in Aristotle ... but were elaborated amid the prolific writings of the Renaissance" (165). Smith does happen to agree with many of the Renaissance commentators on the unities, but he has his own, quite original reasons. In fact, he objects to their insistence that the unities are necessary to maintain verisimilitude, a key tenet of neoclassical theory.

### Decorum and Violence

Another issue of dramatic theory that received much attention well into the eighteenth century was violence or, more generally, the representation of physical pain in the arts. The eighteenth century was overwhelmingly Horatian in rejecting violence on the stage; most critics followed Horace's famous dictum, "Ne peruos coram populo Medea trucidet" ("Medea should not butcher her children in front of the audience"). As we have seen, Hume complained of Rowe's *Ambitious Stepmother*, whose violence and gore were so extreme that the play could impart no pleasure; indeed, with very few exceptions, English critics largely followed neoclassical opinion on the matter. Despite this, however, the bloodiness of the English stage was notorious—Voltaire, for instance, writes "I am far from proposing that the stage should become a scene of slaughter and destruction, as it is in Shakespear and in his successors" ("Essay on Tragedy" 19). The violence of even some classical plays did not escape censure, as will become evident below.

Smith also seems to follow neoclassical theory on this matter, and provides his justification in the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*. While discussing our sympathy with physical pain, he again refers to tragic representations:

In some of the Greek tragedies there is an attempt to excite compassion, by the representation of the agonies of bodily pain. Philoctetes cries out and faints from the extremity of his sufferings. Hippolytus and Hercules are both introduced as expiring under the severest tortures, which, it seems, even the fortitude of Hercules was incapable of supporting.... If those heroes were to recover, we should think the representation of their sufferings perfectly ridiculous. What a tragedy would that be

of which the distress consisted in a colic! Yet no pain is more exquisite. These attempts to excite compassion by the representation of bodily pain, may be regarded as among the greatest breaches of decorum of which the Greek theatre has set the example. (TMS I.ii.1.11)<sup>4</sup>

Smith appears to be following neoclassical, Horatian doctrine, especially given his emphasis on decorum here. He also seems to be following Voltaire closely, who voiced very similar objections. Voltaire insists that the “Greeks produced spectacles on the stage that appear not less shocking and absurd to us,” citing *Hippolytus*, *Philoctetes* (as Smith does), and *Oedipus*, concluding that “many of the Greek tragedies are filled with terror of this kind, that is to the last degree extravagant. The Greek tragedians, in other respects superior to the English, were certainly wrong in often mistaking horror for terror” (“*Essay on Tragedy*” 17-18). Both appear to voice a similar objection, then: they complain about the lack of decorum.

However, Smith offers a more substantial objection than Hume or Voltaire, one that is based not on propriety, but ultimately on his moral epistemology. As we have already seen, for Smith, sympathy can only be obtained when individuals “flatten” their passions, a circumstance that culminates in a preference for decorum in a literary context (Vivenza 175). More importantly, as Vivenza notes, Smith’s preference, “far from being for classical purposes of equilibrium, is emotional involvement, and thus more Smithian than Aristotelian” (175). In this sense, Smithian sympathy (and by extension, decorum) is

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<sup>4</sup> Walter Payne Knight would later echo similar sentiments: *Philoctetes*’ “ulcerated foot and lamentations over it, howsoever just, expressive, and appropriate, would not be endured on any modern stage; not only, because the fiction is, in itself, offensive and disgusting, but because every expression or complaint of distress, that such a calamity can excite, must necessarily display some degree of this kind of selfish weakness; and consequently be unfit for tragedy; which can properly exhibit only the energies of human nature” (330-31).

different from the traditional view of sympathy in which it “soar[ed] above the trammels of the rules ... [and] worked against the Aristotelian conception of mimetic decorum” (Wimsatt and Brooks 296). Smith’s objection, then, is not based on typical neoclassical arguments, and his stricture thus bears only a superficial resemblance to the Horatian principle.

On this issue it is worth recalling Gotthold Ephraim Lessing and Johann Gottfried Herder, two early German readers of Smith’s *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, and among the only readers ever to read Smith’s text with a view to its aesthetics.<sup>5</sup> In his famous *Laocoön*, Lessing argues that despite Smith’s objection, Sophocles’s play, which gave full expression to Philoctetes’ pain, remains “one of the masterpieces of the stage” (70). Despite its theoretical lack of decorum, the play has somehow maintained it. Contra Smith, Lessing insists that we do not, in fact, “despise” Philoctetes,

not when we see that the sufferer makes every effort to suppress [cries]; not when we know him otherwise as a man of fortitude, still less when we see him even in his suffering give proof of his fortitude, when we see that the pain can indeed force cries from him, but can compel him to nothing further—that he will rather submit to the longer endurance of his pain than change his opinions or his resolves in the slightest.

(71-72)

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<sup>5</sup> Over two centuries of commentary and scholarship on Smith have virtually ignored these two. The editorial introduction to the Glasgow edition of the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* repeats what Eckstein’s 1926 German translation and edition says, namely, that Lessing and Herder commented on the work. Both editions indicate that Herder mentions Smith several times in his works. Eckstein tells us that “Lessing mentions it [TMS] in 1763 in his *Laokoon* and quotes explicitly (in the same translation) a section from the second edition from the year 1761” (22). Further, he informs us that “Herder also repeatedly quotes Smith. An example (1769) is in the ‘kritischen Wäldern’ I, 5, at which point he criticises the discourse of Lessing” (44, n34). (I wish to thank Kristin Lindfield-Ott for helping me with translating Eckstein’s introduction).



However, Smith's stricture is more complicated, and Lessing quotes him somewhat out of context. He also fails to mention a crucial aspect of Smith's sympathetic imagination, namely, its epistemological dimension. Smith insists that the facts and circumstances of a situation must be known before sympathy can occur. Even the strongest sympathy in any form is attenuated, he argues, and this is nowhere truer than with physical pain. Smith does not complain that a wild shriek, for instance, is merely undesirable for aesthetic reasons; it is so because spectators can never make the epistemological leap that is required for genuine sympathy. It is for this reason that Smith writes, in a rare moment of humour, that a tragedy predicated on a protagonist's colic would not work. The more acute the distress, the less likely it will be sympathized with. It is not because spectators do not wish to sympathize with pain, but that they are simply incapable of doing so.

Interestingly, however, on this subject Smith and Lessing do find some common ground, and seem to share what might be considered a "stoic" tragic aesthetic. Later in *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Smith gives the graphic example of a man who has "lost his leg by a cannon shot, and who, the moment after, speaks and acts with his usual coolness and tranquillity." Such a person "exerts a much higher degree of self-command, so he naturally feels a much higher degree of self-approbation," the suggestion being that he has earned the approbation of those around him as well.<sup>6</sup> He goes on to say, however, in a passage Lessing omits, that "it is not the pain which interests us, but some other circumstances. It is not the sore foot, but the solitude, of Philoctetes which affects us, and diffuses over that charming tragedy, that romantic wildness, which is so agreeable to the imagination" (I.ii.1.11). Smith

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<sup>6</sup> In her commentary on Smith, Sophie de Grouchy maintains that the only reason our "sympathy is weaker for a man whose leg is cut off than for a man who loses his mistress" is "only because the imitation of physical pains necessary for theatrical success makes the illusion more difficult to achieve" (134).

thus maintains that we can still sympathize with a person undergoing physical torments. Many of his examples illustrating sympathy are extreme, and his moral treatise itself begins, in fact, with no less than our own brother on the rack. Lessing, then, seems to miss the point. We can still sympathize with subjects but not with pain—in Smith’s own words, we “sympathize with the fear, though not with the agony of the sufferer” (I.ii.1.9).<sup>7</sup> Thus, Smith still privileges a “stoic” tragic aesthetics, whereas Lessing complains that “all stoicism is untheatrical” (63). Lessing insists, *pace* Smith, that tragic heroes “must show feeling, must utter their pain, and let Nature work in them undisguisedly,” otherwise “they leave our hearts cold” (73).

In his *Critical Forests*, Herder, who regrets “the trouble that Mr. Lessing takes” to defend Sophocles and to refute Smith comes, as it were, to Smith’s rescue by demonstrating that Lessing has misread him (I.5, 72). He argues that, despite Lessing’s contention, the expression of pain is not the “principal means of arousing sympathy” in the play (73). Herder goes on to list the calamities that befell the protagonist (deceit, betrayal, solitude, and

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<sup>7</sup> Lessing maintains that “[i]f we see [a man] bear his misery with greatness of soul, then indeed greatness of soul will excite our admiration, but admiration is a cold emotion, whose passive wonder excludes every other warmer passion as well as every other more significant representation” (63). Smith would not disagree entirely with Lessing here. Smith tells us that the man who shows no feeling, who is completely insensible, is odious. This was in fact one of Smith’s principal objections to classical Stoicism, that is, *apatheia* (lack of feeling):

[t]he man who appears to feel nothing for his own children, but who treats them upon all occasions with unmerited severity and harshness, seems of all brutes the most detestable. The sense of propriety, so far from requiring us to eradicate altogether that extraordinary sensibility, which we naturally feel for the misfortunes of our nearest connections, is always much more offended by the defect, than it ever is by the excess of that sensibility. The stoical apathy is, in such cases, never agreeable, and all the metaphysical sophisms by which it is supported can seldom serve any other purpose than to blow up the hard insensibility of a coxcomb to ten times its native impertinence. (TMS III.3.14)

However, Smith would insist, *pace* Lessing, that admiration is still the desideratum.

so on), which would correspond to Smith's "other circumstances" necessary for the proper operation of sympathy.

Further, Herder defends (perhaps unwittingly) Smith's assertion that physical pain is almost impossible to sympathize with in all cases. He writes, in typically rhapsodic fashion, that

[t]he impression of physical pain is too confused.... [H]ow can I be moved to pity if the principal idea of the play is physical pain? I cannot think of any apart from the usual utterances, cries, tears, and convulsions.... With physical pain I cannot but sympathize physically: that is, sympathy causes a similarly painful tension to be produced in my fibers; I suffer the pain in my own body. And would this compassion be agreeable? Anything but.

Herder goes on to note that whether the "whimpering man gripped by a seizure is Philoctetes does not concern me: he is an animal, just as I am.... And how is this impression in the slightest degree pleasurable, agreeable? It is excruciating" (76-77). Herder insists that one would require a "gladiator's soul" to endure such a play, (77) and that an "ocean of disagreeable emotions will wash over" a spectator without "admixture of a single agreeable drop" upon viewing it (78). He seems to echo the distinction that Smith himself makes and that Lessing overlooks. Like Smith, he argues that sympathizing physically—what he calls "animal sympathy"—would be physically painful. This form of sympathy "has nothing agreeable about it; it is scarcely capable of illusion" (79). The difference, as we have seen, is that Smith precludes even this "animal sympathy." He observes that although we "can sympathize with the *distress* which excessive hunger occasions when we read the description

of it,” we do not “grow hungry” ourselves, and thus do not sympathize physically with the sufferers (TMS I.ii.1.1, emphasis added).

The “conversation” of these two readers with Smith suggests that his system precludes any sort of aesthetics of pain. By contrast, the aesthetics of Kames, Burke, Lessing, and even St. Augustine (as we will see) each entertains the possibility of pain as a component of aesthetic experience. Burke distinguishes between delight and pleasure, the former of which “turns on pain” (I.xviii, 97). I have already alluded to Kames’s treatment of the problem of tragic pleasure, which in effect “redefines the paradox of tragedy since the standard formulation, on Kames’ view, mistakenly assumes that we cannot be attracted to anything but pleasure” (Zuckert 147). Indeed, in a footnote added to his *Elements of Criticism*, Kames writes that “sympathy, though painful, is attractive, and attaches us to an object in distress” (438).

Though writing centuries earlier, Augustine provides an early and significant articulation of this aesthetics of pain. He denounces tragedy in a manner that would anticipate Rousseau, deploring its indulgence in pain and sadness. He asks,

Why does man like to be made sad when viewing doleful and tragical scenes, which yet he himself would by no means suffer? And yet he wishes, as a spectator, to experience from them a sense of grief, and in this very grief his pleasure consists. What is this but wretched insanity?... The hearer is not expected to relieve, but merely invited to grieve; and the more he grieves, the more he applauds the actor of these fictions. (3.2, 38)

Augustine emphasizes and deprecates the attraction to pain itself, something that most of the eighteenth-century theorists (Smith included) do not, and anticipates arguments such as

Burke's that held that the (painful) experience is somehow morally productive. As has already been noted, Smithian sympathy is ultimately always pleasant: recognizing the "perfect coincidence" between passions is "always agreeable and delightful" (I.iii.1.9). This conclusion did not sit well with Hume. Smith's eschewal of pain and the unpleasant perhaps explains in part his aversion to the (unruly) sublime, as noted in Chapter Five.

Smith would also find opposition on the matter of pain from Sophie de Grouchy, who translated the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* in 1798—it would remain the standard French translation for two centuries—and appended to it eight *lettres* on sympathy, which are more of a response to than a commentary on Smith's work.<sup>8</sup> Among other things, de Grouchy takes issue with Smith on physical pain, insisting that "someone who sees a wounded man, besides the unpleasant impression felt at the sight of pain ... believes he experiences a local pain the corresponding part of his body." She goes so far as to underscore the educative potential of pain and its sympathy: "pain and adversity are such effective schools for making men more compassionate and more human. How necessary this school is for you, the rich and powerful, who are distanced from the very idea of misery and misfortune" (110). Further, *pace* Smith, de Grouchy argues that "[o]ur sympathy for physical suffering is stronger, more general, and more deeply felt than for moral sufferings. The display of physical suffering is even more heartrending and troublesome for those whose education, or rather breakdowns in their education, have distanced themselves from the face of pain"

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<sup>8</sup> Indeed, one of de Grouchy's motivations behind her *Lettres* was that Smith did not, in her opinion, spend enough time analyzing the cultivation or "education" of sympathy, or in Dawson's words, he did "not occupy enough of the public space ... [and] did not evolve from a moral philosopher into a social reformer" ("Moral Philosophy" 281). For a more detailed discussion of de Grouchy's critique of Smith, see Brown and McClellan's introduction to their edition of de Grouchy's *Lettres*.

(134).<sup>9</sup> Smith, by contrast, and who did not share de Grouchy's revolutionary sympathies, diminishes the educative potential of physical pain.

Burke also provides a similar contrast here. As Gibbons notes, whereas Smith deprecates the dramatic representation of *Philoctetes* (in all his agonies), "Burke had no compunction about highlighting the agony of suffering, all the more so when it was due to colonial oppression or injustice" (99). Further, against "Smith's ascetic call for the injured party to stifle his or her cries and to put themselves in the place of the impartial spectator, Burke's sympathies were in the reverse order, insisting that there could be no dispassionate gaze in the face of genuine suffering (100-01). As Gibbons reads him, Burke would side more with de Grouchy since for Smith, the onus is on the sufferer to conform to the spectator's equanimity, whereas for Burke, the spectator "identifies with the agony of the victim" (266). As a result, Burke's model of sympathy "runs the risk of removing the aesthetic barriers from the spectacle of pain, thus allowing the sufferings of the victim to unsettle the composure of the spectator" (120). The potential disintegration of aesthetic barriers and sympathy with, say, a colonial subaltern, threatens to undermine the sterility or inertness and disinterestedness of sympathy, one that characterizes Smith's model—in a sense, for Smith, all the world's a stage. Like Addison before him, Burke insists that pain cannot press too closely; in Smith's sanitized formulation, this is not, as we have seen, a problem. (I will revisit this issue in the final part of this chapter while exploring the implications it has for the ideology of Burkean and Smithian sympathy.)

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<sup>9</sup> Grouchy, as her modern editors note, misreads Smith when she claims that "[i]t is absolutely false that the principle of firmness and courage in the face of physical pains something [sic] that inspires only a small degree of sympathy in others (as Smith remarks)" (135).

Smith's dialogue with these thinkers similarly reveals his denial of the somatic in general—the body, that is—and ties into his discussion of our inability to sympathize with physical pain and hunger. Smith writes, “[i]t is indecent to express any strong degree of those passions which arise from a certain situation or disposition of the body; because the company, not being in the same disposition, cannot be expected to sympathize with them.... Such is our aversion for all the appetites which take their origin from the body: all strong expressions of them are loathsome and disagreeable.” Smith goes so far as to minimize pain, insisting that “[n]othing is so soon forgot. The moment it is gone the whole agony of it is over,” whereas an “unguarded word from a friend will occasion a more durable uneasiness.” As noted above, he avers that spectators cannot sympathize with the hunger felt by the people they read about in the journal of a sea voyage.<sup>10</sup> Smith, then, denies the possibility of a somatic aesthetics, thus complicating Eagleton's formulation of aesthetics as “a discourse of the body” (*Ideology* 13).

Smith, then, would likely agree with the Horatian dictum (“Ne pueros...”), though not out of any deference towards ancient precedent, authority, or any squeamishness on his part. Kames likewise argues that violent action ought never to take place on the stage, but his explanation runs counter to Smith's. He insists that a spectator, who is “deluded” by the action on stage, “is roused by violent action: he was as from a pleasing dream, and gathering all his senses about him, finds all to be a fiction” (666). Kames argues that this neoclassical

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<sup>10</sup> Similarly, Smith contends that love and sexual attraction cannot garner sympathy: “[t]hough naturally the most furious of all the passions, all strong expressions of it are upon every occasion indecent, even between persons in whom its most complete indulgence is acknowledged by all laws, both human and divine, to be perfectly innocent” (TMS I.ii.1.2), which reflects Bohls's contention that Smith's ethics operates under a network of exclusion, especially of sexual and physical love (38)

rule must be followed lest the illusion be destroyed; Smith, as we have seen, denies illusion as a legitimate marker of aesthetic experience. Rather, he would merely deem such scenes unnecessary since we cannot sympathize with physical pain, much less violence; the contextual facts and sentiments of the suffering agent are enough. If he were alive today, Smith would object to slasher or other violent films on similar grounds; it is not that the violence is objectionable in itself but simply unnecessary.

Smith's thoughts on decorum, violence, and the unities explain at least in part his admiration of Racine's *Phaedra*, the neoclassical tragedy *par excellence*. The play observes the unities of time, place, and action and observes decorum to an extreme degree. Nothing untowards happens on stage: the death of Hyppolite occurs offstage and is recounted to the audience.<sup>11</sup> The restrained, one might even say "stoic," nature of the play appealed to Smith since it facilitates sympathetic exchange, as do the unities. By contrast, a play like *Hamlet*—which Voltaire detested and even Smith criticized—is too extreme at times for any sympathetic exchange to occur. Further, Hamlet's emotions, as T.S. Eliot famously observed, "exceeded the facts," an appraisal Smith would likely share (142). Self-command, the quality Smith privileges above all else, is not something the characters of the play are known for: Hamlet kills several people, Ophelia kills herself, Gertrude weds incestuously and indecorously, and Claudius commits fratricide (this is, of course, to say nothing of characters from other Shakespearean plays). Moreover, much of the violence in *Hamlet* occurs on stage, in marked contrast to (neo)classical drama.

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<sup>11</sup> Racine, in his preface to *Berenice*, comments that "there is no need for blood or death in tragedy: grandeur in the action and heroism in the characters are enough," a sentiment Smith would agree with (Howarth et al, 280).



What we are given in *Phaedra*, by contrast, is a narrative, and spectators are given the contextual facts and information demanded by the proper act of sympathy—it is worth recalling here Griswold’s account of sympathy as fundamentally narratological, as has already been noted. There are no attempts in the play, Smith would tell us, to force us to think or feel one way or another by providing a short-cut, as it were, to sympathy, such as expressions of physical suffering. We are offended by such shortcuts because we have not been given the opportunity to exercise our own powers of sympathetic judgment.

As with the unities, then, Smith appears at first glance to be rehearsing neoclassical doctrine with respect to representations of violence and physical pain in the arts. His justification, however, is grounded in his epistemology of sympathy. His objection does not rest on mere decorum, nor is he offended by the horror of pain and violence, as Voltaire and Hume are. *Pace* Hume, painful scenes are in fact capable of garnering sympathy for Smith; his sometimes extreme illustrations demonstrate just this.

### Characters

The issue of characterization—that is, the proper characters in especially tragedy—engaged critics and theorists during the eighteenth century, and in fact, was a debate that had been ongoing since at least the Renaissance.<sup>12</sup> Here too, Smith quietly contributed to this

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<sup>12</sup> Critics were, however, fairly unanimous on this issue from at least late antiquity: Diomedes the grammarian (4<sup>th</sup> century CE), Donatus, Placidus, Isidore of Seville, Huguccio, and Nicolas Trevet of Oxford all define tragedies as stories involving kings and public affairs. This was more or less the consensus until the seventeenth century. As Rebecca Bushnell argues,

[t]he writers and actors of the sixteenth century did inherit from the preceding centuries’ scholars and divines a definitive notion of what ‘tragedy’ is, which was as much a political as an ethical concept:

discussion. As with the other ideas discussed in this chapter, he holds what appears to be a conservative, neoclassical position. As will become evident, however, his justification is unique.

Neoclassical critics of the Renaissance argued in favour of high-ranking protagonists in tragedy, a preference Northrop Frye has termed “high-mimetic” (34). This preference, like that for the dramatic unities, is again based on a misreading of Aristotle. The consensus was that protagonists of high rank were essential to tragedy because they affected spectators more.<sup>13</sup> Some thinkers, such as D’Aubignac, went so far as to maintain that even plays with happy endings are tragedies “so long as they depict the fortunes of the great” (Jones and Nicol 64-65). Such views continued into the next two centuries, especially in (but not limited to) France. There were some early dissenting voices, such as André Dacier, Pierre Corneille, and Jean Baptiste Dubos, who argued that spectators are only affected by the misfortune of people they resemble.<sup>14</sup> Such sentiments were in the minority, however.

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the fall of those of high estate or rank. Chaucer’s translation of Boethius offered a simple definition: ‘What other thing bywalen the crynges of tragedyes but oonly the dedes of Fortune that with unwar strook overturneth the realmes of great nobleye’ (Glose. Tragedye is to seyn a dite of a prosperite for a tyme, that endeth in wrecchidness).” Bushnell also refers to Lydgate’s *Troy Book*, which defines tragedy as a story that “begynneth in prosperite / And endeth ever in adversity / And it also doth the conquest trete / Of riche kynges and of lordys grete, / Of mighty men and olde conquerours. (292)

To this one can add the definition offered by Chaucer’s Monk as a story “[o]f hym that stood in greet prosperitee / And is yfallen out of heigh degree” (“Monk’s Prologue” 1996-97). See also Kelly, *Ideas and Forms of Tragedy*.

<sup>13</sup> Julius Caesar Scaliger, one of the most important and influential Aristotelian scholars of the Renaissance, argued that “[k]ings and princes have by their position a tragic potential lacking in the humbler estates” (qtd. in Jones and Nicol 20), while Castelvetro similarly maintained that the plot of epics and tragedies “should contain action not human alone but also magnificent and royal” since the characters of tragedy “are royal and have greater souls” (qtd in Gilbert, 319, 329).

<sup>14</sup> Dacier writes that fear and pity are only aroused by “the misfortunes of *people like ourselves*” (qtd. in Jones and Nicol 89), while Corneille asks, if pity is “aroused in us by its representation only when we see the suffering of people like ourselves, and that their misfortunes make us feel similar ones, is it not also true that

The eighteenth century in France was overwhelmingly conservative on this matter. Voltaire, who is representative of the the mainstream, conservative current, attacks the nascent bourgeois or middle-class tragedy (“tragédie bourgeoise”) in his preface to *Nanine*,<sup>15</sup> where he argues that the form “is a bastard form, a monster,” a point he echoes in his later *Questions sur l’Encyclopédie* (75).<sup>16</sup> Responding to Corneille, Voltaire argues that tragedies ought to involve “men raised above the common level,” including kings, princes, and emperors. This is so “not only because the fate of states depends on these important people, but because the misfortunes of these illustrious men ... make a greater impression on us than those of the vulgar” (*Remarques sur les discours de Corneille* 357, translations mine).<sup>17</sup> In short, French criticism in the period between Corneille and Voltaire was fairly consistent: protagonists of high rank should be used in tragedy because they are important public figures and because spectators admire them (Stock 35).<sup>18</sup>

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fear could be aroused more strongly by our witnessing misfortunes which befall people of our own rank, whom we resemble completely?” (qtd. in Osborne 185).

<sup>15</sup> This term is variously translated into English. Tobias Smollett’s translation of Voltaire’s works renders the phrase as “familiar tragedy.” Goldsmith, in his “Essay on the Theatre,” mentions “what Voltaire humourously [sic] calls a *Tradesman’s Tragedy*” (287). Both phrases are probably closer to capturing the eighteenth-century derision than the more literal translation, “bourgeois tragedy.”

<sup>16</sup> “ce serait manquer à la fois l’objet de la tragédie et de la comédie; ce serait une espèce bâtarde, un monstre né de l’impuissance de faire une comédie et une tragédie véritable.”

<sup>17</sup> “Rois, empereurs, princes, généraux d’armée, principaux chefs de république; il n’importe. Mais il faut toujours, dans la tragédie, des hommes élevés au dessus du commun; non-seulement parce que le destin des états dépend du sort de ces personnages importants, mais parce que les malheurs des hommes illustres, exposés aux regards des nations, font sur nous une impression plus profonde que les infortunes du vulgaire.”

<sup>18</sup> The conservative current prevailed on the Continent. As late as 1740, Gottsched in Germany, for instance, maintained that “[a] tragedy ... is an instructive moral poem in which an important action among noble persons is imitated.... Tragedy is an image of the misfortunes encountered by the great men of this world and which are either borne steadfastly and courageously or heroically overcome” (qtd. in Osborne 187-88).

This idea continued into eighteenth-century Britain, though its existence there was somewhat more precarious than on the Continent. The tide in Britain was increasingly in favour of “private” characters, a trend that starts fairly early in the century. Nicholas Rowe, Richard Steele (*Tatler* No. 172), and George Lillo, among others, were representative of this shift. Rowe’s prologue to *The Fair Penitent* (1703), an early and significant example, observes that tragedies had for ages been restricted to “the fate of kings and empires” (l. 1). However, since “[w]e ne’er can pity what we ne’er can share” (12), Rowe chooses instead “[a] melancholy tale of private woes,” where the viewer “shall meet with sorrows like [their] own” (ll. 15, 18).

Lillo’s influential *The London Merchant* (1731) similarly opens by complaining that tragic drama had been confined to royalty, and by way of apology, opts for “a tale of private woe” (l. 20). Lillo goes on to argue in his dedicatory epistle to the play that if “princes, etc., were alone liable to misfortunes ... there would be good reason for confining the characters in tragedy to those of superior rank; but since the contrary is evident, nothing can be more reasonable than to proportion the remedy to the disease” (288).<sup>19</sup> These sentiments would be echoed later in the century by Thomas Francklin in his *A Dissertation on Ancient Tragedy* (1768) and the anonymous *An Essay upon the Present State of the Theatre in France, England and Italy* (1760), both of which argue that upper-class protagonists are not only unnecessary to tragedy, but do not affect spectators as well as “the distresses of private life” (*An Essay* 3).

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<sup>19</sup> Osborne observes that “[t]he issues identified by Lillo ... are constants in dramatic criticism in Europe over the next fifty years” (185).

There was, of course, resistance to this current. For instance, the *Encyclopedia Britannica* of 1778 defines tragedy as “a dramatic poem, representing some signal action performed by illustrious persons” (8634). Richard Hurd, writing a few years before Smith, acknowledges that although the “distresses of private and inferior persons will, no doubt, affect us greatly,” tragedies with high-mimetic characters are still preferable since misfortunes “impress the heart more forcibly” when related of the higher characters in life. Such characters hold greater social importance, and as a result, “all our faculties take an alarm” (34-35). Oliver Goldsmith similarly argues in his “Essay on the Theatre” (1773) that the pity of spectators rises in proportion to the height from which a protagonist falls. Such pronouncements were less common in England by the third quarter of the century, though the conservative current was by no means defunct.

To summarize, then: neoclassical writers and theorists tended to see kings and other persons of high rank as indispensable elements of tragedies. This was an inaccurate and un-Aristotelian survival from the Renaissance. The idea was still popular in eighteenth-century France, and, although it flourished in Britain as well, it was challenged more so there; both currents were, however, alive and well around the 1760s, though by mid-century, Stock observes, “a considerable heap of criticism has accumulated which is favourable to domestic tragedy” in England (38). It is in this context, then, that Adam Smith articulates his ideas on tragedy and its protagonists.

## I

On this matter of tragic protagonists, Smith is on the side of high-mimeticism. He articulates his preference most significantly in the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* in the context

of his discussion of sympathy, more specifically, of the influence of social rank on it. Smith writes:

When we consider the condition of the great, in those delusive colours in which the imagination is apt to paint it, it seems to be almost the abstract idea of a perfect and happy state. It is the very state which, in all our waking dreams and idle reveries, we had sketched out to ourselves as the final object of all our desires. We feel, therefore, a peculiar sympathy with the satisfaction of those who are in it. We favour all their inclinations, and forward all their wishes. What pity, we think, that any thing should spoil and corrupt so agreeable a situation!

For this reason, Smith continues, we are more apt to sympathize with those above us in the socioeconomic hierarchy than with those below: “[e]very calamity that befalls them, every injury that is done to them, excites in the breast of the spectator ten times more compassion and resentment than he would have felt, had the same thing happened to other men. It is the misfortunes of Kings only which afford the proper subjects for tragedy” (I.iii.2.2). Thus by a natural, innate predilection, sympathy is from the outset characterized by this particularity for certain subjects over others (as discussed in Chapter Five), and this translates to art as well.

This same idea also appears in his rhetoric lectures from a generation earlier (1762), and in very similar terms:

Kings and nobles are what make the best characters in a tragedy. The misfortunes of the great as they happen less frequently affect us more. There is in human nature a servility which inclines us to adore our superiors and an inhumanity which disposes us to contempt and trample under foot our inferiors. We are too much accustomed to

the misfortunes of people below or equal with ourselves to be greatly affected by them. But the misfortunes of the great both as they seem connected with the welfare of a multitude and as we are apt to pay great respect and attention to our superiors however unworthy are what chiefly affect us.... Tis for this same principle that persons of high ranks make very bad actors in a comedy. (ii. 90)

In both passages, Smith reminds us that the best protagonists for tragedies are those above us. It is easy to view his remarks as merely echoing a neoclassical prejudice of the time. Again, however, his justification is thoroughly epistemological and predicated on his master-principle, sympathy.<sup>20</sup> Earlier theorists who argued for middle-class protagonists, including Rowe, Steele, and Dubos, insisted that the average viewer cannot sympathize or relate to characters far removed from his or her own station in life; however, Smith uses this precise argument against them.<sup>21</sup> He makes it clear several times in his works that human beings are better able to sympathize with those above them in rank and power; for the same reason, spectators are incapable of sympathizing with those lower on the social hierarchy. It is not that people are unwilling to sympathize with them, but are, according to Smith, merely

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<sup>20</sup> De Grouchy would, naturally, disagree. In her commentary on Smith, she writes:

I do not believe that Smith indicated the true reason that makes us pity dethroned kings. If we feel for their misfortunes more intensely than for those of other men, it is only because kings seem to us to be saved from such misfortune, and not (as Smith thinks) because the idea of grandeur, which in most minds is tied to that of felicity, predisposes us by some sort of affection and consideration for their happiness to sympathize more particularly with them. It seems to me that this feeling is little known in the British empire, that it is unknown in the rest of Europe, and one can say with certainty that it is absolutely opposed to the sentiment of natural equality that leads us to regard everything above us with jealousy or at least harshly. (134)

<sup>21</sup> I share this view with Stock, who observes that Smith defends the traditional view “in a manner which must have seemed extraordinary to a conservative neoclassicist.... Smith thus defends a critical commonplace in a singular way.” It is not “because we admire” such characters “more and are impressed with the importance and responsibilities of their rank, but because we sympathize with them more; not because we are struck with terror at their descent, but because we pity them more than we do ordinary people” (36).

incapable of doing so: they simply lack the psycho-biological apparatus for doing so, and this is an irreducible aspect of human nature Smith is compelled to acknowledge. This fact may seem counterintuitive to us in the twenty-first century, and even for some in the eighteenth. Smith, then, would be bemused by the *London Merchant* and more so by *Death of a Salesman*.

On this issue, Smith appears very conservative and reactionary. After all, he writes,

[t]hat kings are the servants of the people, to be obeyed, resisted, deposed, or punished, as the public conveniency may require, is the doctrine of reason and philosophy; but it is not the doctrine of Nature. Nature would teach us to submit to them for their own sake, to tremble and bow down before their exalted station, to regard their smile as a reward sufficient to compensate any services. (TMS I.iii.2.3)

These statements recall Burke's declaration in his *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, published the same year as Smith's final emendations to *Theory of Moral Sentiments*: "[w]e fear God; we look up with awe to kings; with affection to parliaments; with duty to magistrates; with reverence to priests; and with respect to nobility. Why? Because when such ideas are brought before our minds, it is natural to be affected; because all other feelings are false and spurious" (182).

Although this blind submission Smith describes is *natural*, however, he is less than Burkean (or Popean) in his optimism of its beneficial power. We have already seen how he is far more ambivalent towards issues of rank than Kames or even Hume are.<sup>22</sup> His

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<sup>22</sup> As Chandler has recently and aptly noted, "Smith is not as comfortable with social hierarchy as Edmund Burke is, and he has much more time for Rousseau than Burke does" ("Politics" 574).



description in his final amendments to the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* reveals a profound ambivalence: our love of rank, “though necessary both to establish and maintain the distinction of ranks and the order of society ... [is] the great and most universal cause of the corruption of our moral sentiments” (I.iii.3.1). What is “natural” in Smith, as we have already seen, is not always good. Thus, Smith’s rationale only superficially resembles that of thinkers such as Goldsmith and Hurd.

In related fashion, Smith’s language is hedged. In the passage from *Theory of Moral Sentiments* quoted above, Smith begins by stating, “[w]hen we consider the condition of the great, in those *delusive colours* in which the imagination is apt to paint it, *it seems* to be almost the abstract idea of a perfect and happy state” (emphasis added). Thus from the outset Smith has characterized the process in a negative light. Indeed, as Forman-Barzilai aptly notes, “[w]hat makes Smith’s description of moral life so compelling ... is his psychological sensitivity to ways that the human mind often deludes and destabilizes itself” (49). Similarly, in the rhetoric lectures, Smith explicitly adds the qualification that “we are apt to pay great respect and attention to our superiors *however unworthy*,” though a similar sentiment runs through the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, especially in the final edition (in his comments on the influence of rank).

In his final emendations to the moral treatise, however, Smith adds the important qualification that the “most interesting subjects of tragedies and romances are the misfortunes of *virtuous and magnanimous* kings and princes” (VI.ii.1.21, emphasis added). This addition reveals Smith’s discomfort with the natural high-mimetic preference, which also explains why it appears in the entirely new section added to the final edition, “Of the

character of virtue.” This preference for the high-mimetic, then, is not quite an endorsement, but one of several delusions human beings unwittingly live with. Smith would go on to argue that similar delusions or deceptions are responsible for the rise of civilization and industry: it is, in fact, a “deception which rouses and keeps in continual motion the industry of mankind.... which first prompted them to cultivate the ground, to build houses, to found cities and commonwealths, and to invent and improve all the sciences and arts” (TMS IV.1.10).

Burke’s argument that we are naturally attracted to those above us in the socioeconomic hierarchy is thoroughly political:

It is wisely provided in the constitution of our heart, that we should interest ourselves in the fate of great personages. They are therefore made everywhere the objects of tragedy, which addresses itself directly to our passions and our feelings. And why? Because men of great rank, men of great hereditary authority cannot fall without a horrible crash upon all about them. Such towers cannot tumble without ruining their dependent cottages. (“Speech in General Reply” 308)<sup>23</sup>

This view of tragedy may sound very Smithian. The important contrast to note here, however, is that Smith’s justification is not political, but predicated on the possibility of sympathy. In this connection, it is significant that the political dimension of Smith’s formulation, though present in some form in the earlier lectures on rhetoric (“the misfortunes

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<sup>23</sup> My thanks to Frans De Bruyn for bringing this obscure yet very useful quotation to my attention. Richard Hurd similarly wrote before Burke (in 1753) in his essay on drama that “[t]he fall of a *cottage*, by the accidents of time and weather, is almost unheeded; while the ruin of a *tower*, which the neighbourhood hath gazed at for ages with admiration, strikes all observers with concern” (36). Despite the similarity of the metaphor, however, Burke’s emphasis is different.

of the great ... seem connected with the welfare of the multitude”) disappears from the discussion in *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, which Smith revised extensively.

Despite appearances, Smith’s high-mimeticism is not a “classical echo,” as Vivenza suggests—she has especially Epictetus in mind (67). Though he was, as Smith’s modern editors note, a noteworthy influence, Smith’s reasons are very different. Epictetus mentions (briefly) that kings and characters of similar rank are the proper subjects of tragedy: “only sleep with a good will and snore, and remember that tragedies have their place among the rich and kings and tyrants, but no poor man fills a part in a tragedy, except as one of the Chorus” (Epictetus 73). The emphasis here, however, is on the providential imperative that we also witnessed in Addison, which reinforces traditional hierarchies: tragedies “teach us to set a just value upon our own condition, and make us prize our good fortune which exempts us from the like calamities” (No. 418, 393). Such plays show the plight of kings *only* to teach the (potentially Stoic) reader that misfortunes strike even the wealthiest and greatest, an idea that would buttress their doctrine of *contemptus mundi*.

Similarly, the Renaissance’s preoccupation with high-mimeticism was merely a reflection of the prevailing social hierarchies rather than fidelity to some classical principle (qtd. in Vivenza 67). Smith’s preference, then, resists simple categorization—it is neither wholly classical nor Renaissance—and is not predicated on the political; in short, he hardly “echoes” previous thinkers, much less classical ones. Again, it is important to note that, unlike his Renaissance forebears and Enlightenment contemporaries, Smith does not seem to endorse the high-mimetic view, but grudgingly admits it; it is an irreducible element of human nature he cannot ignore. When read in context, in other words, Smith is not being prescriptive, but descriptive.

Though in some respects similar, the ideology of Burkean and Smithian sympathy differ; Burke's formulation of sympathy has, perhaps surprisingly, more radical consequences than Smith's. By emphasizing the agent's suffering, Burkean sympathy becomes more interventionist: through Burke's "real triumph" of sympathy "the multitude may be galvanized into doing something to redress what they consider a travesty of justice" (Gibbons 111). Smithian sympathetic concord, by contrast, becomes a pleasure and end in itself; it privileges the role of the spectator. Indeed, Burkean sympathy is, as noted earlier, roughly synonymous with compassion, whereas Smithian sympathetic exchange demands admiration.

Furthermore, for Burke, sympathy (among other things) arises merely "from the mechanical structure of our bodies, or from the natural frame and constitution of our minds" (I.xiii, 91). There is no approbation, meta-response, or even cognition, as there is in Smith. Indeed, Burke himself writes that our sympathy with others is "blended with no small uneasiness.... and the pain we feel prompts us to relieve ourselves in relieving those who suffer; and all this antecedent to any reasoning, by an instinct that works ... without our concurrence" (I.xiv, 92-93). It is worth remembering Burke's distinction between delight and pleasure, which is a removal of pain and not an absolute pleasure. We experience enough delight, then, "to draw closer to the scene, but enough discomfort to do something about it rather than simply stand back and let it happen" (Gibbons 110). This form of

sympathy just happens, and appears more interventionist, which contrasts with Smith's model, which is more dispassionate.<sup>24</sup>

Indeed, one of the irreconcilable tensions in Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, and one that Smith is at least partly aware of, is the self-fulfilling, cyclical nature of sympathy that ends up merely reproducing and perpetuating social structures. Ildiko Csengei, among others, has recently noted that Smithian "sympathy creates the very social hierarchies and tensions it is meant to transgress and alleviate," and that it generates a "vicious circle" since "we are constantly trying to come up to the requirements of a system of sympathy, which ... will emerge as the founder of social differences and inequalities which themselves call for the operation of sympathy to alleviate the suffering that arises from them" (53, 57). Of course, Smith's growing insistence over successive editions of the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* on the objectivity of conscience and the impartial spectator reveals his awareness of this problem, though, as Vivenza reminds us, "Smith, like the stoics, readily accepts social inequality, and even considers it to be useful, thus refuting any sort of revolutionary tendency, despite the fact that at a human level he comprehends the motives which lead the lower levels of society to rebel" (211-212). Thus, despite the egalitarian impulse in Smith noted by Stephen Darwall (vis-à-vis sympathetic exchange) among many others,<sup>25</sup> Smith's tragic and moral theory is "safer" and more contained; his is, oddly enough, less subversive than someone like Burke's.

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<sup>24</sup> Valihora too notes, though without reference to Burke, that in Smith, "[t]he response to suffering is not spontaneous and passionate, but regulated and controlled" (157-58).

<sup>25</sup> In addition to Darwall, Sen, Rothschild, and Fleischacker read Smith thus.

Indeed, Pierre-Louis Roederer, a French revolutionary writing only two months after the execution of Louis XVI, took exception to what he interpreted as Smith's support of monarchy. Smith's comments on our deference to those above us was "[i]n the revolutionary context of 1793 ... unacceptable to Roederer.... [He] was equally, if not more, disturbed by what he took to be Smith's argument ... that the principle of sympathy supports a monarchical form of government" (Scurr 446). In his *Reflections*, Burke deprecates the harsh treatment of the French royal family during the revolution, especially Marie Antoinette, who narrowly avoided "a band of cruel ruffians and assassins" that had "rushed into the chamber of the queen, and pierced with an hundred strokes of bayonets and poniards the bed, from whence this persecuted woman had but just time to fly almost naked," (164) a scene that Smithian but not, ironically, Burkean sympathy should have rendered impossible. As Smith admits, "[e]ven when the order of society seems to require that we should oppose them [monarchs], we can hardly bring ourselves to do it." In fact, in a passage that would remain unchanged through all editions of his treatise, Smith notes that even when subjects are justified in their indignation, "they are apt to relent every moment, and easily relapse into their habitual state of deference to those whom they have been accustomed to look upon as their natural superiors. They cannot stand the mortification of their monarch. Compassion soon takes the place of resentment" (TMS I.iii.2.3).

Following Smith's construction of sympathy, it would seem that one should better appreciate a tragedy (or similar narrative) that one can relate to. Sympathy is tied to knowledge: it is, after all, difficult to sympathize with what one does not know or understand, as Dubos and others held. Wimsatt and Brooks similarly observe that traditional sympathy "pleaded persuasively for a kind of illusionistic naturalism," and as a consequence

worked “against the Aristotelian person of high state and in favour of every-day life, the shopkeeper protagonist of bourgeois drama” (296). Further, as Forman-Barzilai and Montes have noted, the concept of *oikeiosis* characterizes Smith’s ethics. This is idea that human “affection weakens as it radiates outward in degrees from the self. Thus, the Stoics mapped our affections concentrically, arguing that our affections are strongest at the center, closest and most familiar to the self, and that they weaken progressively as an object is moved further and further away” (Forman-Barzilai 8).<sup>26</sup>

However, as we have seen, Smith maintains that we are naturally more interested in high-mimetic characters in both literature and real life. Thus, there appears an irreconcilable problem here. Smith, however, manages to synthesize this antinomy. Nowhere does he insist that the events that interest us ought to be “public” ones. Indeed, Smith wrote of Tacitus that he “conjectured ... justly that the incidents of private life tho’ not so important would affects us more deeply and interest us more than those of a Publick nature” (LRBL ii.66). The protagonists involved still ought to be above us, so ideally, a narrative would contain public figures *with* private issues.<sup>27</sup> Mark Phillips demonstrates how Smith also synthesized his “literary purism” and classical tastes with “the possibility of history registered in the eyes of spectators, a sentimental history concerned less with outward acts and public occasions than with the private passions and experiences of men” (*Society* 87). In

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<sup>26</sup> Smith’s appropriation of the concept “was conflicted and incomplete.” Though he accepted the reality of Stoic *oikeiosis*, Smith “refused to follow the Stoic argument to its cosmopolitan conclusion that rational agents must cultivate ‘apathy’ toward the near and dear, [and] learn to resist *oikeiosis*.... In his engagement with Stoic teleology, then, Smith was distinctively *anti-cosmopolitan*” (8). See also Leonidas Montes’s discussion in “Adam Smith as an *Eclectic* Stoic.”

<sup>27</sup> Richard Hurd achieves a similar synthesis. Though acknowledging that “it may seem, that the fortunes of private men, as more nearly resembling those of the generality, should be most affecting,” he insists that a tragedy ought to involve “important” or public actions (34, 36).

other words, Smith combines his preference for ancient historiography—linear narratives without the excrescences of modern histories, such as digressions or didacticism—with a decidedly more “modern” focus on the private, inner lives, and is thus sentimental. It is still possible to be more interested in the private lives of public persons divorced from any utility, though this still does seem a short-circuit of sympathy. Smith thus follows the conservative tradition of preferring high-mimeticism, but argues against practitioners of the emerging forms that we actually sympathize more with those above us, not those like us. This seems in part to answer the question of why Smith alludes to great tragic works and not sentimental novels—he mentions the latter once in his text (TMS III.3.14), while references to tragic works abound. One would think that a text such as *Theory of Moral Sentiments* would privilege the sentimental novel, but Smith (somewhat paradoxically, on first view) argues against such narratives and middle-class tragedies.

Smith, then, appears on the surface to share the Renaissance and eighteenth-century neoclassical preference for high-mimetic protagonists in tragedy. His justification, however, is different from those of his forebears, and, perhaps more importantly, his position was less an endorsement than a grudging admission. He manages to synthesize the more traditional, conservative insistence on high-mimeticism while still maintaining the growing interest in the “private.” His defense of neoclassical critical doctrine, though conservative in a literary-historical sense, is predicated on reasons different from those invoked by other critics in the century.



## CONCLUSION

As this dissertation has shown, Adam Smith was quietly involved in the aesthetic debates of his age. He not only contributed his own ideas to these debates but often pushed his inquiries further than his contemporaries did. He problematized the notion of a standard of taste and even the concept of taste itself to a greater extent than his peers. He presciently observed a determining relation between a person's socioeconomic class and his or her ideas of taste, yet he was aware of the shortcomings of a theory of taste based on sympathy. Though he relativizes and problematizes the concept of taste, Smith also evinces a more normative strain in his thinking on the subject. He maintains that when aesthetic judgments are possible, they are ultimately cognitive. As a result, he disavows deception and the sublime as legitimate markers of aesthetic experience, as they do not conduce to (or proceed from) active cognition. Smith also contributed to the paradox of tragedy that vexed many of his contemporaries, and his solution to the problem, while elaborating on what his forebears argued, is notable for its superior explanatory power. Finally, Smith rethinks neoclassical dramatic theory in original ways. Though he defends traditional theoretical arguments about the dramatic unities, the depiction of violence and pain on the stage, and the decorum or conservation of character, he does so, characteristically, in a manner that is original and, as with many of his ideas, ultimately Smithian.

As mentioned in the introduction, this project is not intended to offer a comprehensive aesthetics of Adam Smith. Not only is "aesthetics" itself a very broad field, but such an endeavour is bound to be frustrated, given the lack of a specifically aesthetic treatise in Smith's *oeuvre*. This project has instead focussed on the most salient aspects of his aesthetic

views, especially in dialogue with his contemporaries. In this light, Smith stands out as an important and original voice in the history of European aesthetic thought.

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