

Frédéric Ogée (Ed.)

Sensing the World

Taste and the Senses in the Eighteenth Century (II)

LANDAU-PARIS STUDIES ON THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY
LAPASEC

Peter Wagner and Frédéric Ogée (Eds.)

Vol. 5

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Frédéric Ogée (Ed.)-
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To Robert Mankin (1952-2017)

Table of Contents

Foreword ix

Overture: The Great Sensorium 1
Frédéric Ogée

Sensate Knowledge

Mediating between the Senses and Reason:
Aesthetics and Vitalism in the High and Late Enlightenment 15
Peter Hanns Reill

Tactility

"Do not touch me": The Politics of Touch in the Eighteenth Century 33
Christoph Houswitschka

Palpation and Knowledge: Touch in 18th-century English
Literary and Medical Discourse 43
Marcel Hartwig

Hearsay

Handel's Oratorios and the Taste of Eighteenth-Century London Audiences:
Solomon as a Box Office Disaster 59
Christoph Heyl

Emotion, Affectation and Theatricality:
the Ethics of Hearing as a Matter of Taste 73
Pierre Degott

'For Whose Ear?' The Reception of Mozart's Music 93
Laurel E. Zeiss

Seeing Things Through

The Continuous Deception of Colours 107
Amélie Junqua

"A Work to wonder at": Seeing the English Landscape Garden 121
Frédéric Ogée

The Sense of Otherness

The Aesthetics of Chinoiserie and the Economy of Taste
in Eighteenth-century England 141
Vanessa Alayrac-Fielding

A man of sense surveys Europe: Edward Gibbon abroad, 1764 157
Robert Mankin

The Politics of Taste

'From head [...] to eyes': John Wilkes in the flight of taste 177
Madeleine Descargues-Grant

From Deadly Dullness to Murderous Anarchy: Good Taste and Morality 195
Robert Maniquis

Notes on Contributors 215

Index 219

Foreword

This volume comprises a selection of papers given at a conference hosted by the William Andrews Clark Library (UCLA, Center for Seventeenth- and Eighteenth-Century Studies) in April 2012. The editor wishes to thank the co-organisers of the conference, Peter Hanns Reill and Peter Wagner, as well as Barbara Fuchs, then Director of the Clark Library and all her staff, for making such an exciting event possible.

The conference marked the culmination of a series of research meetings exploring various issues relating to taste and the five senses during the Enlightenment period, involving American, French and German scholars. Those events took place over a period of three years at Universität Koblenz-Landau in Germany and Université Paris Diderot in France, within the LAPASEC (Landau Paris Symposiums on the Eighteenth Century) project, with generous support from the Deutsch-Französische Hochschule. A first collection of essays reflecting this long-term project was published in 2011 by Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, under the title *Taste and the Senses in the Eighteenth Century*.

The editor wishes to thank all the contributors for their remarkable input and team spirit over the years. The present volume hopes to reflect the remarkable variety and originality of the research undertaken within that project. Further LAPASEC meetings will take place in 2017 and 2018. WVT has already published four such LAPASEC volumes.

Special thanks to Nicole Theriault for taking such scrupulous care of the copy editing, and to Erwin Otto and everyone at WVT for their continuous support to this unique Franco-German scholarly enterprise.

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Overture: The Great Sensorium

Frédéric Ogée (Paris Diderot)

In 1757, the same year as Edmund Burke's *Philosophical Inquiry Into the Origins of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, David Hume published a collection of essays, one of which, hastily written, was entitled 'Of the Standard of Taste'. Starting from the commonplace truth ('too obvious not to have fallen under every one's observation') that there is 'a great variety of taste' prevailing in the world, Hume endeavours to discuss the origin and causes of that variety and to explain, in the wake of Hutcheson, the essential link between sentiment and evaluation.

One of the remarkable features of Hume's essay is the particular attention he pays to the *experience* of perception by the senses, and to the complexity of its operations. While arguing that 'true taste' can only be reached and claimed by those very few 'critics' able to monitor the parameters of practice, comparison and prejudice, Hume's main line of argument eventually brings out the irreducible nature of that very 'variety' of taste and, in true Enlightenment spirit, somehow validates it:

there still remain two sources of variation, which are not sufficient indeed to confound all the boundaries of beauty and deformity, but will often serve to produce a difference in the degrees of our approbation or blame. The one is the different humours of particular men; the other, the particular manners and opinions of our age and country. [...] One person is more pleased with the sublime; another with the tender; a third with raillery. One has a strong sensibility to blemishes, and is extremely studious of correctness: Another has a more lively feeling of beauties, and pardons twenty absurdities and defects for one elevated or pathetic stroke.

Rather than dismiss personal prejudice as a source of error, as had been done in previous decades, in particular by the 'Natural Philosophers', Hume posits the inevitability of character disposition and cultural difference, and invites to a constructive consideration of subjectivity in the evaluative process:

where there is such a diversity in the internal frame or external situation as is entirely blameless on both sides, and leaves no room to give one the preference above the other; in that case a certain degree of diversity in judgment is unavoidable, and we seek in vain for a standard, by which we can reconcile the contrary sentiments.

Just as Burke was suggesting the possibility of considering (and occasionally enjoying) the obscure, the irrational, the unexplainable, as the complementary side of human experience and understanding, Hume here refuses the dismissive closure of 'the proverb [that] has justly determined it to be fruitless to dispute concerning tastes', and suggests, most politically, how fruitful it may be to look for ways of 'composing' that variety, as his friend William Hogarth had recently put it in *The Analysis of Beauty* (1753).¹

1 David Hume, *Selected Essays*. Ed. Stephen Copley and Andrew Edgar (Oxford, 1993), 133, 149-150, 137. All further references to this edition. 'I mean here, and every where indeed, a composed variety; for variety uncomposed, and without design, is confusion and deformity', William Hogarth, *The Analysis of Beauty* [1753]. Ed. Ronald Paulson (New Haven and London, 1997), 28.

Ten years later, just weeks before he died, sermon writer and novelist Laurence Sterne published the first two books of *A Sentimental Journey through France and Italy*. After the nine boisterous volumes of *Tristram Shandy*, the travelogue, narrated by Parson Yorick (a name also used by Sterne to publish his Sermons), is a remarkably delicate attempt at reaching some form of equilibrium between the demands of body and soul, of impulse and reason, of the sensorial and the sensible, an equilibrium which the word 'sentimental' meant to encapsulate, and which is the present collection of essays' central subject on enquiry.

To understand the cruciality of Sterne's choice of the word, it is necessary to examine its semantic position at the crossroads of philosophical and moral discourse, of literature and aesthetics, but also of pathology and psychology. When *A Sentimental Journey* was being translated into German (by Johann Joachim Christoph Bode) in 1768, Lessing remarked that, as 'sentimental' was such a new and important word for the understanding of the novel's message, it should be rendered in German by a new word as well, and he suggested *empfindsam*, which, together with the corresponding noun *empfindsamkeit*, soon became a standard German word². Similarly, in France, Frénais, the first translator of Sterne's book, wrote in his 'Avertissement au Lecteur':

The title, 'A Sentimental Journey', which he has given to his observations announces their genre of writing clearly enough to spare me the necessity of defining it: you will find everywhere that amiable, philanthropic character, which is always true to itself, just as you will find, under the veil of gaiety and even sometimes buffoonery, traces of a true and tender sensibility which brings tears to your eyes at the same time as it sets you a-laughing. It has not been possible to render the English word 'Sentimental' by any expression that could match it, so we left it as such. Perhaps shall we find when reading it here that it would be a good idea to add it to our own language.³

The meaning of 'sentimental' and of the constellation of words around it (sentiment, sentimentalism, sentimentality, sensibility, sensible, sense, sensitive, sensitiveness, etc.) rests on a fundamental ambivalence. Both Lessing and Frénais were apparently under the impression that Sterne had coined the word. It seems, however, that Sterne used the word on the basis of the signification of the French word *sentiment* and played precisely on what he saw as a very appropriate double edge.⁴

For a good survey of the issue of taste, see George Dickie, *The Century of Taste: The Philosophical Odyssey of Taste in the Eighteenth Century* (Oxford, 1996).

- 2 Bernhard Fabian, "Tristram Shandy and Parson Yorick among some German Greats." In: *The Winged Skull. Papers from the LS Bicentenary Conference*. Eds. A.H. Cash and J.M. Stedmond (London, Methuen, 1971), 202.
- 3 My translation of: 'Le titre de *Voyage Sentimental* qu'il a donné à ses observations, annonce assez leur genre pour que nous nous épargnions la peine de le définir : on y verra partout un caractère aimable de Philantropie qui ne se dément jamais, et sous le voile de la gaieté, et même quelquefois de la bouffonnerie, des traits d'une sensibilité tendre et vraie qui arrachent des larmes en même temps que l'on rit. Le mot Anglois 'Sentimental' n'a pu se rendre en Français par aucune expression qui pût y répondre et on l'a laissé subsister. Peut-être trouvera-t-on en lisant qu'il mériterait de passer dans notre langue.' *Voyage Sentimental en France*, par M. Sterne sous le nom d'Yorick, traduit de l'Anglois par M. Frénais, Londres, 1789, 7-8.
- 4 For more information on this, see Erik Erämetsä, *A Study of the word 'sentimental' and of other linguistic characteristics of eighteenth-century sentimentalism in England* (Helsinki, 1951) and