

Criticism, Connoisseurship and Appreciation

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1. Taste, connoisseurship and criticism

In the discussion of criticism in the arts, and indeed of aesthetics in general, the following concepts seem to go together: appreciation, beauty, connoisseurship, evaluation, taste, quality. They are contrasted with: interpretation, meaning, theory, truth, understanding. I believe that the opposition between these two sets of concepts must be overcome, and in particular I am concerned to locate the truth inherent in a so-called “taste” aesthetic, under which a commitment to connoisseurship is often subsumed. In doing so, I will be concerned to re-evaluate conceptions of artistic criticism current in the eighteenth century, comparing them favourably with some assumptions held by twentieth-century art history. I conclude that, while the notion of connoisseurship in particular and criticism in general has come under increasing attack from the direction of the academic discipline of art history, it may be vindicated through a defence of an appreciative model of artistic criticism. Connoisseurship is traditionally the prototype for appreciation, and I will advocate a democratic treatment of both appreciation and connoisseurship by appealing to eighteenth-century treatments by David Hume and Immanuel Kant.

There is widespread philosophical scepticism concerning a taste aesthetic. Such an aesthetic unifies criticism and indeed the aesthetic itself, asserting a continuum between artistic criticism and appreciation of food, wine, fashion and so on. Writers as diverse as Theodore Adorno and Arthur Danto reject it in favour of a diverging account which holds that reference to taste involves a trivialising response to the arts. A diverging account arises both from anti-elitism and from puritanism – though in addition, the aesthetic credentials of taste are disputed because of its ambiguity, positioned as it is between mere liking and genuine aesthetic judgment. Adorno’s critique of Kant’s “taste aesthetic”—a deliberately tendentious account conditioned by Negative Dialectics—is scathing about the role of good taste in an authentic experience of art:

Only once it is done with tasteful savouring does artistic experience become autonomous [...] Whoever concretely enjoys artworks is a philistine; he is convicted by expressions like “a feast for the ears” [...] the more they are understood, the less they are enjoyed. [...] What opened up to, and overpowered, the beholder was their truth, which as in works of Kafka’s type outweighs every other element. They were not a higher order of amusement.

This position constitutes an elitist, puritan rejection of a taste aesthetic (Adorno 1997: 9–13).¹

In *The Invention of Art*, in contrast, Larry Shiner’s objection to an aesthetic involving taste arises from anti-elitism rather than puritanism. He argues plausibly that the eighteenth century saw a growing distinction between the social basis of good taste and consciousness of a genuinely aesthetic basis, but concludes that:

The crucial difference between taste and the aesthetic is that taste has always been an irremediably social concept, concerned as much with food, dress and manners as with the beauty or meaning of nature or art. (Shiner 2001: 141, 131).

Danto makes essentially the same point:

with art, quality is of a lesser dimension than cognition, and [...] the appreciation of a work is not like one's appreciation of a fine apple, or a piece of horseflesh, or a rare claret. The latter are kinds of things that go with connoisseurship, in which "quality" is a relevant predicate [...] connoisseurship is a measure of holding high rank [in society], being conversant with wines, brandies, horses, clothes, guns, jewels [...] the term "quality" [...] locates art within the kinds of systems of grading that occlude its true value for human life. (Danto 1994b: 347).²

What, then, is connoisseurship? On the basis of empirical evidence, and through practice in a disciplined method of analysis, the connoisseur attributes authorship and date of production, and appraises quality, notably in salon committees which select artists for exhibition; the critic, on the basis of experience and practice, makes judgments of aesthetic value. The antipathy between connoisseurs and art historians is mutual and relatively longstanding. It became entrenched as art history developed as an academic discipline during the twentieth century, and came to present a certain picture of its nineteenth-century antecedents. As Clement Greenberg recognized, this picture is part of a general antipathy to taste and evaluation in criticism, an antipathy he rejects:

There are [...] art critics who say [...] that judgments of value are beneath them, being the affair of "reviewers" [...] At the same time, words like "connoisseur" and "connoisseurship" have come to sound old-fashioned and even pejorative. Add to this the business about "elitism": which is, in effect, the argument that taste should no longer be decisive because the art it elevates has so little to do with life as lived by the common man [...] (Greenberg 1999: 25).

The antipathy to connoisseurship that concerns Greenberg is exemplified in this polemic by Brian Tovar:

The term [...] calls up an antiquated attitude towards the study of art that prefigures the modern discipline of art history within the academy. It has been negatively defined as the activity of so-called amateurs of the past, who were presumably bound by elitist standards toward high art on one hand, yet unburdened from the demands of an objectifying methodology on the other [...] Implicitly bound to the economic functions of capitalist society, the principal function of connoisseurship still remains the establishment of attribution, with which the art buyer and art dealer can determine the market value of a work of art [...] It was the exclusive province of dilettantes beholden to notions of artistic genius [...]. (Tovar: accessed 2005)

In this view, criticism and connoisseurship are part of the pre-history of the intellectually rigorous discipline of Art History.

This polemic cites three alleged failings of connoisseurship, viz. dilettantism (implying a lack of serious theoretical commitment or methodology); elitism; and commercial interest (ties with the art market). A critique such as Michael Ann Holly's cites rather different objections to connoisseurship, viz. its alleged "empiricism" and politically naïve aestheticism:

While most of the other humanities have been engaged in critical self-reflection [...] for several decades, art history has lagged behind for several historically legitimate reasons: its newness as a distinct discipline; the discovery, authentication, and classifying of objects that had first to be accomplished; and the aesthetic status of the objects themselves, a status that resulted in the preference given to description over interpretation in the visual arts. Consequently, most art historical studies in this century

have fallen into the prevalent modes of stylistic analysis, iconographic readings, and historical documentation.

Set against the theoretical commitments of Jacob Burckhardt, Erwin Panofsky, Alois Riegl and Heinrich Wölfflin, Holly writes, is the “counterpractice” of formalist aesthetics – “not a theory per se” – with its

attendant commitment to the principles of connoisseurship [...] Its practice is dependent upon the trained eye of the connoisseur, a commitment to certain aesthetic standards, and an inclination to exclude works of art, modes of interpretation, and classes of artists who do not conform to a preconceived canon of values.

Today, however, Holly concludes,

art history is no longer an empirical [...] study of monuments, artists, styles, periods [...] [It foregrounds] theoretical (as opposed to empirical) commitments [...] focusing on the history, context, and politics of visual interpretation. It interrogates gender boundaries and [...] examines the distinction between the so-called high and popular cultures [...] in an effort to overcome the privileging of either the word or the image. (Holly: accessed 2005).

This polemic associates connoisseurship with “empiricism”, formalism and “aestheticism”.

The implicit dichotomy between the sensory and the intellectual is a false one, however, which Holly overcomes in a tendentious fashion by assimilating art history to what is, in effect, cultural studies. This is clear from the more considered defence of connoisseurship by Otto Pächt. Pächt argues that connoisseurship and knowledge of artistic content must be essentially unified. Trying to imagine a scholar “whose interest was entirely in the content of a work of art, and who cared nothing for its authorship or dating”, he responds:

A correct attribution defines the view that alone reveals the true essence of the work [...] Attribution is not merely a matter of classification: ultimately, it is a matter of content.

Giovanni Morelli, the greatly influential nineteenth-century connoisseur who attempted to put the practice on a scientific basis, advocated looking for individual stylistic characteristics in the minute details of a painting, such as fingernails, earlobes and so on, which were inconspicuous enough to avoid the attentions of imitators. Thus the imitator or faker would not render them authentically. According to Pächt, however, this method—applicable only to certain periods of naturalistic art in any case—does not mean that one can make correct attributions while ignoring the nature and essence of the artwork: “small-scale correspondences afford no valid evidence unless they can be made to harmonize with the overall design principle of the work” (Pächt 1999: 66–7). In his view, there is no dichotomy between rational scientific art history based on stylistic history and iconography, and the “purely intuitive” practice of connoisseurship.

A true understanding of the aesthetic, such as that implicit in Pächt’s discussion, seeks to overcome the divide between word and eye, between text and image. The word “aesthetic” is derived from the Greek, meaning “that which involves or appeals to the senses”. But in its current sense it refers to the meeting-point of the sensory and intellectual. “Aestheticism”, properly understood, is not a pejorative. “Aesthetic” is, I would argue, a quasi-technical term—like, for instance, “self-consciousness” and even, perhaps, “perception”—which has come to denote a philosophical sub-discipline. Kant, to some extent anticipated by Hume, founded aesthetics as a branch of philosophical enquiry by unifying a class of judgments concerning a domain of understanding and experience which had not previously

been recognized as a unity—a domain distinct from cognitive judgment, from moral judgment, and from the purely subjective such as pure likings and dislikings.⁴ He separated the spheres of aesthetic and ethical value, while insisting on the autonomy of individual judgment in each. What the aesthetic describes is ordinary and unmysterious: an attitude of quickening faculties or intensification or heightening of experience, which Kant described as disinterested, but which may more precisely be characterized as devoid of practical interest, and which issues in judgments of beauty and cognate concepts. Thus the aesthetic is not the preserve of the “aesthete” or “connoisseur” (in the negative senses of those terms). Aesthetic judgments, I would argue, are ubiquitous, since anything can be regarded aesthetically, and they are also essentially democratic. As David Pole writes:

An aesthetic response [...] implies no more than a heightened present awareness of the qualities of an external [...] object; and any object may be looked at this way. [Though] clearly to say that all objects allow of our adopting this attitude is not to say that they equally reward it. (Pole 1983b: 33)

The ubiquity of aesthetic judgment helps to undermine the claim that the aesthetic attitude is *recherché*, esoteric and elitist.

The ubiquity and democracy of aesthetic judgment implies an aesthetic conception of criticism. While not seeking to resurrect the patrician model of connoisseurship (which would in any case be impossible), my aim is to defend the possibility of appreciative criticism by contrasting two opposed tendencies within the critical enterprise. According to the first of these tendencies, the *prescriptive model*, criticism prescribes correct artistic practice and audience response; the strongest form of the model, associated with classicism, is the *legislative conception* which postulates cognisable *a priori* rules governing artistic creation and assessment of artworks. Thus Aristotle’s *Poetics* attempts to lay down the “rules of art”, by insisting on a hierarchy of genres and prescribing, for instance, that tragedy must be limited to a single place and time. It seems likely that through most of its history the prescriptive model of criticism has been dominant, even if its opponents have tended to exaggerate its claims. The prescriptive tendency tends to assimilate art and craft, and flourishes until the two are clearly distinguished. It is dominant at least until Kant, and is assumed in his objections to criticism discussed below.⁵ Although the claim of *a priori* principles of taste is no longer regarded as plausible, weaker versions of the legislative model endure, which do not appeal to such principles.

During the eighteenth century, with the developing autonomy of taste, and the appearance of Romantic ideals of genius and self-expression, an opposed and more genuinely aesthetic *appreciative model of criticism* becomes possible. This is a more democratic conception in which Humean conditions of experience and practice are paramount; criticism no longer prescribes rules of artistic creation and evaluation. This conception arose in conjunction with other revolutionary developments in the world of the arts, such as what Kristeller referred to as “the modern system of the arts”; the developing autonomy and associated commodification of art, linked with a developing bourgeois public sphere of taste; and (most directly relevant) Kant’s aforementioned philosophical systematisation of aesthetics arising from the separation of the value spheres and recognition of the autonomy of individual judgment. Artworks were no longer designed for a narrow audience of patrons, and critics such as Addison and Steele in the London periodicals *The Tatler* and *The Spectator* saw it as their role to educate the public in the appreciation of an increasing artistic production.⁶

With the expansion of the press and the increasing commodification of artworks during the nineteenth century, artistic criticism increasingly became a professional activity, itself contributing to the growing aesthetic autonomy of art.⁷ Although the appreciative model coincides with the growing professionalisation of criticism, however, it is important to recognize that criticism is not essentially a professional activity, but is practised whenever art is discussed (see Shusterman 2000: 110–13). It would be wrong to say that appreciation is a relatively recent complement to aesthetic judgment—this would be akin to saying that

artworks first appeared in the eighteenth century. But criticism can become essentially appreciative only on the assumption, arising in the modern era, of the *autonomy of taste*. The prescriptive tendency did not disappear during the nineteenth century—it was alive and well when critics objected to Schoenberg's use of non-textbook harmonies in *Verklaerte Nacht*. Criticism which seeks to discover the "laws" of an artistic medium, as Clement Greenberg did, may be regarded as postulating *a priori* principles of taste. But even if its aim is always too ambitious, such an approach may still allow a place for appreciation—indeed Greenberg was a Kantian who claimed that "rules and maxims don't hold in the making or appreciating of art" (Greenberg 1999: 42).

The appreciative model, unlike the legislative model, recognizes that criticism is an art. This claim must not be inflated, however, as it was during the nineteenth century, when some writers advocated what has been termed *creative criticism*. (See Landerouin, present volume: pp cross-refer this volume). It might seem truisitic to say that criticism cannot transcend its source, the artwork that inspired it, but Schlegel for instance maintained that the work of criticism is a work of art independent of the work it criticizes. This view of criticism reached its apogee in the work of Friedrich Nietzsche, and inspired a vigorous later nineteenth-century debate. In "The Critic As Artist", Oscar Wilde argued that criticism is a creative art, not least because the critic may find in the work things of which the artist was not aware: "the highest criticism, being the purest form of personal expression, is in its way more creative than creation". The critic's guide is his or her own impressions, not the intentions of the artist: "For the highest criticism deals with art not as expressive but as impressive purely" (Wilde 1987: 1028). The implication is that the meaning of a work belongs as much to the beholder as the author. Commenting on Ruskin's *Modern Painters*, Wilde finds it immaterial whether Ruskin's views on Joseph Turner are sound or not; Ruskin's discussion is greater than Turner's paintings, he believes, because literature is the higher art, while commenting on Whistler's attack on Ruskin, Wilde retorts that painters should keep to painting. (Wilde 1987: 1027, 1028). (Here, one feels like responding that critics should keep to criticism.) Wilde's position was echoed by Marcel Proust. Seeking out an obscure figurine at Rouen cathedral which Ruskin had described as exhibiting a "very noble vitality", Proust found it mean and worn, but commented that "Ruskin might have been wrong as a critic in his evaluation of a work, but the beauty of his false judgment is often more interesting than the beauty of the work being judged, and corresponds to something [...] just as valuable"⁸ (Proust 1971: 128). Wilde's view is implicit in Michael Tanner's suggestion that one does not go to the great critics for accurate accounts of the works with which they deal – "that can be left to merely very good critics", he comments—and that a critic may still be illuminating even when they misunderstand the artwork.

There is some plausibility to Tanner's claim, but it does not imply a distinct and elevated category of creative criticism (Tanner 1994: 22). This exalted kind of criticism has also been termed *critique d'auteur*, i.e. criticism produced by a novelist, poet or dramatist. But then if the criticism in question really is independent of the work, in producing it the critic has become an auteur. Schlegel's claim is misguided, however. Artistic criticism, like musical or dramatic performance of a work, is a secondary art, logically dependent on the existence of an artwork which has its own creator; indeed performance of a work is a variety of interpretation and therefore of criticism. Of course there is musical performance which is not of a work, but there is no equivalent to this in criticism. There is nothing objectionable about critics becoming artists, just as there is nothing objectionable about a classical performer such as Glenn Gould becoming a composer. But in doing so, they cease to practice the secondary artform, whether it be criticism or performance. Perhaps there could be an artworld where there is no divide between creator and critic; but that is not the present situation. Whether or not it is helpful to treat "creative criticism" as criticism, however, I propose to set the issue to one side.

It follows from the defence of so-called aestheticism earlier, that one should not be swayed by a currently dominant populism into scepticism about the aesthetic. What I will describe as *anti-aesthetic populism* is inherent in much contemporary writing on the arts. It arises from the aesthetic subjectivism espoused by such as Curt Ducasse, who wrote that

A person's taste may change [...] but whether we call the change development or perversion depends solely on whether it changes in the direction of our own or away from it. A change in our own taste is for each of us, by definition, development [...].

Thus populists believe that exposure to judgment by the critics crushes individual autonomy; critical prescriptions inhibit the individual's aesthetic response, undermining their trust in their own opinions. For Ducasse, the belief that "There is no such thing as *objective* goodness or badness of taste, but only such a thing as my taste and your taste [...] tastes shared by many or by few, [that] there are no authorities in matters of taste", may "throw one back upon one's own taste, [freeing] one from distrust of it, and [enlivening] it" (Ducasse 1994: 115–27). A more recent development is rejection of the aesthetic as rarefied, esoteric, exotic and ideological: hence "anti-aesthetic populism". Discussing the Modern Movement in architecture and design, for instance, Jonathan Woodham comments disapprovingly that the writings of Le Corbusier and Adolf Loos express "a sense of cultural elitism: Loos's claim that the ornamental designer's "productions are unbearable to cultured persons now, and will become so to others in a little while", presages Corbusier's assertion [...] that "the more cultivated a people becomes, the more decoration disappears". Woodham assumes that one can no longer talk of persons or a people being cultured or cultivated (Woodham 1997: 33, 83–4). The anti-aesthetic nature of his populism is apparent in Woodham's comment that the design legacy of modernism, through its preservation in museums, has

generally been viewed for its aesthetic qualities, divorced from any real sense of its original everyday context and function [...]. [in museum collections] the high premium placed on aesthetic content necessarily distinguishes their exhibits from what was generally consumed, used, and experienced by the majority.

This standpoint is expressed in other contemporary developments. Marxist critiques of high culture which are more overt than Woodham's assume its complicity with oppressive socio-political hierarchies, and regard the aesthetic as essentially ideological. This position is a motivation for cultural studies, which examines all media and deprives imaginative literature of its privileged status, in tension with one disjunct of the antinomy of aesthetics: that everything can be the object of aesthetic attention, but that not everything equally rewards it.⁹ I believe that these anti-aesthetic positions rest on a misunderstanding of both design and the aesthetic. Design is aesthetic through and through; the aesthetic is not rarefied or esoteric, but an everyday phenomenon (Pye 1978: 12–13, 34). I will now show how appreciative criticism, with its eighteenth-century roots in the writings of Hume and Kant, provides an alternative both to the prescriptive model of criticism, and to anti-aesthetic scepticism about criticism.

2. Hume and Kant: expertise and democracy

Hume's acknowledgment of critical judgment, and Kant's defence of the autonomy and democracy of taste, offer a much more nuanced treatment of criticism than that of contemporary populists. Thus although a New Aestheticism has recently been advocated, I prefer to return to the Old Aestheticism of Hume and Kant, aiming to develop an account of critical judgment which reconciles their treatments.¹⁰ Kant is more forward-looking than Hume in his assertion of the autonomy of taste, but conservative in his assumption of an outmoded legislative model, which makes him very hostile towards criticism—a position to which Hume's treatment offers a helpful corrective. Both philosophers aimed to reconcile the respective truths in subjectivity and objectivity in aesthetics. To take Hume first: Hume sought to reconcile the subjectivity of individual preference (which for him implies that beauty is a matter of sentiment, and is not "in" objects), with a standard of taste or notion of correct judgment. He claims that these subjective and objective features are expressed respectively in two species of common sense: the "axiom" that there is no disputing about

taste, and the “species of common sense which opposes it, at least serves to modify and restrain it” (i.e. the recognition that some judgments of artistic value, for instance the claim that Ogilby, a minor poet, is a greater talent than Milton, are simply absurd). Hume makes a distinction between sentiment (e.g. someone’s liking of Ogilby) and critical judgment (their recognition that Ogilby is a lesser talent). Thus he is able to maintain that beauty belongs to the sentiments, whilst rejecting the commonsense axiom that there is no disputing about taste. For Hume, the joint verdict of the true critics is “the true standard of taste and beauty”, where the “true critics” are those who exhibit delicacy of taste, practice, experience of a wide range of objects, lack of prejudice, and common sense (Hume 1985: 230, 241). Developing a critical sensibility, I believe, involves discovering both who the true critics are, and what true criticism involves.

This double purpose makes sense. Aspiring artlovers do not just want to know, as a matter of fact as it were, which works have artistic value. They want to be able to make critical judgments themselves, to become—perhaps only in an amateur way—true critics. It would be perverse for someone to say, “All I’m interested in doing is deferring to critical opinion. If I want to buy a painting by a contemporary artist, or recordings of Jamaican dub music, I’ll ask an expert’s opinion on which to go for. I’m not interested in developing my own autonomous judgment.” Deference is the beginning of the process of appreciation, not the end of it. In the interpretation proposed here, Hume’s claim that “the taste of all individuals is not upon an equal footing” becomes less problematic; the inequality is circumstantial, and not essential as elitists maintain. A Humean account does not have to subjugate individual response to expert opinion in the way that many writers assume. Once it is recognized that the true critics have an ideal status, the charge of elitism loses much of its force. The five qualities are ones to which all, not just an elite, may aspire in the education of a critical sensibility.

This interpretation of Hume will not satisfy Marxist critics, whose objections go deeper. Bennett, for instance, argues that the Humean standard of taste is

based on the most insubstantial and flimsy of foundations: the consensus of the drawing room [...] the bourgeois public maintains a united front, the illusion of universality, in face of the masses (Palmer and Dodson eds 1996: 39).

Bennett acknowledges that Hume rejects the “arbitrary authoritarianism of earlier aristocratic aesthetic prescriptions [and articulates] the Enlightenment demand that the principles of taste should be arrived at by means of rational and open debate between members of a public who meet as equals” —that is, as I would say, he rejects the legislative conception. But he claims that, for Hume, “the qualification of some subjects of judgment is effected by the simultaneous disqualification of others” through the exercise of cultural power. However, “disqualification” is not an expression that Hume uses, and it implies the permanent exclusion of the judger from the so-called elite which decides the standard of taste. The process of educating a sensibility does not imply disqualification, however; it distinguishes simply between those who are qualified and those who are not *yet* qualified. This question of educating a sensibility will be returned to later.

Kant’s treatment is problematic in the opposite direction to Hume’s. In Kant’s account, aesthetics is inherently democratic, and his strong assertion of the autonomy of taste, coupled with an inability to see beyond a prescriptive model in its legislative version, leads to a bias against criticism. However, his insistence that aesthetic judgments are universally valid as well as subjectively based is broadly comparable to Hume’s position, and shows that he is not a populist in the sense in which I have used the term. On the interpretation of Hume’s critics as ideal figures defended here, their joint verdict may be equated with Kant’s universal voice. Analogous to Hume’s two species of common sense is Kant’s “antinomy of taste”: How can a judgment based on individually-felt pleasure possibly claim validity for all other judging subjects? Kant appeals in the first instance to the requirement of disinterestedness: the judger “must believe he is justified in requiring a similar liking from everyone because he

cannot discover, underlying this liking, any private condition" (sec 6), and to a common psychological constitution allowing for the free play of imagination and understanding.

Kant's hostility to criticism is conditioned by his assumption that criticism must conform to the legislative model in its strongest form: that criticism involves cognisable, *a priori* principles of taste (for instance, the Aristotelian principle that a beautiful object must possess symmetry and formal balance). Rejecting Baumgarten's science of aesthetics, Kant sided in the 1760s with the British school of criticism represented by Lord Kames (Henry Home). Thus in the lectures on *Logic* he observed:

The philosopher Baumgarten in Frankfurt had the plan to make an aesthetic as science. More correctly, Home [Kames] has named aesthetics criticism, since it gives no rules *a priori* that sufficiently determine the judgment, as does logic, but takes its rules *a posteriori* and only makes the empirical laws general through comparisons.

The basis of this rejection is Kant's commitment to what has been termed the Acquaintance Principle, which claims that aesthetic judgments, unlike judgments of moral knowledge or ordinary cognitive judgments, must be based on first-hand experience of their objects and are not generally transmissible from one person to another (Wollheim 1980a: 233). It is an expression of the autonomy of taste, and is particularist in import. Kant writes:

a principle under which, as condition, we could subsume the concept of an object and then infer that the object is beautiful [...] is absolutely impossible. For I must feel the pleasure directly in my presentation of the object, and I cannot be talked into that pleasure by means of any bases of proof. [...] [we must] *get a look at the object with our own eyes*, just as if our delight depended on sensation (Kant 1987: 56).

Counterexamples to the Principle are, I believe, unconvincing. If a critic whom I like or admire judges that an artwork is beautiful, I may predict that I am likely to concur; but the fact of their judgment gives me no grounds for making the same judgment in advance of experiencing the artwork. Indeed, in this situation what I make is not merely an ill-considered aesthetic judgment, rather it is not a genuine aesthetic judgment at all. When I dismiss a piece of music or a novel which I have read, then learn that a critic whom I admire finds something in it, I may feel that my rejection was too hasty. But I do not at this point have grounds for a new aesthetic judgment; rather I have reason to look or listen again and see if I can arrive at a more positive appreciation. I can be influenced by the judgment, but cannot base mine on it; I am entirely responsible for my opinion. But how exactly does the fact that one has to see the beautiful object with one's own eyes express the democracy and autonomy of taste? In cognitive discourse, experts may simply inform one of a truth. In aesthetics, in contrast, the subject has a much more active role; they are not the passive recipient of critical truths imparted by experts, and perhaps they are not the recipient of a mere truth at all.

There are few enough data in philosophical aesthetics—or indeed in any branch of Philosophy—and the Acquaintance Principle is a crucial datum for criticism. But though the Principle itself is highly plausible, the hostile consequences for criticism which Kant drew from it are not. He completely rejects the deliverances of critical opinion, arguing emphatically that:

If someone reads me his poem, or takes me to a play that in the end I simply cannot find to my taste, then let him adduce *Batteux* or *Lessing* to prove that his poem is beautiful [...] let certain passages that I happen to dislike conform quite well to rules of beauty (as laid down by these critics and universally recognized); I shall stop my ears, shall refuse to listen to reasons and arguments, and shall sooner assume that those rules of the critics are false, or at least do not apply in the present case, than allow my judgment to be determined by *a priori* bases of proof; for it is meant to be a judgment of taste, and not one of understanding or of reason. (Kant 1987: sec. 33)

For Kant, it seems, we cannot give reasons one to another why a certain object should be judged beautiful.

However, it is important to recall that Kant's negative attitude to criticism is conditioned by the legislative conception to which he at least implicitly subscribed. Kant assumes that critics simply prescribe, and in common with many eighteenth century writers (though not Hume) he sees no middle way between the mechanical application of pre-given rules and principles and the spontaneous and unrevisable verdict of immediate feeling. He moves from "an aesthetic judgment cannot be compelled by principles of taste" to "no reasons can be given in support of an aesthetic judgment". Hence the complaint by Wollheim and others, that he defines the ideal critic as one whose cognitive stock is empty (see for instance Janaway 1997). He neglects the possibility both of developing an aesthetic sensibility, and also of revising particular aesthetic responses, the latter not by command of external authority, but in light of our increasing experience of artworks and critical discussion of them (Gaiger 2000: 14).¹¹ For instance, one might find Mike Figgis's *Leaving Las Vegas* ludicrous and the climax laughable, but on discussing the film with others, come to question one's initial reaction. It is true that Hume does not emphasize the role of dialogue among the true critics in forming their joint verdict; but in Kant, the place of genuine critical discourse and debate is wholly neglected.¹² Unlike Hume, he gives little guidance concerning how one can get better at making aesthetic judgments, and indeed shows little awareness that there is such a process. (This is so even when it is recognized that the principal discussion of art occurs after the Four Moments.)

3. Appreciative criticism

The account of criticism defended here, to reiterate, aims to reconcile Hume's respect for the true critics with Kant's democratic aspirations. My claim is that in critical judgment, anyone who puts a serious effort into arriving at an opinion has the right to have it taken seriously, yet the judgments of those with practice and experience in appreciation and criticism carry special weight. There is no comparable democratising element in the disciplines of science, engineering, medicine, or history. One could not seriously suggest that anyone is entitled to an opinion concerning the kinds of subatomic particle, or the likely load-bearing capacities of a bridge design. In science, the opinions of the untrained are worthless.

Clearly one must distinguish artistic and non-artistic appreciation (only the former involves meaning, interpretation and truth-content), but not at the expense of denying appreciation a central role in artistic criticism, as the critics of connoisseurship discussed in section 1 have tended to do. Hence the account which I am offering, in emphasising the role of experience and practice, shows that it is wrong to dismiss taste and connoisseurship as merely social and not genuinely aesthetic. To call someone a connoisseur of jazz or painting, far from saying that they have a trivialized response to it, means that they have experience of a wide range of examples, and practise at making critical judgments on that basis (a view defended, for instance, by Greenberg 1999: 23–30). It is not clear how in criticism one could avoid referring to artistic quality, even though it should be acknowledged that ranking is an over-rated activity and aesthetic evaluations are not absolute, requiring a context of choices and decisions to determine their content and appropriate standards. The following activities may each involve a distinct aesthetic evaluation: deciding what works to record, what records to buy, or what classical concert to attend; what paintings to put in a gallery or buy for the University council chamber or one's home; what book to take on holiday as light reading as opposed to heavyweight fiction, to give to a student or to stock in the travel section of the library.

Appreciative criticism, in the interpretation offered here, is unformalized and involves Humean conditions of experience and practice. It offers a middle way between elitism, which claims that a comprehending response to the arts requires learning an exclusive critical language, and a deflationary populism, which regards all opinions as having equal validity and value. Three processes should be distinguished: liking, appreciating (making a

critical judgment), and articulating the grounds for a critical judgment. Appreciation may involve knowing that something is aesthetically valuable without being able to articulate why; listeners may be able to appreciate the cohesiveness, unity and dynamism of Beethoven's symphonic compositions, for instance, without being able fully to articulate these qualities as reasons for a critical judgment. Conversely, those who are able to articulate the reasons for a critical judgment—why a piece works, and why it has aesthetic or artistic quality—may possibly be no better at appreciating artworks than those who cannot. If someone asks what they need to know in order to appreciate painting or music, what they should read or study before going to an art gallery or concert, the right answer is: "Just look or listen and experience!" Technical or theoretical knowledge is not the first prerequisite, although it is also true that the difficulty of acquiring it is often exaggerated. "Here's a list of twenty books on Italian Renaissance painting—I don't want to hear a suggestion of a critical opinion out of you till you've read them all" would be an absurd requirement. Appreciative criticism leaves in balance two competing imperatives. A democratic perspective emphasizes that criticism is concerned to help us hear or see a work in a new and stimulating light; the perspective of expertise warns us that that light may be wrong, and based on a misunderstanding.

Central to appreciative criticism is the process of educating or developing an aesthetic sensibility, a process whose very possibility populism denies, as shown by Ducasse's comments quoted earlier. Although it seems perverse or incoherent to say that it is entirely subjective whether change constitutes development (this implies, for instance, that an artist's skills never develop) there is something to Ducasse's concerns. The following remarks must reflect a common experience:

I enjoy going to galleries and seeing pictures. Some I like, some I don't – but I really find it very difficult to distinguish between good and not so good in any clear way. I am always conscious of the reputation of the painter, determined of course by other people (an elite presumably), and less by the picture itself. In consequence, I am left totally unsure of any judgement that I might have.¹³

Although these remarks seem to confuse appreciation with ranking, the writer would probably lack confidence in making aesthetic judgments of a different form. Pure subjectivism is no remedy for this lack of confidence, however. Subjectivism may appear liberating in contrast to the patrician elitism which it has supplanted, but ultimately it is profoundly disempowering. Anti-elitists such as Ducasse fails to recognize the different senses of "authority in matters of taste", i.e. prescriptive and appreciative. As argued earlier, Hume's true critics have ideal status, and developing a critical sensibility has the double purpose of discovering both who the true critics are, and what true criticism involves. It is culturally disastrous to imply, as Ducasse does, that one need not defend or seek to legitimate one's likings, for to claim that with each critical judgment the judger always starts with a blank slate, is to deny the possibility of self-development.

What does aesthetic self-development involve? The process of educating an aesthetic sensibility is not a uniform one; there are many kinds of sensibility that can be developed, and many ways of doing so. The process therefore involves what I will term aesthetic mentors as much as true critics. (In these respects, among others, my account differs from Hume's.) The situation which I have been focussing on is that of someone who wants to find out about an artwork with which they are confronted—who should they go to, and on what kind of basis should they consult them? That person may not be the one who is in the best position in general. They may not be the best evaluator—indeed they may even be a false critic—while still pointing out things which help me to appreciate the work.¹⁴ Hume comments that I select my favourite books as I do my friends, and this applies also to my selection of critics. When I read the critics, I am trying to find one whose taste is sympathetic to mine, and will help me to develop it—a process that involves self-expression through taste rather than conservatism or subjectivism.

This process of developing one's critical faculties is not one which encourages elitism, aestheticism – except in the benign sense of treating the aesthetic seriously – formalism or any of the other *bete noires* I have been concerned to undermine. The value of criticism, in the sense in which I have defended it here, has been somewhat neglected in the contemporary intellectual climate, and it deserves renewed consideration.¹⁵

Notes

¹ Adorno is of course an intellectual as opposed to a social elitist.

² Compare also Jones 2002: “the aesthetic approach to visual culture [...] inevitably cleaves to the connoisseurial tradition and perpetuates its authoritarian effects” (216).

³ Morelli presents his views through one of the protagonists in the dialogue. According to Wollheim, Morelli contrasts the art historian’s concern with the broad sweep of art, with the connoisseur’s concern with the individual artwork, while maintaining that art history should rest on, and include, connoisseurship (Wollheim 1974b: 180).

⁴ This at least suggests that before the eighteenth century, the true nature of aesthetic judgment was not understood. The further ramifications of this philosophical development are matters of great debate; Habermas for instance regards Kant’s separation of the aesthetic from the ethical and the cognitive as central to modernity.

⁵ These developments are well discussed by Shiner 2001.

⁶ “The new literary criticism not only attempted to guide readers toward which books to read but, in some cases, how to read them [and] attempted to inculcate a contemplative reading [...]” (Shiner 2001: 135).

⁷ E.T.A. Hoffmann’s anonymous review of Beethoven’s 5th Symphony in the pages of the *Allgemeine Musikalische Zeitung*, for instance, is cited as influential in the elevation of purely instrumental or absolute music.

⁸ Translation by Yves Landerouin, to whose article in the present volume I am much indebted.

⁹ Terry Eagleton (1983) proposes the replacement of literary studies by cultural studies. Other examples of anti-aesthetic populism are Bennett 1996, and Elliott 2002. But compare Jameson 1991 and Eagleton 1990: “From one viewpoint, the aesthetic *is* the ideological [...] There is no reason to suppose, however, that ‘ideology’ need always be a pejorative term, and that the aesthetic stands unequivocally on the side of social oppression” (Eagleton 1990: 100).

¹⁰ The term “New Aestheticism” comes from Joughin and Malpas 2003, but the phenomenon has been commented on by other writers, notably Danto 2004.

¹¹ Indeed, generalisation has a place in critical argument—the issue is discussed interestingly in Pole (1983c: especially 154–6).

¹² There is a general issue of Kant interpretation here; i.e., how far his discussion of criticism pertains to free beauty, and how far to dependent beauty. It might be argued that Kant’s hostility to criticism is limited to the context of pure judgments of beauty (in contrast to impure judgments concerning artworks) to which no concept of the object is meant to pertain. Perhaps here, his position is correct. (This would exclude the possibility of nature criticism, which I wish to defend.) But many of the passages which I have quoted occur relatively late in the *Critique of Judgment*, where Kant is also concerned with impure judgments of beauty. Moreover, he would not be sympathetic to the claim that the cultivation of aesthetic sensibility consists in a development from pure to impure judgments.

¹³ E-mailed comment from audience member at Keele RIP lecture, 12.2.04.

¹⁴ I owe this point to Richard Wollheim.

¹⁵ I am greatly indebted to comments from Jason Gaiger, John Skorupski, Nick Southgate, and Roger Squires, and from the audience at the conference “Art Criticism, 1700–1900: Emergence, Development, Interchange in Eastern and Western Europe” at the University of Exeter, 11–13 September 2003.