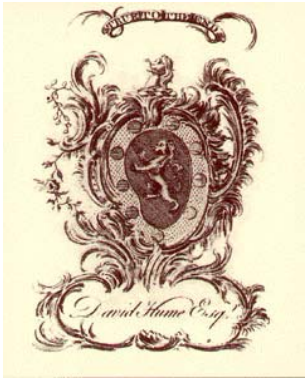

Hume and the Standard of Taste
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HUME AND THE STANDARD OF TASTE

I

David Hume's critical theories, although fragmentary, have drawn increasingly serious attention in the twentieth century, yet even in 1976 Peter Jones, in reassessing Hume's aesthetics,[1] can describe one of the most substantial of his critical essays, "Of the Standard of Taste," as underrated. Jones praises it as "subtle and highly complex," but while I agree with that judgment I also find the essay quite puzzling. I am struck by certain features which look like structural weaknesses and by what seem to be inconsistencies, even contradictions, in Hume's argument. But perhaps the gravest difficulty facing interpretation of this essay is the irony which Hume seems to use, for this raises the question of just how seriously we are to take some of the more conventional views contained in "Of the Standard of Taste."

I can begin to illustrate my uneasiness by considering Hume's use of a tall tale from Don Quixote, Part II, chapter xiii. Hume introduces this in a lighthearted way as part of his definition of delicacy of taste. It is the story of Sancho Panza's two kinsmen, who are such sensitive judges of wine that they can detect the taint of iron and leather imparted to a hogshead by the presence in it of a key on a thong. Now there are some interesting differences between Hume's version of this tale and the original. For example, where Hume has the two tasters deliberate over their wine before pronouncing it good, except for the slight taste of leather or iron, Cervantes says the first merely tried it with the tip of his tongue and the second just sniffed it, without tasting any at all. Further, Hume says "both were ridiculed for their judgment,"[2] but there is no such

reaction mentioned in the original. Lastly, Hume calls the cause of the taint of iron "an old key," where Cervantes describes it as "little."[3] In short, while in the original interest is in the sensitivity of the taste of Sancho's kinsmen for its own sake, Hume's emphasis is more on the relation of their taste to that of other people. He makes the procedure of tasting the wine as normal as possible and he gives prominence to the reactions of other people. Hume both tones down the more fabulous aspects of the story, making it less extraordinary and hence a better starting-point for a generalization about taste, and makes more explicit the conflict of opinion about the wine. He is using the story not just to define delicacy of taste but also to relate it to the problem of aesthetic judgment and the standard of taste.

This is confirmed by the application Hume makes of his example. First, he uses the analogy between physical and aesthetic taste to claim that delicacy in both consists of the ability to detect minute effects and make fine discriminations. But the crucial question is what serves, like the key on the thong in the story, to confirm to outsiders that a man's aesthetic judgment is in fact more delicate than his neighbours'. Hume's answer is "the general rules of beauty ... to produce these general rules or avowed patterns of composition is like finding the key with the leathern thong; which justified the verdict of Sancho's kinsmen, and confounded those pretended judges who had condemned them" (273). But of course producing a general rule is not exactly like finding a physical key on a thong, and Hume's use of the word "avowed" here, which he repeats later, raises the difficulty of how the principles of art become accepted, and by whom. But, that apart, there is something odd about the discussion since the avowed principle is used, with support from examples, to

convince a bad critic that he is wrong, on the grounds that his judgment does not accord with the general judgment. This is the opposite of Sancho's story, in which his kinsmen were in a minority, derided, adds Hume, by the dull majority, and only vindicated by the discovery of the tainting key and thong. The aesthetic equivalent of the key and thong is being used not to confirm a particularly discerning criticism but to uphold a well-established opinion. Although it is possible to imagine a positive use of the rules of art, in which the critic appealed to a general principle to support his own view, the part played by the rules would be the same and would mean the subordination of individual to general response. Hume's actual case, the suppression of a deviant view, perhaps shows this more clearly. The so-called bad critic is guilty of nothing but idiosyncrasy, but when this becomes known he is forced to recant his divergence from the general rule. Thus the general rules operate against refinement or delicacy of taste, in so far as these mean individual variation of sensibility, and seek to impose uniformity.

Hume's attempt to define delicacy of taste has led to a restriction of its effectiveness by the very thing which is meant to confirm its existence. Nowhere, however, is this consequence expressed directly by Hume. One is left to wonder how far he was aware of it, or, in other words, whether the passage is to be read ironically, its real meaning unstated. There are perhaps clues, in the word "avowed," which begs the question, or in the rather bald way the general rules are equated with the key on the thong. But perhaps more convincing are signs of irony in other parts of the essay.

The next section consists of a rather conventional expansion of the definition of a good critic. He must have delicacy of taste, he must be well-practised, he must be adept in making comparisons,

he must be free from prejudice and he must have good sense. If there is any irony here, it lies in the accumulation of these demands, so that Hume concludes that "though the principles of taste be universal, and, nearly, if not entirely the same in all men; yet few are qualified to give judgment on any work of art, or establish their own sentiment as the standard of beauty" (278).[4] One's confidence in the general rules of art is seriously undermined by the statement that "a true judge in the finer arts is observed, even during the most polished ages, to be so rare a character" (278). Yet Hume ends the paragraph by asserting that "the joint verdict of such, wherever they are to be found, is the true standard of taste and beauty."

It is most significant that the paragraph immediately following this sentence should begin with the obvious question it raises: "but where are such critics to be found?" (279). Two similar questions follow. Such piling up of questions has a marked rhetorical effect. The prose becomes excited and the reader expects some revelation to be made. Hume describes the three questions as embarrassing. He admits that they seem to jeopardize whatever progress his essay has made so far. This extraordinary paragraph, therefore, seems designed to mark a crisis in the essay; the reader is led to wonder how Hume, to use his own word, will extricate himself.

The answer is that he simply abandons the argument. He makes no effort to tell us where to find the true critic, but anticlimactically retreats into generalities: "It is sufficient for our present purpose," he writes, "if we have proved, that the taste of all individuals is not upon an equal footing, and that some men in general, however difficult to be particularly pitched upon, will be acknowledged by universal sentiment to have a preference above others" (279). Having raised

the reader's expectations by elaborate means, Hume blatantly disappoints them. The inelegance and lack of subtlety here are striking, but much more so is the fact that this escape into generalities is not just a disappointment but is also a near-contradiction. To see this one has to look at the beginning of the essay.

The work begins conventionally enough, commenting on the variety of taste, but then a comparison with moral debate is introduced and this leads to two or three paragraphs of digression on morality. That this is a digression is signalled by the abrupt beginning of the single sentence of the sixth paragraph: "It is natural for us to seek a Standard of Taste..." (268). This seems to bring us back sharply to the subject of the essay and to mark its real beginning. The crudeness of this arrangement seems a literary blemish on the essay. One is inclined to ask why Hume did not effect this transition with more dexterity, or indeed make it unnecessary by omitting the digression. But the function of this inelegant sixth paragraph may be to direct our attention to the digression preceding it and thus to why Hume included it. The starting point is the observation that in moral as in critical discussion men will agree in general terms but disagree in particular applications. Just as "every voice is united in applauding elegance, propriety, simplicity, spirit in writing; and in blaming fustian, affectation, coldness, and a false brilliancy" (266), so "writers of all nations and all ages concur in applauding justice, humanity, magnanimity, prudence, veracity; and in blaming the opposite qualities" (267). Disagreement begins when these generalizations are applied in particular instances and we find that one man's elegance is another man's fustian, and, to take Hume's example, that what Homer calls heroism Fénelon would call ferocity. Slyly, Hume extends the discussion to the Koran, pointing out that though the Arabic

equivalents of the English words for equity, justice, charity and so on must be taken in a good sense, examination of their particular applications suggests that in practice the ethics of the Koran are not at all compatible with those of England; this is sly because one suspects that here the Koran is being used as a stalking horse for the Bible and that Hume's condemnation of its treachery, inhumanity, cruelty, revenge and bigotry is not directed at only one religious work.

What the digression leads to, then, is the statement that "the merit of delivering true general precepts in ethics is indeed very small" (268) because the terms themselves imply blame or approbation. Furthermore, given that the argument began by noting something similar about the language of criticism, inherent in Hume's conclusion is a parallel statement about the small merit of delivering true general precepts in aesthetics, too. And this brings us back to Hume's evasion of the question of how to identify truly good critics, for in contenting himself with nothing more than a general description of the qualities of a good critic, avoiding particulars, Hume commits the very fault he condemns in this introductory digression, albeit in aesthetics rather than ethics. Again the reader is left to ask whether Hume was aware of this inconsistency. There is no direct evidence that he was, but, on the other hand, what is the point of the digression on moral generalizations, so abruptly broken off, unless intended for the ironic purpose of undermining the appeal to general agreement later in the essay?

The form and function of the first six paragraphs of the essay seem evidence of a technique of ironic contrast in the work. Because of this, the reader has to be prepared to make comparisons between statements and arguments often separated by several pages. For example,

in discussion the need for the good critic to free himself from prejudice, Hume writes that

> when any work is addressed to the public, though I should have a friendship or enmity with the author, I must depart from this situation; and considering myself as a man in general, forget, if possible, my individual being and my peculiar circumstances (276).

This seems fair enough, although we might ask how strong the phrase "if possible" is here. But later in the essay Hume discusses personal preferences in literature: "at twenty, Ovid may be the favourite author; Horace at forty; and perhaps Tacitus at fifty" (281). He goes on to say that "vainly would we, in such cases, endeavour to enter into the sentiments of others, and divest ourselves of those propensities, which are natural to us." If it is so difficult to divest ourselves of our natural propensities in the second case, how is it easier in the earlier one? Hume's language here suggests difficulty, not ease; he writes of how the prejudiced critic fails to respond "as if he had imposed a proper violence on his imagination, and had forgotten himself for a moment" (277). The oxymoron "proper violence" implies more than a dilemma in the mind of the critic but a conflict of values, for he must, it seems, violate his own feelings for the sake of a higher, selfless end.

It might be argued that the contexts alter significantly Hume's meaning in these two cases; that in the first he is, reasonably enough, warning against a particular kind of prejudice for or against an author with whom one is personally acquainted and in the second he is merely noting a natural and acceptable tendency which it would be absurd to oppose. We do expect critics to be disinterested in certain obvious ways, for instance, financially, but we make allowances for, and sometimes prize, youthful enthusiasm, mature wisdom and national, political or religious sympathy with an author.

But against this line of argument can be set the presence in "Of the Standard of Taste" of other ironic contrasts, especially between its last few pages and the middle section of remarks on the ideal critic, and these also focus on the question of the point of view the critic should adopt.

If we return to the paragraph discussing the critic's need to be free from prejudice, we find Hume asserting

> that every work of art, in order to produce its due effect on the mind, must be surveyed in a certain point of view, and cannot be fully relished by persons, whose situation, real or imaginary, is not conformable to that which is required by the performance. (276)

Now there are obvious problems here concerning what the "due effect" of a work of art is and how we discover the situation of the spectator required by that work, but let us ignore these and turn to the general point that the critic must put himself into the correct point of view before passing judgment. Otherwise,

> if the work be addressed to persons of a different age or nation, he makes no allowance for their peculiar views and prejudices; but, full of the manners of his own age and country, rashly condemns what seemed admirable in the eyes of those for whom alone the discourse was calculated. (277)

Towards the end of the essay, however, Hume returns to this matter to quite a different effect. Perhaps it is significant that here he considers it in more particular detail and instead of talking generally of "a different age or nation" he mentions specifically the controversy about ancient and modern learning and the rival arts of England and France.

He begins by remarking that "we are more pleased ... with pictures and characters, that resemble objects which are found in our own age or country, than with

those which describe a different set of customs" (281) and instances modern dislike of the rustic behaviour of the aristocrats in ancient literature and the difficulty of transferring comedy from one age or country to another. True, he allows that "a man of learning and reflection can make allowance for these peculiarities of manners" (282), which seems like a reference back to the ideal, detached critic of the earlier passage. But the next paragraph develops a different point. Hume offers a reflection on "the celebrated controversy concerning ancient and modern learning." He proposes a distinction between what is and is not a legitimate allowance for the changes in civilization since ancient times:

> Where any innocent peculiarities of manners are represented ... they ought certainly to be admitted; and a man, who is shocked with them, gives an evident proof of false delicacy and refinement.... But where the ideas of morality and decency alter from one age to another, and where vicious manners are described, without being marked with the proper characters of blame and disapprobation; this must be allowed to disfigure the poem, and to be a real deformity.' I cannot, nor is it proper I should, enter into such sentiments; and however I may excuse the poet, on account of the manners of his age, I never can relish the composition. (282)

To draw the line at condoning what you regard as immorality must make it impossible to adopt the correct point of view required of the ideal judge earlier in the essay. Further, if we follow Hume's suggestion and make allowances for "innocent peculiarities of manners" but not for moral differences, then we open ourselves to the more trivial aspects of alien culture and close our minds to its more serious side, or at any rate as much of it as we disapprove of. Hume seems to be advocating the exercise, not the abolition, of prejudice, except in unimportant matters of customs and manners.

Yet over this paragraph, as over many in these last pages of the essay, hangs an ironic air of paradox. The paragraph ends with sharp criticism of the morals of Homer and Greek tragedians, as though Hume relishes the opportunity to snipe at these cultural monuments. I suspect that it is not so much the case that he disapproves of their morality as that he is showing the "unco guid" that the Greek classics they profess to admire are morally dubious.[5] At the same time he raises again the problem of the critic's point of view and whether or not he could or should divest himself of his own beliefs in order to accommodate those of the work in question. Hume articulates an extreme attitude: "where a man is confident of the rectitude of that moral standard, by which he judges, he is justly jealous of it, and will not pervert the sentiments of his heart for a moment, in complaisance to any writer whatsoever" (283). This is a far cry from "placing himself in that point of view, which the performance supposes" (277). It seems that either the ideal critic has to deny his own morality or the moral critic has to succumb to the prejudice under which "all his natural sentiments are perverted" (278).

Hume carries the irony a stage further by carefully separating morality and religion; where the first admits no compromise, the second may be excused. As he impishly puts it, "all the absurdities of the pagan system of theology must be overlooked by every critic, who would pretend to form a just notion of ancient poetry; and our posterity, in their turn, must have the same indulgence to their forefathers" (283); that is to say, future readers must excuse the Christianity of Hume's contemporaries as a transient cultural aberration. The effect of this is to drain much of the significance from Christian literature. If, for the sake of argument, we call the moderns Christian, as opposed to the pagan ancients, Hume might be said to have argued two things:

first, that ancient literature cannot now be seriously considered because it does not conform to modern, Christian morality and, second, that modern literature is equally vitiated by its conformity to a religious cult.

The only exception to Hume's rule of religious tolerance is when religious principles lay a poet under the imputation of bigotry or superstition, since these offend against morality and hence cannot be excused. Religious principles become bigotry or superstition when they take strong possession of the poet's heart, that is to say, when he takes them seriously enough to believe in them. Thus it seems that any work of art with a serious religious purpose alien to the critic must be rejected by him. Hume disguises the scope of this conclusion by using the conventional eighteenth-century whipping-post, Roman Catholicism, as his example of religious bigotry and superstition, and thus seems to conform to the British bigotry and superstition of his day. We might defend him against this charge by saying that his attack on Catholicism displays just that prejudice which he has been ironically describing as a laudable refusal to compromise in moral judgments. Indeed, what develops in the penultimate paragraph of the essay is not so much a diatribe against Popery as a reminder of the cultural differences, and prejudices, dividing France from England, with Hume, as a Scot and a philosopher, playing the impartial observer. Here again he seems to be showing that when we come down to particular examples in specified cultural contexts what we find is variety, even incommensurability, of taste rather than a universal standard.

II

Now if "Of the Standard of Taste" does indeed have the inconsistencies and contradictions I have

pointed out, one is left wondering how coherent it is, whether indeed it was meant to be coherent and therefore if it is a serious work at all. One might argue that it is a muddle, a series of unrelated and unrelatable arguments of different tendencies, Hume's random thoughts on the subject. It might be said that, being only an essay, such lack of rigour is to be expected. Hume's excuse is that he is writing in a leisurely way for leisure readers. But a far more interesting speculation is that although the essay may appear to lack rigour Hume in fact exploits this patchiness to ironic effect, by blandly confronting conventional arguments with their contradictions, leaving it to the percipient reader to see his serious meaning. This meaning must be sought in the combined effects of the ironies I have noted. The next stage is to see what tendencies these ironies have and upon what presuppositions they are based.

The treatment of the story from Don Quixote has certain implications. It suggests, for instance, the outlandishness of delicacy of taste, making it seem not only rare but also abnormal. Related to this is the acrimony Hume introduces into the story, which later passes into the aesthetic parallel, in which a deviant critic is made to see the error of his ways. In this competitive situation power seems to lie with the big battalions, especially after Hume has made the shift from the physical key and thong as vindication of the tasters to the much more abstract general rules of art. Tradition, convention, "what oft was thought" seem to rule in matters of artistic taste. But perhaps the reader ought to be struck by the disparity of the equivalence Hume asserts. For the obvious equivalent to the key and thong is surely some physical feature of a work of art, the evidence of what it is like, the cause of the sentiments felt in the critic. Instead, Hume ostentatiously avoids this possibility, thus ironically

suggesting the lack of such conclusive verification of a critic's view. As he says, if the key and thong had not been found, it would have been very difficult for Sancho's kinsmen to prove their superior taste. The implication is that since critics cannot really produce anything so conclusive their judgments are correspondingly open to dispute. The story as a whole suggests the crucial difference between physical tasting and aesthetic taste, while purporting to use this analogy conventionally.[6]

Hume's treatment of the definition of the ideal critic similarly undermines a conventional view, for his stress on the difficulties facing the critic and the consequent rarity of the good critic make the possibility of a standard of taste based on the views of several such critics seem more and more remote. Although it seems at first acceptable that good taste should be determined by the judgments of the best critics, by the time Hume has finished describing the qualifications of those critics he has made them seem, like Sancho's kinsmen, overrefined creatures, hardly human at all in their freedom from prejudice and individual propensities. The later passages, in which Hume restores preference and prejudice to importance, seem more realistic about human nature. The ironic effect is that the theory that ideal critics make the standard of taste is shown to be unworkable because it does not match reality, and this is confirmed by the escape into generalization at the crucial point where the argument demands that some particular definition of the good critic and his principles be given.

Yet there is perhaps a deeper irony in that the presentation of this line of argument seems so conventional and familiar, as though Hume is saying that, although it is inconclusive and cannot proceed beyond generalization, nevertheless this is the best argument of

its kind for the standard of taste, and is often used.[7] And if in fact the standard of taste has no more secure basis than this its application must owe its success not to any reasoned acceptance of it by critics and people of taste but to some kind of habitual acquiescience, never very thoroughly questioned. That there are critics who strongly influence the opinions of others is indubitable; that they conform to the ideal demanded by the theorists of the standard of taste is less certain. Perhaps the unfounded generalizations of the theorists merely add respectability to the eminence of those who occupy the commanding heights of culture.

The last few pages of the essay reintroduce prejudices and personal beliefs as influences on taste. The effect is to bring the debate about a standard back into relation with other topics, especially morality and religion. It is noticeable that this comes about as soon as the discussion becomes particular enough to mention actual writers, the Greeks, and actual publics, the French and the English. The standard of taste is brought down from an ideal, detached level of lofty debate and found to be at the mercy of other sets of beliefs. Indeed, Hume ironically makes a purely aesthetic approach seem trivial by restricting it to those aspects of art which are not morally serious. If art and criticism are to be really valuable they will have to enmesh with the moral values of their time and place and that will inevitably affect their status in relation to any supposed general rules. In such a conflict Hume seems clearly to see that success lies with the demands of the here and now, hence the cultural relativism of these concluding remarks in his essay.

Throughout there is vagueness about the constancy of the art-object and its value. Of course, an essay about the standard of taste is bound to concentrate on the mechanics of critical debate, rather than on the

precise nature of the aesthetic experience, but the impression remains that the contribution from the nature of the works of art themselves seems remarkably slight. They initiate the debate, but do not control it. The influences which seem more important are the personal and cultural variables, and these are quite fluid. Appeal may be made to general rules, or to supposed excellence of a critic or to moral standards to establish the quality of a work, but these are essentially temporary. They are open to variations and manipulation.

It is because of the significant influence of individual prejudices in judgments of taste that a major centre of interest in Hume's essay is the point of view of the critic. In his first, negative discussion of this Hume makes the idealistic demand that the critic renounce his own individual point of view and adopt one which is correct for the work in question and free from personal bias. This is very much a conventional approach and goes with the notion that the good critic bases his judgments on general rules of taste, which by definition are free from individual prejudice. But Hume seems to realise that such freedom is impossible. The point of view of a general rule is itself a generalization and need not, perhaps cannot, coincide with any individual's actual view-point. If a critic claims to occupy exactly the point of view demanded by a general rule, based on generalization of several different critics' opinions, then he has either succeeded in depersonalizing himself or hopes to convince others that he has. In other words, the neo-classical appeal to general rules of taste can in practice amount to either of two things: an unattainable ideal, to which critics strive genuinely but without expectation of full success, or an empty gesture intended to lend spurious authority to what is really personal opinion. In the latter case the appeal to general rules appears only as a social convention which disguises the

real state of affairs, the struggle by critics to establish and maintain their authority. Thus there may be another layer of irony in Hume's conclusion that "it is sufficient for our present purpose, if we have proved, that ... some men ... will be acknowledged by universal sentiment to have a preference above others" (279) in that this minimal statement may be all there is to say about the actual behaviour usually described as the operation of a standard of taste. The implication is that an established critic has put himself in a position to exercise a self-perpetuating influence on critical opinion.

Some plausibility is given to this reading by a slightly later paragraph in the essay, which describes the operation of a system of taste in which a few leaders generate opinions which are then propagated to become acknowledged verdicts:

> Though men of delicate taste be rare, they are easily to be distinguished in society, by the soundness of their understanding and the superiority of their faculties above the rest of mankind. The ascendent, which they acquire, gives a prevalence to that lively approbation, with which they receive any productions of genius, and renders it generally predominant. Many men, when left to themselves, have but a faint and dubious perception of beauty, who yet are capable of relishing any fine stroke, which is pointed out to them. Every convert to the admiration of the real poet or orator is the cause of some new conversion. And though prejudices may prevail for a time, they never unite in celebrating any rival to the true genius, but yield at last to the force of nature and just sentiment.... (280)

What is noticeable here is that the ascendent critic alone has the responses to the work of art, which he then teaches the dull majority to appreciate. The process is likened, in the use of the words "convert" and

"conversion", to the spread of religious belief, whose opposite is easily labelled "prejudice." The critic acts like a missionary, interpreting the truth of the work of art to a benighted public, who seem incapable of finding it out for themselves. Once persuaded, however, the public holds fast to its opinion and will not readily change; hence the lasting reputations of classical authors. Hume contrasts their long popularity with the revolutions in philosophy and theology, ironically omitting the point that philosophers and, one supposes, theologians are attempting to make statements of fact which may be true or false and judged accordingly. The claims of critics, however, are justified by general acceptance and their errors are forms of social deviance. Thus it is hardly surprising that "though a civilized nation may easily be mistaken in the choice of their admired philosopher, they never have been found long to err, in their affection for a favourite epic or tragic author" (280).

Hume's essay, then, ironically undermines the neo-classical beliefs it seems to support and reduces them to a disguise of the social machinery by which tastes are in fact created and changed.[8] Central to this is the acknowledged critic, who can, by virtue of his social position, mould opinion and create reputations. From the historical point of view, the interesting thing is that Hume himself seems to have attempted to do this. Having acquired a certain literary reputation, he tried to use his influence to promote several Scottish writers, Blacklock, Wilkie and his cousin John Home.[9] His motive seems to have been patriotism; he seems to have felt the need for a Scottish literary achievement. His method conformed closely to the outline quoted above. He wrote letters to friends, both in Scotland and England, asking, almost badgering, them to read the latest Scottish masterpiece, assuring them of its worth in encomia which

make pointed comparisons with classical literature. In addition, he urges them to bring the work to the notice of their friends, especially those of some prominence in English letters, and tries to encourage all concerned by repeatedly mentioning respected critics and their remarks on the work, as though to create the required influential body of opinion needed to lift the work into public attention.

All Hume's attempts were failures, although John Home's play Douglas did enjoy a vogue. His grasp of the public relations aspect of literary success, however, was prescient, for within a few years of his death was to come the astonishing rise of a provincial Scottish poet to national, indeed international, fame. The rise of Robert Burns's reputation, transmitted through the Edinburgh literati to London and beyond, is almost a model of Hume's conception of the critical process. So too is the rise to fame of Sir Walter Scott. Perhaps that suggests that "Of the Standard of Taste" is really an account of what is now known as the best-seller.

Finally, let me stress two important aspects of Hume's notion of taste. The first, upon which Peter Jones lays much emphasis, is the public nature of critical debate, the need for the critic to have his judgments accepted by others. In "Of the Standard of Taste" Hume inclines to a social view of his subject. Sancho's kinsmen are involved in a social activity in trying to convince others of their wine-tasting ability. Similarly, the great critic will have his delicacy all to himself unless he can persuade others to accept his expertise. The qualities of the good critic which Hume describes are publicly observable. The community can see for itself whether a critic is well-practised, whether he can make comparisons, whether he is free from prejudice and whether he has good sense (the only exception is delicacy of taste itself, and this, Hume suggests, goes

naturally with good sense). There is, of course, nothing here about untutored genius or natural sensibility or good taste as opposed to popular opinion. The good critic is synonymous with his reputation and the standard of taste he promotes reflects his society's cultural values.

For this reason there is a second aspect to Hume's theory of taste which is worth bringing out. Implicit in his cultural relativism is the plurality of taste. Historically and geographically there is not one taste but many. These tastes are, as it were, assessments of prevailing critical opinion and preferences in particular times and places. Hume's awareness of the differences between ancient and modern taste and between English and French taste in his own time (perhaps sharpened by his awareness of the differences between English and Scottish taste) leads him away from the conventional eighteenth-century view of taste as a mental faculty towards taste as an ordering concept, what Eva Schaper calls

> one among the concepts by which we bring order into the social and aesthetic history of art, design and culture.... The taste concept is used and needed by art history to make the mere catalogue of artistic achievements 'history,' and to make the mere assortment of past and present group phenomena amenable as ordered patterns....[10]

She goes on to say that "if on such a view we want to talk of 'standards of taste', we must see them as derivative from and created by art works as they form a historical order" (66). Hume would disagree; it is not the art works but the critics who create standards of taste, by imposing an order on them, and thus the crucial point is not the nature of the art-work but the nature of the critic and the society he reflects.

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1. Peter Jones, 'Hume's Aesthetics Reassessed," in Philosophical Quarterly 26 (1976), pp. 48-62.

2. David Hume, 'Of the Standard of Taste,' in Essays Moral, Political, and Literary, ed. T.H. Green and T.H. Grose, London, 1875, vol. I, p. 272. Subsequent references to this edition are given in parentheses in the text.

3. As far as I can establish, eighteenth-century translators of Don Quixote into English, for example, Motteux (1700) and Jarvis (1742), give the correct rendering, "little".

4. There seems to be a discrepancy here between the claim that the judgments of specially sensitive critics form the standard of taste and earlier statements that the general rules of art are the basis for a standard.

5. Hume indulges in a similar trick in the "Dialogue" appended to his Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals (1751), in which "Palamedes," using unrecognizable names, describes what seems to be an immoral and corrupt society, only to reveal that he has in fact been talking about the ancient Greeks. His aim is to show "that fashion, vogue, custom, and law, were the chief foundation of all moral determination." This seems to me not dissimilar to Hume's purpose in "Of the Standard of Taste."

6. For an uncritical use of the analogy between physical taste and aesthetic taste, see The Spectator 409, by Joseph Addison.

7. Very similar lines of argument are taken by Alexander Gerard in his Essay on Taste, 1759, by Henry Home, Lord Kames, in his Elements of Criticism, 1762, and in the seventh of Sir Joshua Reynolds's Discourses, 1776.

8. Mary Carman Rose, in "The Importance of Hume in the History of Western Aesthetics," in British Journal of Aesthetics 16 (1976), pp. 218-229, claims that Hume was innovatory in treating aesthetic questions without metaphysical preconceptions and that his views are "drawn from his study of what he takes to be de facto human responses to art objects" (220). She concludes that "Hume's suggestion that in seeking understanding of the nature and mode of being of beauty we turn from the object to the person who responds to it aesthetically informs much twentieth-century analysis of the status of being and of the meaning of the linguistic expressions in

which we talk about aesthetic experience and aesthetic objects" (222).

9. See E.C. Mossner, The Life of David Hume, Oxford, 1954, chapter 27.

10. Eva Schaper, "Symposium: About Taste (1)," in British Journal of Aesthetics 6 (1966), pp. 55-67.