

Essays on Taste eBook

Essays on Taste

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Essays on taste

from

John Gilbert Cooper

Letters Concerning Taste

Third Edition (1757)

&

John Armstrong

Miscellanies

(1770)

With an Introduction by

Ralph Cohen

Publication Number 30

Los Angeles

William Andrews Clark Memorial Library



University of California

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INTRODUCTION

The essays on taste taken from the work of John Gilbert Cooper and John Armstrong and reprinted in this issue are of interest and value to the student of the eighteenth century because they typify the shifting attitudes toward taste held by most mid-century poets and critics. Cooper, who accepts the Shaftesbury-Hutchesonian thesis of the internal sense, emphasizes the personal, ecstatic effect of taste. Armstrong, while accepting the rationalist notions of clarity and simplicity, attacks methodized rules and urges reliance on individuality.

Following Shaftesbury and Hutcheson closely, Cooper treats taste as an immediate, prerational response of an internal sense to the proportion and harmony in nature, a response from an internal harmony of the senses, imagination, and understanding to a similar harmony in external nature. Cooper defines the effect of good taste as a "Glow of Pleasure which thrills thro' our whole Frame." This "Glow" is characterized by high emotional sensibility, and it thus minimizes the passivity which Hutcheson attributes to the internal sense.



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Armstrong's sources are more eclectic than Cooper's. Armstrong shows similarities to Pope in his rationalism, to Dennis in his treatment of poetry as an expression of the passions, and to Hutcheson in his emphasis on benevolence and the psychological basis of perception. But to these views, he frequently adds personal eccentricities. For example, *Taste: An Epistle to a Young Critic* reveals its Popean descent in its tone and form; however, its gastronomic ending displays Armstrong's interest, as a physician, in the relation of diet to literary taste. If Armstrong's boast that "I'm a shrewd observer, and will guess What books you doat on from your fav'rite mess," is a personal eccentricity, his attack on false criticism and his exhortation to judge for oneself are typical harbingers of late eighteenth-century individualism and confidence in the "natural" man.

An honest farmer, or shepherd [writes Armstrong in "Of Taste"], who is acquainted with no language but what is spoken in his own county, may have a much truer relish of the *English* writers than the most dogmatical pedant that ever erected himself into a commentator, and from his *Gothic* chair, with an ill-bred arrogance, dictated false criticism to the gaping multitude.[1]

[Footnote 1: John Armstrong, *Miscellanies* (London, 1770), II, 137.]

Cooper and Armstrong both hold a historically intermediate position in their attitudes toward taste, accepting early eighteenth-century assumptions and balancing them with late eighteenth-century emphases. Neither of them abandons the moral assumption of art which, as Armstrong explains it, is a belief in "a standard of right and wrong in the nature of things, of beauty and deformity, both in the natural and moral world." [2] Cooper, who defines taste as a thrilling response to art, falls back upon Hutcheson in minimizing the importance of art and making it secondary to moral knowledge. Armstrong, while describing taste as the sensitive discrimination of degrees of beauty and deformity, bases this discrimination not on artistic, but on moral qualities.

[Footnote 2: *Ibid.*, II, 134.]

The complete transition from classic to romantic premises of taste is characterized by the separation of art from morals. This step neither Cooper nor Armstrong takes. But they do exhibit tendencies which explain how the shift was made possible. Both writers insist on a felt response to a work of art. Cooper emphasizes that this response must be to the whole work. This assumption implies that a work of art is an entity complete in itself; it makes possible the argument that art conveys artistic, not moral knowledge. Cooper, by stressing sensibility as an effect of taste, suggests the Wordsworthian notion that the poet is more sensitive than other people.

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Armstrong, in addition to his hostility to formal criticism and his confidence in the natural man, reveals three other tendencies which later eighteenth-century critics elaborated. Like Edward Young in his *Conjectures on Original Composition*, 1759, Armstrong opposes slavish imitation of ancient models and declares that the writer should “catch their graces without affecting it [them]” so that his “own original characteristic manner will still distinguish itself.”[3] Armstrong emphasizes exquisiteness of perception as the basis for taste: the more exquisite the mind, the more is it able to discriminate among the various degrees of the beautiful and the deformed. Although later critics repudiate Armstrong’s moral discrimination, they transform it into a refined discrimination of aesthetic qualities. Finally, by suggesting that the man of genius differs from the man of taste by his ability to handle a medium, Armstrong implies the possibility of a technical criticism in terms of the writer’s craft, apart from moral judgment.

[Footnote 3: *Ibid.*, II, 168.]

Although the works of Cooper and Armstrong elicited contrasting popular reactions—*Letters concerning Taste* running into four editions from 1755 to 1771 and Armstrong’s writings, with the exception of *The Art of Preserving Health*, never winning much public favor—neither writer exerted a strong critical influence. Cooper did not reassess or change significantly the assumptions of Shaftesbury and Hutcheson. His work was primarily a popularization of their ideas, and, in its enthusiastic language, its emphasis on sensibility, and its epistolary form, it seems directed at flattering a female audience. Armstrong’s remarks on taste, written in imitation of the simplicity and clarity of the rational tradition, are personal assertions and opinions rather than well-defined or clearly thought-out critical positions. They are random thoughts rather than a coherent critical theory.

The significance of Cooper and Armstrong rests, therefore, on certain representative attitudes toward taste which exhibit the change “from classic to romantic.” On the one hand, they accept the moral postulates of art, and, on the other, they emphasize the emotional basis of taste. Cooper treats art as a secondary form of knowledge, yet emphasizes the thrill that art gives. Armstrong accepts the standards of clarity and simplicity, while emphasizing the individuality of response and the need for discriminating particular, rather than general, qualities. Though Cooper and Armstrong fail to reevaluate the traditions they accept, they exemplify trends which led others to perform this reevaluation and to transform the moral assumptions into aesthetic criteria.

Bibliographical Note



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The two reprints from the twenty letters of John Gilbert Cooper's *Letters concerning Taste. To which are added Essays on similar and other Subjects* are from the third edition, dated 1757; the first edition was published in 1755 as *Letters concerning Taste*. The selections by John Armstrong are taken from the two-volume *Miscellanies* published in 1770. "The Taste of the Present Age" received its first publication in this edition, but the other prose had previously been published in 1758 under the pseudonym of Launcelot Temple in the first volume of *Sketches: or Essays on Various Subjects*. The poem *Taste: An Epistle to a Young Critic* was first published in 1753.

Ralph Cohen

LETTERS CONCERNING TASTE.

LETTER I.

To EUPHEMIUS.

Whence comes it, EUPHEMIUS, that you, who are *feelingly* alive to each fine Sensation that Beauty or Harmony gives the Soul, should so often assert, contrary to what you daily experience, *that TASTE is governed by Caprice, and that BEAUTY is reducible to no Criterion?* I am afraid your Generosity in this Instance is greater than your Sincerity, and that you are willing to compliment the circle of your Friends, in giving up by this Concession that envied Superiority you might claim over them, should it be acknowledged that those uncommon Emotions of Pleasure, which arise in your Breast upon the Observation of moral or natural Elegance, were caused by a more ready and intimate Perception of that universal TRUTH, which the all-perfect CREATOR of this harmonious System ordained to be the VENUS of every Object, whether in the Material World; in the imitative Arts; or in living Characters and Manners. How irreconcilable are your Doctrines to the Example you afford us! However, since you press me to justify your Practice against your Declarations, by giving a Definition of what is meant by TASTE, I shall not avoid the invidious Office of pointing out your superior Excellence to others, by proving that TRUTH and BEAUTY are coincident, and that the warmest Admirers of these CELESTIAL TWINS, have consequently Souls more nearly allied to ætherial Spirits of a higher Order. The effect of a *good TASTE* is that instantaneous Glow of Pleasure which thrills thro' our whole Frame, and seizes upon the Applause of the Heart, before the intellectual Power, Reason, can descend from the Throne of the Mind to ratify it's 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; or when we recall, by the imitative Arts, both of them thro' the intermediate Power of the Imagination. Nor is this delightful and immediate Sensation to be excited in an undistempered Soul, but by a Chain of Truths, dependent upon one another

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till they terminate in the hand of the Divine COMPOSER of the whole. Let us cast our Eyes first upon the Objects of the Material World. A rural Prospect upon the very first Glance yields a grateful Emotion in the Breast, when in a Variety of Scenes there arises from the whole ONE Order, whose different Parts will be found, by the critical Eye of Contemplation, to relate mutually to one another, and each examined apart, to be productive of the Necessaries, the Conveniencies, and Emoluments of Life. Suppose you was to behold from an Eminence, thro' a small range of Mountains covered with Woods, several little Streams gushing out of Rocks, some gently trickling over Pebbles, others tumbling from a Precipice, and a few gliding smoothly in Willow-shaded Rivulets thro green Meadows, till their tributary Waters are all collected by some River God of a larger Urn, who at some few Miles distance is lost in the Ocean, which heaves it's broad Bosom to the Sight, and ends the Prospect with an immense Expanse of Waters. Tell me, EUPHEMIUS, would not such a Scene captivate the Heart even before the intellectual Powers discover Minerals in the Mountains; future Navies in the Woods; Civil and Military Architecture in the Rocks; healing Qualities in the smaller Streams; Fertility, that the larger Waters distribute along their serpentising Banks; Herbage for Cattle in the Meadows; and lastly, the more easy Opportunities the River affords us to convey to other Climates the Superfluities of our own, for which the Ocean brings us back in Exchange what we stand in need of from theirs. Now to heighten this beautiful Landscape, let us throw in Corn Fields, here and there a Country Seat, and, at proper Distances, small Hamlets, together with Spires and Towers, as MILTON describes them,

“bosom'd high in tufted Trees.”

Does not an additional Rapture flow in from this Adjunct, of which Reason will afterwards discover the latent Cause in the same manner as before. Your favourite Architecture will not fail to afford less remarkable Instances, that Truth, Beauty, and Utility are inseparable. You 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, and that even what are now the ornamental Parts of an Edifice, originally were created by Necessity; and are still displeasing to the Sight, when they are disobedient, if I may use that moral Expression, to the Order, which Nature, whose Laws cannot be repealed, first gave to supply that Necessity. Here I appeal to your own Breast, and let me continue the Appeal by asking you concerning another Science analogous to this, which is founded upon as invariable Principles: I mean the Science of living well, in which you are as happily learned as in the former. Say then, has not every amiable Character, with which you have been enamoured, been proved by a cool Examination to contain a *beautiful* Proportion, in the Point it was placed in, relative to Society? And what is it that constitutes Moral Deformity, or what we call Vice, but the Disproportion which any Agent occasions, in the Fabric of Civil Community, by a Non-compliance to the general *Order* which should prevail in it?

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As the Arts of Painting, Sculpture, and Poetry are imitative of these, their Excellence, as ARISTOTLE observes, consists in Faithfulness to their Original: nor have they any *primary* Beauty in themselves, but derive their shadowy Existence in a mimetic Transcript from Objects in the Material World, or from Passions, Characters, and Manners. Nevertheless that *internal Sense* we call TASTE (which is a Herald for the whole human System, in it's three different Parts, the refined Faculties of Perception, the gross Organs of Sense, and the intermediate Powers of Imagination) has as quick a Feeling of this secondary Excellence of the Arts, as for the primary Graces; and seizes the Heart with Rapture long before the Senses, and Reason in Conjunction, can *prove* this Beauty by collating the Imitations with their Originals.

If it should be asked *why* external Objects affect the human Breast in this Manner, I would answer, that the ALMIGHTY has in this, as well as in all his other Works, out of his abundant Goodness and Love to his Creatures, so *attuned* our Minds to Truth, that all Beauty from without should make a responsive Harmony vibrate within. But should any of those more curious Gentlemen, who busy themselves With Enquiries into Matters, which the Deity, for Reasons known only to himself, has placed above our limited Capacities, demand *how* he has so formed us, I should refer them, with proper Contempt, to their more aged Brethren, who may justly in Derision be stiled *the Philosophers of ultimate Causes*. To you, my dear Friend, whose truly philosophical and religious Taste concludes that whatever GOD ordains is right, it is sufficient to have proved that *Truth* is the Cause of all *Beauty*, and that Truth flows from the Fountain of all Perfection, in whose unfathomable Depth finite Thought should never venture with any other Intention than to wonder and adore. But I find I have been imperceptibly led on from Thought to Thought, not only to trespass upon the common Stile of a Letter, by these abstruse Reasonings and religious Conclusions, but upon the ordinary length of one likewise; therefore shall conclude by complimenting my own Taste in Characters, when I assure you that I am,

Your most affectionate Friend, &c.

LETTER II.

To the SAME.

It gave me no small Pleasure to find, by your Answer to my last Letter, that you now allow BEAUTY to be the Daughter of TRUTH; and I in my turn will make a Concession to you, by confessing that BEAUTY herself may have *acquired* Charms, but then they are altogether such as are consistent with her divine Extraction. What you observe is very true, that the human Form (the most glorious Object, as you are pleased to call it, in the Creation) let it be made with the most accurate Symmetry and Proportion, may receive *additional* Charms from Education, and



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steal more subtly upon the Soul of the Beholder from some adventitious Circumstances of easy Attitudes or Motion, and an undefineable Sweetness of Countenance, which an habitual Commerce with the more refined Part of Mankind superadds to the Work of Nature. This the ancient *Grecian* Artists would have represented mythologically in Painting by the GRACES crowning VENUS. We find how much LELY has availed himself in his shadowy Creations of transcribing from Life this adventitious Charm into all his Portraits. I mean, when he *stole* upon his *animated Canvas*, as POPE poetically expresses it,

“The sleepy Eye that spoke the melting Soul.”

You will ask me, perhaps, how I can prove any Alliance in this particular Circumstance of a single Feature to Truth; Or rather triumphantly push the Argument farther, and say, Is not this additional Charm, as you call it, inconsistent with the Divine Original of Beauty, since it deadens the fiery Lustre of that penetrating Organ? I chuse to draw my Answer from the Schools of the antient ETHOGRAPHI, who by their enchanting Art so happily conveyed, thro' the Sight, the Lessons of Moral Philosophy. These Sages would have told you, that our Souls are attuned to one another, like the Strings of musical Instruments, and that the Chord of one being struck, the *Unison* of another, tho' untouched, will vibrate to it. The Passions therefore of the human Heart, expressed either in the living Countenance, or the mimetic Strokes of Art, will affect the Soul of the Beholder with a similar and responsive Disposition. What wonder then is it that Beauty, borrowing thus the Look of softening Love, whose Power can lull the most watchful of the Senses, should cast that sweet *Nepenthe* upon our Hearts, and enchant our corresponding Thoughts to rest in the Embraces of Desire? Sure then I am, that you will always allow Love to be the Source and End of our Being, and consequently consistent with Truth. It is the Superaddition of such Charms to Proportion, which is called *Taste* in Musick, Painting, Poetry, Sculpture, Gardening and Architecture. By which is generally meant that happy Assemblage which excites in our Minds, by Analogy, some pleasurable Image. Thus, for Instance, even the Ruins of an old Castle properly disposed, or the Simplicity of a rough hewn Hermitage in a Rock, enliven a Prospect, by recalling the Moral Images of *Valor* and *Wisdom*; and I believe no Man will contend, that Valor exerted in the Defence of one's Country, or Wisdom contemplating in Retirement for the Welfare of Mankind, are not truly amiable Images, belonging to the Divine Family of Truth. I think I have now reconciled our two favorite Opinions, by proving that these *additional* Charms, if they must be called so, have their Origin in Nature as much as Proportion itself.—I am very glad the Prints I sent afforded you so much Pleasure, not only as I wish every thing which comes from me may be favorably



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received by you, but as they are likewise a Confirmation of my Arguments; for the Man who drew them is no very great Artist, but being a faithful Disciple of Nature, having delineated every Object in a *Camera Obscura*, he has not failed of gaining the uncontested Applause, which the Followers of that unerring Mistress will ever receive from Mankind. My EUDOCIA calls me to administer with her Comfort to a little fatherless Family in the District of our Hamlet, therefore must conclude myself,

Your sincere Friend, &c.

LETTER

TASTE:

AN

EPISTLE

TO A

YOUNG CRITIC.

Range from Tower-hill all London to the Fleet,
 Thence round the Temple, t'utmost Grosvenor-street:
 Take in your route both Gray's and Lincoln's Inn;
 Miss not, be sure, my Lords and Gentlemen;
 You'll hardly raise, as I with[A] *Petty* guess, } 5
 Above twelve thousand men of taste; unless }
 In desperate times a *Connoisseur* may pass. }

"A Connoisseur! What's that?" 'Tis hard to say:
 But you must oft amidst the fair and gay
 Have seen a wou'd-be rake, a fluttering fool, 10
 Who swears he loves the sex with all his soul.
 Alas, vain youth! dost thou admire sweet Jones?
 Thou be gallant without or blood or bones!
 You'd split to hear th' insipid coxcomb cry
 Ah charming Nanny! 'tis too much! I die!— 15
 Die and be d—n'd, says one; but let me tell ye
 I'll pay the loss if ever rapture kill ye.



[Footnote A: Sir William Petty, author of the *Political Arithmetic*.]

'Tis easy learnt the art to talk by rote:
At Nando's 'twill but cost you half a groat;
The Redford school at three-pence is not dear, Sir;
At White's—*the stars instruct you* for a tester. 21
But he, whom nature never meant to share
One spark of taste, will never catch it there:—
Nor no where else; howe'er the booby beau
Grows great with Pope, and Horace, and Boileau.

Good native Taste, tho' rude, is seldom wrong,
Be it in music, painting, or in song.
But this, as well as other faculties,
Improves with age and ripens by degrees.
I know, my dear; 'tis needless to deny 't, 30
You like Voiture, you think him wondrous bright;
But seven years hence, your relish more matur'd,
What now delights will hardly be endur'd.
The boy may live to taste Racine's fine charms,
Whom Lee's bald orb or Rowe's dry rapture warms:
But he, enfranchis'd from his tutor's care, 36
Who places Butler near Cervantes' chair;
Or with Erasmus can admit to vie
Brown of Squab-hall *of merry memory*;
Will die a Goth: and nod at [A]Woden's feast, 40
Th' eternal winter long, on [B]Gregory's breast.



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Long may he swill, this patriarch of the dull,
 The drowsy Mum—But touc not Maro's skull!
 His holy barbarous dotage sought to doom,
 Good heaven! th' immortal classics to the tomb!—
 Those sacred lights shall bid new genius rise 45
 When all Rome's saints have rotted from the skies.
 Be these your guides, if at the ivy crown
 You aim; each country's classics, and your own.
 But chiefly with the ancients pass your prime, 50
 And drink Castalia at the fountain's brim.
 The man to genuine Burgundy bred up,
 Soon starts the dam of Methuen in his cup.

[Footnote A: Alluding to the Gothic heaven, Woden's hall; where the happy are for ever employed in drinking beer, mum, and other comfortable liquors out of the skulls of those whom they had slain in battle.][Footnote B: Pope Gregory the VIth, distinguished by the name of St. Gregory; whose pious zeal, in the cause of barbarous ignorance and priestly tyranny, exerted itself in demolishing, to the utmost of his power, all the remains of heathen genius.]

Those sovereign masters of the Muses skill
 Are the true patterns of good writing still, 55
 Their ore was rich and seven times purg'd of lead;
 Their art seem'd nature, 'twas so finely hid.
 Tho' born with all the powers of writing well,
 What pains it cost they did not blush to tell.
 Their ease (my Lords!) ne'er lowng'd for want of fire,
 Nor did their rage thro' affectation tire. 61
 Free from all tawdry and imposing glare
 They trusted to their native grace of air.
 Rapt'rous and wild the trembling soul they seize, }
 Or sly coy beauties steal it by degrees; } 65
 The more you view them still the more they please. }

Yet there are thousands of scholastic merit
 Who worm their sense out but ne'er taste their spirit.
 Witness each pedant under Bentley bred;
 Each commentator that e'er commented. 70
 (You scarce can seize a spot of classic ground,
 With leagues of Dutch morass so floated round.)
 Witness—but, Sir, I hold a cautious pen,
 Lest I should *wrong* some *honourable men*.
 They grow enthusiasts too—'Tis true! 'tis pity! 75
 But 'tis not every lunatic that's witty.



Some have run Maro—and some Milton—mad,
Ashley once turn'd a solid barber's head:
Hear all that's said or printed if you can,
Ashley has turn'd more solid heads than one. 80

Let such admire each great or specious name;
For right or wrong the joy to them's the same.
"Right!" Yes a thousand times.—Each fool has heard
That Homer was a wonder of a bard.
Despise them civilly with all my heart— 85
But to convince them is a desperate part,



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Why should you teize one for what secret cause
 One doats on Horace, or on Hudibras?
 'Tis cruel, Sir, 'tis needless, to endeavour
 To teach a sot of Taste he knows no flavour, 90
 To disunite I neither wish nor hope
 A stubborn blockhead from his fav'rite fop.
 Yes—fop I say, were Maro's self before 'em:
 For Maro's self grows dull as they pore o'er him.

But hear their raptures o'er some specious rhyme
 Dub'd by the musk'd and greasy mob sublime. 96
 For spleen's dear sake hear how a coxcomb prates
 As clam'rous o'er his joys as fifty cats;
*"Music has charms to sooth a savage breast,
 To soften rocks, and oaks"*—and all the rest: 100
"I've heard"—Bless these long ears!—"Heav'ns what a strain!
 Good God! What thunders burst in this *Campaign!*
 Hark Waller warbles! Ah! how sweetly killing!
 Then that inimitable Splendid Shilling!
 Rowe breathes all Shakespear here!—That ode of Prior 105
 Is Spencer quite! egad his very fire!—
 As like"—Yes faith! as gum-flowers to the rose,
 Or as to Claret flat Minorca's dose;
 As like as (if I am not grosly wrong)
 Erle Robert's Mice to aught e'er Chaucer sung. 110

Read boldly, and unprejudic'd peruse
 Each fav'rite modern, ev'n each ancient muse.
 With all the comic salt and tragic rage
 The great stupendous genius of our stage,
 Boast of our island, pride of human-kind, 115
 Had faults to which the boxes are not blind.
 His frailties are to ev'ry gossip known:
 Yet Milton's pedantries not shock the town.
 Ne'er be the dupe of Names, however high;
 For some outlive good parts, some misapply. 120
 Each elegant Spectator you admire;
 But must you therefore swear by Cato's fire?
 Masques for the court, and oft a clumsey jest,
 Disgrac'd the muse that wrought the Alchemist.



“But to the ancients.”—Faith! I am not clear, 125
For all the smooth round type of Elzevir,
That every work which lasts in prose or song,
Two thousand years, deserves to last so long.
For not to mention some eternal blades
Known only now in th’ academic shades, 130
(Those sacred groves where raptur’d spirits stray,
And in word-hunting waste the live-long day)
Ancients whom none but curious critics scan,
Do, read[A] Messala’s praises if you can.
Ah! who but feels the sweet contagious smart 135
While soft Tibullus pours his tender heart?
With him the Loves and Muses melt in tears;
But not a word of some hexameters.
“You grow so squeamish and so dev’lish dry,
You’ll call Lucretius vapid next.” Not I. 140
Some find him tedious, others think him lame:

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But if he lags his subject is to blame.
Rough weary roads thro' barren wilds he tried,
Yet still he marches with true Roman pride:
Sometimes a meteor, gorgeous, rapid, bright, 145
He streams athwart the philosophic night.
Find you in Horace no insipid Odes?—
He dar'd to tell us Homer sometimes nods;
And but for such a aide's hardy skill
Homer might slumber unsuspected still. 150

[Footnote A: A poem of Tibullus's in hexameter verse; as yawning and insipid as his elegies are tender and natural.]

Tasteless, implicit, indolent and tame,
At second-hand we chiefly praise or blame.
Hence 'tis, for else one knows not why nor how,
Some authors flourish for a year or two:
For many some, more wond'rous still to tell; 155
Farquhar yet lingers on the brink of hell.
Of solid merit others pine unknown; }
At first, tho'[A] Carlos swimmingly went down, }
Poor Belvidera fail'd to melt the town. }
Sunk in dead night the giant Milton lay 160
'Till Sommer's hand produc'd him to the day.
But, thanks to heav'n and Addison's good grace
Now ev'ry fop is charm'd with Chevy Chace.

[Footnote A: Don Carlos, a tragedy of Otway's, now long and justly forgotten, went off with great applause; while his Orphan, a somewhat better performance, and what is yet more strange, his Venice Preserved, according to the theatrical anecdotes of those times, met with a very cold reception.]

Specious and sage, the sovereign of the flock
Led to the downs, or from the wave-worn rock 165
Reluctant hurl'd, the tame implicit train
Or crop the downs, or headlong seek the main.
As blindly we our solemn leaders follow,
And good, and bad, and execrable swallow.



Pray, on the first throng'd evening of a play 170
That wears the[A] *facies hippocratica*,
Strong lines of death, signs dire of reprobation;
Have you not seen the angel of salvation
Appear sublime; with wise and solemn rap
To teach the doubtful rabble where to clap?— 175
The rabble knows not where our dramas shine;
But where the cane goes pat—*by G— that's fine!*

[Footnote A: The appearance of the face in the last stage
of a consumption, as it is described by Hippocrates.]

Judge for yourself; nor wait with timid phlegm
Till some illustrious pedant hum or hem. 179
The lords who starv'd old Ben were learn'dly fond
Of Chaucer, whom with bungling toil they conn'd,
Their sons, whose ears bold Milton could not seize, }
Would laugh o'er Ben like mad, and snuff and sneeze, }
And swear, and seem as tickled as you please. }

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Their spawn, the pride of this sublimer age, 185
Feel to the toes and horns grave Milton's rage.
Tho' liv'd he now he might appeal with scorn
To Lords, Knights, 'Squires and Doctors, yet unborn;
Or justly mad to Moloch's burning fane
Devote the choicest children of his brain. 190
Judge for yourself; and as you find report.
Of wit as freely as of beef or port.
Zounds! shall a pert or bluff important wight,
Whose brain is fanciless, whose blood is white;
A mumbling ape of taste; prescribe us laws 195
To try the poets, for no better cause
Than that he boasts *per ann.* ten thousand clear,
Yelps in the House, or barely sits a Peer?
For shame! for shame! the liberal British soul
To stoop to any stale dictator's rule! 200

I may be wrong, and often am no doubt,
But right or wrong with friends with foes 'twill out.
Thus 'tis perhaps my fault if I complain
Of trite invention and a flimsy vein,
Tame characters, uninteresting, jejune, 205
And passions drily copied from [A]Le Brun.
For I would rather never judge than wrong
That friend of all men, generous Fenelon.
But in the name of goodness, must I be 210
The dupe of charms I never yet could see?
And then to flatter where there's no reward—
Better be any patron-hunting bard,
Who half our Lords with filthy praise besmears,
And sing an Anthem to ALL MINISTERS:
Taste th' Attic salt in ev'ry Peer's poor rebus, 215
And crown each Gothic idol for a Phoebus.

[Footnote A: First painter to Lewis XIV. who, to speak in fashionable French English, *called himself* LEWIS THE GREAT. Our sovereign lords the passions, Love, Rage, Despair, &c. were graciously pleased to sit to him in their turns for their portraits: which he was generous enough to communicate to the public; to the great improvement, no doubt, of history-painting. It was he who they say poison'd Le Sueur; who, without half his advantages in many other respects, was so unreasonable and provoking as to



display a genius with which his own could stand no comparison. It was he and his Gothic disciples, who, with sly scratches, defac'd the most masterly of this Le Sueur's performances, as often as their barbarous envy could snugly reach them. Yet after all these achievements he died in his bed! A catastrophe which could not have happened to him in a country like this, where the *fine arts* are as zealously and judiciously patronised as they are well understood.]

Alas! so far from free, so far from brave,
We dare not shew the little Taste we have.
With us you'll see ev'n vanity controul
The most refin'd sensations of the soul. 220
Sad Otway's scenes, great Shakespear's



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we defy:

“Lord, Madam! ’tis so unpolite to cry!—
 For shame, my dear! d’ye credit all this stuff?—
 I vow—well, this is innocent enough?”
 At Athens long ago, the Ladies—(married) 225
 Dreamt not they misbehav’d tho’ they miscarried,
 When a wild poet with licentious rage
 Turn’d fifty furies loose upon the stage.

They were so tender and so easy mov’d,
 Heav’ns! how the Grecian ladies must have lov’d!
 For all the fine sensations still have dwelt, 231
 Perhaps, where one was exquisitely felt.
 Thus he who heavenly Maro truly feels
 Stands fix’d on Raphael, and at Handel thrills.
 The grosser senses too, the taste, the smell, } 235
 Are likely truest where the fine prevail: }
 Who doubts that Horace must have cater’d well? }
 Friend, I’m a shrewd observer, and will guess
 What books you doat on from your fav’rite mess,
 Brown and L’Estrange will surely charm whome’er
 The frothy pertness strikes of weak small-beer.
 Who steeps the calf’s fat loin in greasy sauce
 Will hardly loathe the praise that bastes an ass.
 Who riots on Scotcht Collops scorns not any
 Insipid, fulsome, trashy miscellany; 245
 And who devours whate’er the cook can dish up,
 Will for a classic consecrate each[A] bishop.

[Footnote A: See Felton’s Classics.]

But I am sick of pen and ink; and you
 Will find this letter long enough. Adieu!

OF GENIUS

There is a standard of right and wrong in the nature of things, of beauty and deformity, both in the natural and moral world. And as different minds happen to be more or less exquisite, the more or less sensibly do they perceive the various degrees, of good and bad, and are the more or less susceptible of being charmed with what is right or beautiful, and disgusted with what is wrong or deformed. It is chiefly this sensibility that



constitutes genius; to which a sound head and a good heart are as effectual as a lively imagination. And a man of true genius must necessarily have as exquisite a feeling of the moral beauties, as of whatever is great or beautiful in the works of nature; or masterly in the arts which imitate nature, in poetry, painting, statuary, and music.

On the other side, where the heart is very bad, the genius and taste, if there happen to be any pretensions to them, will be found shocking and unnatural. NERO would be nothing less than a poet; but his verses were what one may call most *villainously* bad. His taste of magnificence and luxury was horribly glaring, extravagant and unnatural to the last degree.

CALIGULA's taste was so outrageously wrong, that he detested the works of the sweet MANTUAN poet more passionately than ever MOECENAS admired them; and if VIRGIL had unfortunately lived down to those times in which that monster appeared, he would probably have been tortured to death for no other crime but that he wrote naturally, and like an honest man.



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True genius may be said to consist of a perfect polish of soul, which receives and reflects the images that fall upon it, without warping or distortion. And this fine polish of soul is, I believe, constantly attended with what philosophers call the moral truth.

There are minds which receive objects truly, and feel the impressions they ought naturally to make, in a very lively manner, but want the faculty of reflecting them; as there are people who, I suppose, feel all the charms of poetry without being poets themselves.

OF TASTE.

Our notion of taste may be easily understood by what has been said upon the subject of genius; for mere good taste is nothing else but genius without the power of execution.

It must be born; and is to be improved chiefly by being accustomed, and the earlier the better, to the most exquisite objects of taste in its various kinds. For the taste in writing and painting, and in every thing else, is insensibly formed upon what we are accustomed to; as well as taste in eating and drinking. One who from his youth has been used to drink nothing but heavy dismal port, will not immediately acquire a relish for claret or burgundy.

In the most stupid ages there is more good taste than one would at first sight imagine. Even the present, abuse it with what contemptuous epithets you please, cannot be totally void of it. As long as there are noble humane and generous dispositions amongst mankind, there must be good taste. For in general, I do not say always, the taste will be in proportion to those moral qualities and that sensibility of mind from which they take their rise. And while many, amongst the great and the learned, are allowed to have taste for no better reason than that it is their own opinion, it is often possessed by those who are not conscious of it, and dream as little of pretending to it as to a star and garter. An honest farmer, or shepherd, who is acquainted with no language but what is spoken in his own county, may have a much truer relish of the *English* writers than the most dogmatical pedant that ever erected himself into a commentator, and from his *Gothic* chair, with an ill-bred arrogance, dictated false criticism to the gaping multitude.

But even those who are endued with good natural taste, often judge implicitly and by rote, without ever consulting their own taste. Instances of this passive indolence, or rather this unconsciousness of one's own faculties, appear every day; not only in the fine arts, but in cases where the mere *taste*, according to the original meaning of the word, is alone concerned. For I am positive there are many thousands who, if they were to bring their own palate to a severe examination, would discover that they really find a more delicious flavour in mutton than in venison, in flounder than in turbut, and yet prefer middling or bad venison to the best mutton; that is, what is scarcest and

dearest, and consequently what is, from the folly of mankind, the most in vogue, to what is really the most agreeable to their own private taste.



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In matter of taste, the public, for the most part, suffers itself to be led by a few who perhaps are really no judges; but who, under the favour of some advantages of title, place, or fortune, set up for judges, and are implicitly followed even by those who have taste. These washy dictators have learnt at school to admire such authors as have for ages been possessed of an undisputed renown: but they would never have been the first to have discovered strokes of true genius in a co-temporary writer, though they had lived at the court of AUGUSTUS or of Q. ELIZABETH.

So undistinguishing is our taste, that if the most torpid dunce this fruitful age can boast of, could by some artful imposture prepossess the public, that the most insipid of all his own bread-sauce compositions, to be published next winter, was a piece MILTON's, or any other celebrated author, recovered from dust and obscurity, it would be received with universal applause; and perhaps be translated into *French* before the town had doated six weeks upon it. One might venture to say too, that if a work of true spirit and genius was to be introduced into the world, under the name of some writer of low reputation, it would be rejected even by the greatest part of those who pretend to lead the taste. And no wonder, while an eminent vintner has mistaken his own old hock at nine shillings the bottle for that at five.

OF WRITING TO THE TASTE OF THE AGE.

Whatever some have pretended, one may reasonably enough doubt whether ever an author wrote much below himself from any cause but the necessity of writing too fast. When this happens to a writer who, with the advantages of leisure and easy circumstances, is capable of producing such works as might charm succeeding ages, it is a disgrace to the nation and the times wherein such a genius had the misfortune to appear.

It belongs to true genius to indulge its own humour; to give a loose to its own sallies; and to be curbed, restrained and directed by that sound judgment alone which necessarily attends it. It belongs to it to improve and correct the public taste; not to humour or meanly prostitute itself to the gross or low taste which it finds. And you may depend upon it, that whatever author labours to accommodate himself to the taste of his age—suppose it, if you please, this present age—the sickly wane, the impotent decline of the eighteenth century: which from a hopeful boy became a most insignificant man; and for any thing that appears at present will die a very fat drowsy block-head, and be damned to eternal infamy and contempt: every such author I say, though he may thrive as far as an author can in the present age, will by degrees languish into obscurity in the next. For though naked and bare-faced vanity; though an active exertion of little arts, and the most unremitting perseverance in them; though party, cabal, and intrigue; though accidental advantages, and even whimsical circumstances; may conspire to make a very moderate genius the idol of the implicit multitude: works that lean upon such fickle props, that stand upon such a false foundation, will not be long able to

support themselves against the injuries of time. Such buildings begin to totter almost as soon as their scaffolding is struck.



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But if you find it necessary to comply with the humour of your age; the writing best calculated to please a false taste is what has something of the air of good writing, without being really so. For to the vulgar eye the specious is more striking than the genuine. The best writing is apt to be too plain, too simple, too unaffected, and too delicate to stir the callous organs of the generality of critics, who see nothing but the tawdry glare of tinsel; and are deaf to every thing but what is shockingly noisy to a true ear. They are struck with the fierce glaring colours of old *Frank*; with attitudes and expressions violent, distorted, and unnatural: while the true, just and easy, the graceful, the moving, the sublime representations of *Raphael* have not the least power to attract them. The bullying, noisy march in *Judas Macchabeus* has perhaps more sincere admirers than that most pathetic one in *Saul*: and in conversation pertness and mere vivacity is more felt by the general run of company than easy unaffected wit; as flashy, bouncing, flatulent cyder boasts of more spirit than the still vigour of reserved *Madeira*.

But the easiest, as well as the most effectual way of writing to the bad taste of your age, is to set out while your genius is yet upon a level with it. Accordingly, if you have a son who begins to display a hopeful bloom of imagination, be sure to publish, with all the advantages that can be procured, the very first essays of his genius. They will hardly be too good to please; and besides, they have a chance to be received with particular favour and admiration as the productions of a young muse. When he has thus taken possession of the public ear, he may venture, as his genius ripens, to do his best; he may write as well as he can, perhaps without much danger of sinking in reputation. The renown of his first crude essays will be sufficient to prejudice the mobility, great and small, in favour of the most exquisite pieces he can produce afterwards. But if he must live by his wit, the best thing you can do for him is to transplant him, as early as possible, to PARIS; where in the worst of days, in the most *Gothic* muse-detesting age, there is still some shelter afforded to the most delicate as well as the most uncommon flower that blossoms in the human mind. In that gay serene and genial climate the muses are still more or less cultivated, though not with the same ardour and passion in every age; as appears from the following passage translated from a[A] *French* author, who wrote about the beginning of the present century. "Almost all the arts have in their turns experienced that disgust and love of change which is natural to mankind. But I don't know that any one of them has felt it more than Poetry; which in some ages has been exalted to a triumphal height, in others neglected, discouraged and despised. About sixty years ago, under the administration of one of the greatest geniuses that ever *France* produced, poetry found itself amongst us at its highest pitch of glory. Those who cultivated the muses were regarded with particular favour: this art was the road to fortune and dignified stations. But in these days this ardour seems to be considerably abated. We do not appear to be extremely sensible to poetical merit, &c."



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[Footnote A: Defense de la Poesie; par M. l'Abbé *Messieu*. *Memoires de Literature*, Tome 2de.]

THE TASTE OF THE PRESENT AGE.

Amongst many other distinguishing marks of a stupid age, a bad crop of men, I have been told that the taste in writing was never so false as at present. If it is really so, it may perhaps be owing to a prodigious swarm of insipid trashy writers: amongst whom there are some who pretend to dictate to the public as critics, though they hardly ever fail to be mistaken. But their dogmatic impudence, and something like a scientific air of talking the most palpable nonsense, imposes upon great numbers of people, who really possess a considerable share of natural Taste; of which at the same time they are so little conscious as to suffer themselves passively to be misled by those blundering guides.

A Taste worth cultivating is to be improved and preserved by reading *only* the best writers. But whoever, after perusing a satire of Horace, even in the dullest English translation, can relish the stupid abuse of a blackguard rhymster, may as well indulge the natural depravity of his Taste, and riot for life upon distiller's grains.

But the Taste in writing is not, cannot be worse, than it is in music, as well as in all theatrical entertainments. In architecture indeed there are some elegant and magnificent works arising, at a very proper time to restore the nation to some credit with its neighbours in this article; after its having been exposed to such repeated disgraces by a triumvirate of awkward clumsey piles, that are not ashamed to shew their stupid heads in the neighbourhood of Whitehall: and one more, that ought to be demolished; if it was for no other reason but to restore the view of an elegant church, which has now for many years been buried alive behind the Mansion-house.

It is indeed some comfort, that while Taste and Genius happen to be very false and impotent in most of the fine arts, they are not so in all. The arts of Gardening particularly, and the elegant plan of a farm, have of late years displayed themselves in a few spots to greater advantage in England, than perhaps ever before in any part of Europe. This is indeed very far from being universal; and some gardens, admired and celebrated still, are so smoothly regular, so over-planted, and so crowded with affected, impertinent, ridiculous ornaments of temples, ruins, pyramids, obelisks, statues, and a thousand other contemptible whims, that a continuation of the same ground in its rude natural state, is infinitely more delightful. You must often have seen fine situations ruined with costly pretences to *improvement*. The most noble and romantic situation of any gardens I have seen, is near Chepstow; and the gentleman who possesses that delightful spot, has shewn great judgment and a true taste, in meddling so little with Nature where she wanted so little help.

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This is one happy instance of an admirable situation, where Nature is modestly and judiciously improved, not hurt, by art. An opposite instance of what art, skill, and taste may produce, without any particular advantages of ground or situation, is most agreeably displayed in the royal gardens at Kew. There you find an extent of flat ground, so easily, agreeably, and unaffectedly broken, that you would think it impossible to alter it but to the worse. To pass without any notice the agreeable and the elegant pieces of architecture, which without crowding adorn those delightful gardens; perhaps there is not a physick garden in Europe where any botanist can be more agreeably entertained, as to the variety of curious plants. But there is something new as far as I know, and particularly ingenious here in the disposition and management of them. Those that naturally delight in the rocks, and the dry hungry soil, are here planted upon ridges of artificial rock-work; where they shew all the luxuriance of vegetation that they could amongst the Alps, the Pyrenees or the Andes. While a very different tribe, the Aquatics, display themselves in a large cistern, where they are constantly supplied with their best and most natural nourishment the rain water, conveyed to them from the eves of the richest greenhouse I have ever seen.

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10. Corbyn Morris *Essay towards Fixing the True Standards of Wit, etc.* (1744).



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11. Thomas Purney's *Discourse on the Pastoral* (1717).
12. *Essays on the Stage*, selected, with an Introduction by Joseph Wood Krutch.

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