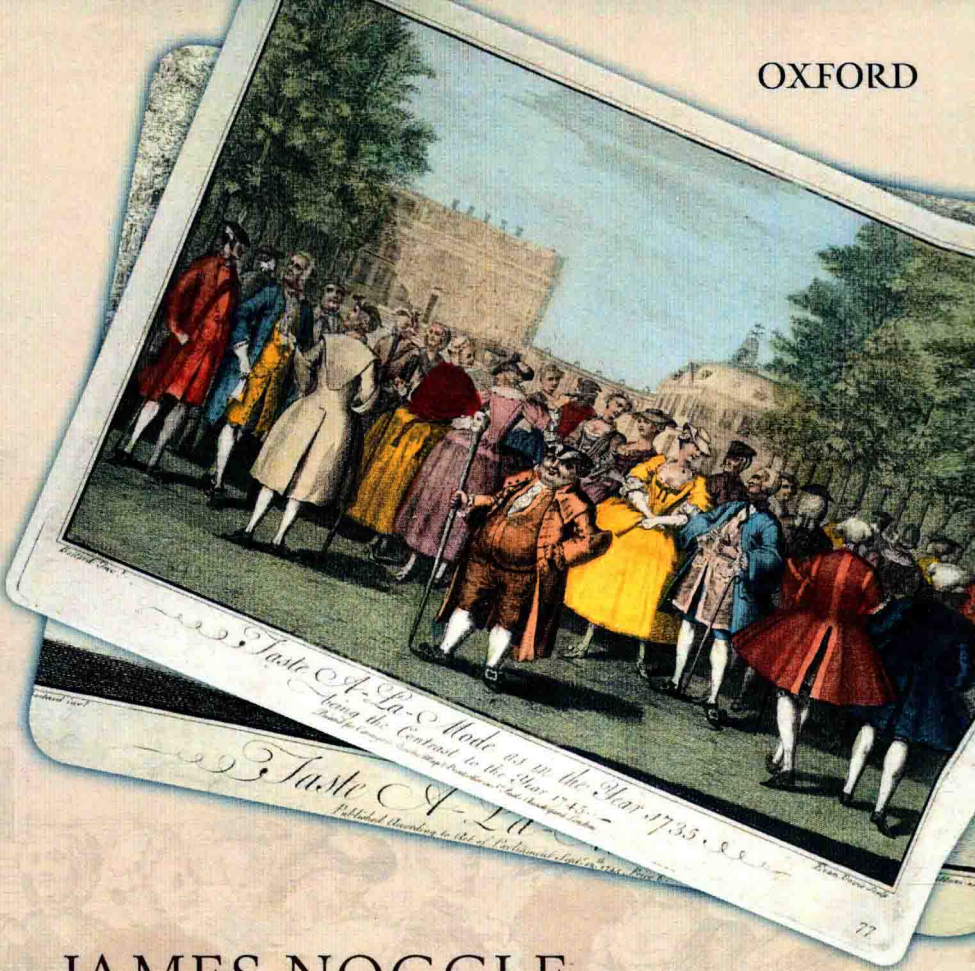


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JAMES NOGGLE

the Temporality of Taste

in Eighteenth-Century British Writing

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THE TEMPORALITY OF TASTE IN
EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY BRITISH WRITING

for Ferrell Mackey

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Introduction: The Progress of Pleasure

Taste, the most potent evaluative term in eighteenth-century British culture, plays a divided role in the period's writing because it works in two fundamentally contrasting ways in time. It is defined in philosophy and psychology as the capacity to instantaneously judge nearly anything: it lives in the moment, in particular sensibilities. As Joshua Reynolds puts it in one of his *Discourses* (1777), the term applies 'to that act of the mind by which we like or dislike, whatever be the subject'.¹ But in the century's social theory and historiography, taste names slowly evolved, collective processes and outcomes. The modern taste, the Gothic, classic, female, British, and Chinese tastes (and so on) are descriptors vital to eighteenth-century understandings of culture. Such accounts describe the rise and progress of various nations, social and political classes, and economies, shaped by vicissitudes of wealth and climate, local customs, and contests for national power. The gradual refinement of taste is especially seen as attending the commercial and political development of modern Britain. In the eighteenth century, these two temporal poles—intense immediacy and the long process—govern the discourse of taste together, neither negating nor fully harmonizing with each other. This divide intimately conditions the consciousness of individuals in the period. A temporal incongruity is built into the subject of taste.

The two temporalities are locked together in the word's basic lexical structure, informing its usage from the most deliberate philosophical attempts at definition to everyday talk. On the one hand, we say we have or lack *taste*, an ability to respond sensitively and discriminately to nearly any thing. This meaning is usually said to originate in mid-seventeenth-century

¹ *A Discourse, Delivered to the Students of the Royal Academy, on the Distribution of the Prizes, 10 December 1776*. By the president (London, 1777), 10. (This is the seventh of Reynolds's *Discourses*.)

Spanish (*gusto*) in Baltasar Gracián's courtier's writings,² soon spreading to French (*goût*),³ English, and other European languages. But on the other, the social phenomenon of having *a* taste or tastes—for certain things (things themselves in certain tastes)—also pervades the period's writing. These are predilections, acquired templates for recognizing, sorting, and ranking objects. In the eighteenth century, anyone speaking of taste as part of a durational social identity of a person or a group—of modern or Gothic, British or French or Chinese, masculine or feminine people—employs this sense of the word. Much older, it twines around and draws energy from the first and is no way subsidiary as a force in the period's discourse.⁴ This peculiarly double force of the word is the subject of this book. Rather than a neutral term that applies transparently to a set of basic cultural experiences, taste in its duplicity shapes such experiences, with effects that are manifest in any context it appears.

This introduction will describe the abiding structure of this divide through eighteenth-century usage. The first of its three sections, 'Times Upon the Mind', discusses how the two kinds of taste affect the constitution of subjectivity. The second, 'The Two Presents', shows how taste's temporal divide influences the period's concept of its own modernity. The final section, 'The Composite Fantasy', explores the particular ideological function of this divide, both in the period and against various theories of aesthetic ideology from recent years. These general characterizations of taste's role in constituting eighteenth-century subjectivity, modernity, and ideology will be made specific to particular contexts in ensuing chapters. I will explain, for instance, why Pope's enthusiastic taste in the early 1730s for Stowe, the greatest landscape garden of the eighteenth century, means something different from William Gilpin's for the same place in the late 1740s; and the specific social imperatives attending the use of taste by middle-class second-generation Bluestockings in the 1770s. This introduction's generalizations about the temporal structure of taste will contextualize the force and meaning of these particular instances, the way engaged historical agents forged a meaning for taste for themselves out

² See e.g. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd rev. edn., trans. rev. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Crossroad, 1989), 35, which dates the beginning of taste in this sense with Gracián.

³ See Michael Moriarty, *Taste and Ideology in Seventeenth-Century France* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 54–82, for a discussion of the various meanings of the word in its first appearances in French.

⁴ I do not aspire here to give a full account of the pre-history of the term. For a sketch of its roots in classical antiquity and the Renaissance, see Dabney Townsend, *Hume's Aesthetic Theory: Taste and Sentiment* (London: Routledge, 2001), 47–85.

of inherited and recurrent patterns of thinking, writing, talking, and acting.

Taste's two temporal poles are usually not conceived as incompatible in the period. Rarely is there any question of choosing one over the other. Rather writers see them as two different facts about taste, to be reconciled (or just accepted) in different ways, according to different exigencies. The relation may most basically be conceived metonymically. A moment of delight or discrimination, on a particular afternoon, at a picture exhibition or landscape garden, in a shop or drawing room, could be seen as a little piece of a historical process. An instantaneous feeling of pleasure could belong to both me and modernity. Such linkages are often overtly celebrated in the period and to an extent conform to current theoretical accounts of the social, even ideological work of taste, as a means of organizing and regularizing society. Most scholars have thought that by connecting discrete feelings to larger social structures, taste smoothly and tacitly enlists individuals' immediate impulses to support consumer culture, the market for luxuries, and the elitism of the commercial classes. The period's discourse itself conceptualizes many such links, but so explicitly and vigorously that the theoretical understanding of taste as an unknowingly obeyed 'aesthetic ideology' must be revised.⁵ One theme of the following discussion is how wrongheaded it is to see eighteenth-century taste as a 'denial of the social' (in Pierre Bourdieu's phrase).⁶ Rather taste is that region of discourse that allows us to declare that this or that instantaneous feeling makes us truly modern, or British, or refined, high class, or manly or feminine. It is a fantasy of recent scholarship that

⁵ Now canonical discussions of this topic tend to treat taste in the eighteenth century in its psychological function as a sensibly immediate faculty, not tastes as cultural entities with specific, contrasting, and varied historical careers. Taste for Terry Eagleton in *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990) amounts to the essentially spontaneous operation of subjectivity coded as 'bourgeois' in that its very freedom obeys the 'law of the heart' (31–69): 'What is at stake here [in taste and the aesthetic generally] is nothing less than the production of an entirely new kind of human subject—one which, like the work of art itself, discovers the law in the depths of its own free identity, rather than in some external power... The new subject, which bestows upon itself self-referentially a law at one with its immediate experience, finding its freedom in its necessity, is modeled on the aesthetic artifact' (19–20). Similarly Paul de Man in the essays collected in *Aesthetic Ideology* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), e.g. in his discussion of Schiller and Kant, argues that 'an immediate appeal of the moment' in Schiller subverts 'the aim of an ideological desire' (147) in contrast to the more radically destabilizing action of Kantian formalism. For a survey of the matter of aesthetic ideology in literary history from the eighteenth to the twentieth centuries, see George Levine (ed.), *Aesthetics and Ideology* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1994).

⁶ Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: a Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1984), 11.

taste in the eighteenth century exclusively pretends to be a realm of 'disinterested contemplation'.

But most importantly, an attention to the double discursive temporality of taste reveals a critical potential in eighteenth-century writing that has gone unseen by theorists from Joseph Addison to his many heirs among cultural historians today. This 'doubleness' permits astute writers in the period to pull taste apart, to explore the gaps between immediate pleasure and cultural progress, and so use taste to criticize the very ideological constructs that many scholars think it upholds. While I attend to the nationalistic, commercial, and presentistic contexts that bind feelings to beneficent historical processes, the chapters that follow primarily focus on moments of dehiscence, ruptures, themselves historical, which open between immediate feeling and history. These become apparent at times in spite or because of writers' best efforts to close the temporal gap in discourse, and at others due to more critical recognitions of tension, opposition, and incompatibility.

The leading examples analysed here hence do a double duty. Each chapter's principal text or set of texts has an eminence in the literature of taste. There is no more widely quoted poem about taste than Pope's *Epistle to Burlington*; Stowe is perhaps the most written-about landscape garden of the century; Hume's *History of England*, the most popular history of the nation; and so on. The prestige of the less famous texts treated here—Hannah More's *Essays on Various Subjects Principally Designed for Young Ladies* (1777), or William Beckford's *Biographical Memoirs of Extraordinary Painters* (1780), or Frances Reynolds's *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Taste, and of the Origin of Our Ideas of Beauty* (1785)—rests on my sense of their specially vivid evocation of taste's double function in the marriage market, in art collecting, or in fashion. But beyond merely representing the general discursive structure of the culture of taste, the texts on which my discussion centres produce unique, intense eruptions of the energy that this discourse in its dividedness contains. They reveal that taste plays a much more dynamic, unpredictable part in eighteenth-century writing and culture than scholars and theorists typically think.

This book, then, is a defence of taste. I defend it against cultural critics who reduce it to a force that functions merely ideologically, to consolidate the identities of gentlemen, Britons, and middle-class women. But I also defend taste against that version of aesthetics that seeks to isolate a special sort of pleasure from its social and historical circumstances. In its defence of the critical and cultural power of an aspect of aesthetics, this book resembles recent theoretical work in a variety of fields—literary theory,

philosophy, art criticism—that has argued for a ‘new formalism’,⁷ a return to beauty, or a revived aesthetic criticism. But my account differs from much of this work. Some have made claims for the socially beneficial power of beauty, or the aesthetic attitude, in some version or another, its inherent connection to justice, or to a radical politics, or at least to a mode of provisional engagement with social reality that resists instrumental domination.⁸

The present discussion claims less than that for taste in the eighteenth century. Taste’s compound structure, in normal cases, entails as ideologically blinded and dominative a socio-political attitude as its detractors have always insisted. But its divided status also permits critical views of its specific, ideologically motivated compositions, if not a radical undoing of them. Such critical views sometimes explicitly appear in the texts under consideration; in others, they open merely as moments of half-realized tension that we later critics must explain. In either case, their appearances demand both close reading—another emphasis this book shares with New Formalist analyses—and an attention to historical contexts to reveal the difference they make. Taste lives on the restless exchange between the moment of pleasure and its acknowledged place in history. Their ‘almost inseparable’ combination (in Hume’s phrase) introduces a friction in the operations of culture. Far from detaching taste from its social, political, and economic conditions, the discursive norm in eighteenth-century culture is to obsessively and variously write the pleasurable moment into the story of modernity, Britishness, the beneficence of market forces. The instances I focus on show how this very ardour to weave pleasure into progress made gaps in that story appear.

I. TIMES UPON THE MIND

Immediacy exercises a power in the discourse of taste that is excessive in a number of connected senses. Together these make immediacy’s discursive function, its determination of the nature and cultural power of judgements of taste in the eighteenth century, something larger and more open

⁷ See Marjorie Levinson, ‘What Is New Formalism?’ *PMLA* 122: 2 (2007), 558–69, for a survey of different developments, especially her useful distinction between ‘a new formalism that makes a continuum with new historicism and a backlash new formalism’ (559), the former ‘activist’ (560), the latter ‘normative’ (561).

⁸ For examples of these three motives, see respectively Elaine Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999); Isobel Armstrong, *The Radical Aesthetic* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000); and Jonathan Loesberg, *A Return to Aesthetics: Autonomy, Indifference, and Postmodernism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005).

to a multiplicity of ideological aims than historians have made it out to be. First, taste's immediacy exceeds the limits of the particular theories in which it is a key element, showing up in widely disparate cultural contexts and in philosophical projects otherwise contrived to oppose each other. Early on in France, the neoclassicist advocate of the *je ne sais quoi* Dominique Bouhours insists that such 'feelings of liking or disliking take shape in an instant'.⁹ Francis Hutcheson, in his development of 'moral sense' psychology, says in 1725 that 'some Objects are *immediately* the Occasion of this Pleasure of Beauty' (his emphasis).¹⁰ Later still, Alexander Gerard remarks in his *Essay on Taste* (1759) that 'the operations of taste are quick, and almost instantaneous'.¹¹

The last two show how the theme of immediacy traverses a central opposition often described to tell the history of taste in the eighteenth century. Both 'sense of beauty' theorists such as Hutcheson and associationists like Gerard, as well as less systematic essayists, journalists, and letter-writers, make a point of it. Though opposed to the school of Hutcheson, associationism is appealing partly because, as Peter Kivy remarks, it can 'preserve immediacy without recourse to innate senses'.¹² Immediacy pervades the period's discussion of the topic enough to be recognized by intellectual historians from Cassirer to Gadamer as taste's defining trait.¹³ The catholicity of this insistence on immediacy makes it what could be called a pre-theoretical feature of the discourse, both widely

⁹ Dominique Bouhours, *Conversations of Aristo and Eugene* (1671), in Scott Elledge and Donald Shier (eds.), *The Continental Model: Selected French Critical Essays of the Seventeenth Century in English Translation* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1960), 235.

¹⁰ Francis Hutcheson, *An Inquiry into the Original of Our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue; in two treatises* (London, 1725), 11.

¹¹ Alexander Gerard, *An Essay on Taste*, ed. Walter J. Hipple (Gainesville: Scholars Facsimiles and Reprints, 1963), 179.

¹² Peter Kivy, *The Seventh Sense: Francis Hutcheson and Eighteenth-Century British Aesthetics*, 2nd edn. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2003), 202. Remarking that Archibald Alison is unusually silent about immediacy, Kivy continues, 'the associationists, as we have seen, did not believe immediacy and association to be incompatible doctrines, either in ethics or aesthetics' (202).

¹³ Gadamer remarks that 'Good taste is always sure of its judgment. . . an acceptance and rejection that involves no hesitation, no surreptitious glances at others, no searching for reasons. Taste is therefore something like a sense . . .'; it 'cannot be separated from the concrete moment in which that object occurs and cannot be reduced to rules and concepts' (*Truth and Method*, 36, 38). Ernst Cassirer also maintains that immediacy lies at taste's foundations in the modern period: 'taste is no longer classified with the logical processes of inference and conclusion but placed on a par with the immediacy of the pure acts of perception—with seeing and hearing, tasting and smelling' (*The Philosophy of the Enlightenment*, trans. Fritz C. A. Koelin and James P. Pettegrove (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1951), 304).

accepted and poised to be explained in different ways by those who think abstractly about what taste really is.¹⁴

Immediacy's workings inside the subject of taste are furthermore often described in excessive terms. John Gilbert Cooper's *Letters Concerning Taste* (1755) affirm that 'a good TASTE is that instantaneous Glow of Pleasure which thrills thro' our whole Frame, and seizes upon the Applause of the Heart, before the intellectual Power, Reason, can descend from the Throne of the Mind to ratify it's [*sic*] Approbation . . .'¹⁵ In an essay of 1777, Hannah More similarly says that 'taste is an instantaneous decision of the mind, a sudden relish of what is beautiful, or disgust at what is defective, in an object, without waiting for the slower confirmation of the judgment'.¹⁶ Instantaneousness contributes to the drama and irresistibility of the mental experience of taste. Its importance in these discussions derives from its more general function as a foundational element of post-Cartesian psychology, though this too taste's immediacy exceeds. In Richard Rorty's famous characterization of Cartesianism, 'nothing is closer to the mind than itself';¹⁷ the spatial sense of immediacy—the absolute proximity of the mind to its ideas—coincides with the temporal sense cited above.

In the Lockean, 'empirical' version that would inform psychological and philosophical discussion through the British eighteenth century, the mind takes all sorts of objects into its 'Presence-Room', where every idea, including those of 'the several Tastes and Smells', appears as 'the immediate Object of Perception, Thought, or Understanding'.¹⁸ Taste's speed and nearness and their force, the way it thrills and seizes, are more overtly

¹⁴ See Wallace Jackson, *Immediacy: the Development of a Critical Concept from Addison to Coleridge* (Amsterdam: Rodopi NV, 1973), for an historical account of immediacy's career in English criticism. Jackson's story, which understands immediacy not just in its affiliation to what he calls "'taste" criticism' (58) but as a broader critical value, argues that immediacy first informs Addison's and Shaftesbury's attempt to use 'the aesthetic experience as a route to moral consciousness' (25) and then at mid-century becomes implicated in 'the psychological bases of taste' (52). His general contention that interest in immediacy helps ensure that 'eighteenth-century criticism consistently rejected the view that art has a limited, socially instrumental function' (53) is the sort of view that my insistence on taste's inherently double temporal status seeks to complicate.

¹⁵ John Gilbert Cooper, *Letters Concerning Taste* (London, 1755), 3.

¹⁶ Hannah More, 'Miscellaneous Observations on Genius, Taste, Good Sense, &c.' in *Essays on Various Subjects Principally Designed For Young Ladies* (London, 1777), 180.

¹⁷ Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), 59. 'Nothing is closer to the mind than itself' is Rorty's gloss of the heading of Descartes's 'Meditation II', 'Of the Nature of Mans mind, and that 'tis easier proved to be *then* our body'; *Six Metaphysical Meditations*, trans. William Molyneux (London, 1680), 11.

¹⁸ *An Essay concerning Human Understanding* (1700), 4th edn., Peter H. Nidditch (ed.) (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 121, 134.

remarkable than the ordinary immediacy of ideas always in the mind.¹⁹ Taste thus heightens the drama of the basic quality of all subjectivity. Immediacy had become the pre-eminent, absolute power that the perceiving mind could claim, and taste defines itself in post-Cartesian thought by out-absolutizing this absolute, while retaining its footing among basic forms of perception.

Another index of this force, as remarked by Cooper and More, lies in taste's capacity to exceed (by outracing) reason—one key to the authority of utterances within taste as a discourse. Of course reason's objects also appear immediately before the mind and can also come in a flash, but we arrive at that flash typically by means of steps.²⁰ As Cooper and More furthermore attest, taste reveals its quickness precisely in such cases as *also* engage the reason, which comes tardily along to 'ratify' taste's approbation, or *confirm* 'what is defective'. Reason then may be experienced not only as definitionally opposed but also as linked to taste, as it has a way of catching up to and adding its own, different authority to what taste has already decided. Winning this competition, taste attains its truly discursive function: its manner of authorizing its participants and their judgements, of shaping the way those judgements may be rendered, and how access to this authority may be policed.

This combination of tasteful immediacy's pervasiveness and its authoritativeness makes its ideological function more unpredictable and volatile than is often thought. Scholars have tended to view the sensitive force of taste as inherently tied to a particular socio-political agenda, such as the construction of the subject of 'bourgeois' ideology, the justification of 'the virtuous commercial state',²¹ or (more positively) the expression of 'demotic' as opposed to 'elitist' cultural aspirations.²² My purpose is not to

¹⁹ See Wallace Jackson, *Immediacy*, for an account of the decisive influence of 'the Lockean epistemology' (13) on the prestige of immediacy in critical discourse in England, especially 13–14.

²⁰ That is, the flash of reason evoked by ' $2 + 2 = 4$ ' always involves stepping from one side of an equal sign to the other. Syllogisms likewise acquire their force via the steps composing them. (You cannot just cut to the conclusion, or shout '4!', and get the force of rationality.)

²¹ Howard Caygill, *Art of Judgement* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), 50. Caygill sees taste in the English context and its mysterious, non-rational sensitivity to be designed for the justification of a 'Whig Hellenism' (44); see *Art of Judgement*, 38–102.

²² I pick up these descriptors from Peter de Bolla's *The Education of the Eye: Painting, Landscape, and Architecture in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), which employs them throughout; see especially 9–11. De Bolla focuses on a relatively brief period, the 1760s, and what could be seen as a specific version of the larger discursive divide informing taste. He describes visual culture as split between the 'regime of the picture', which involves categorization and habits of expertise (one version of the historical formation of tastes discussed here) and 'the regime of the eye' (which involves spontaneous pleasure and is one example of the instantaneousness running through the

deny the idea that taste substantially performs that range of socio-political functions, but to insist that its temporal structure has the flexibility to exceed them. *That* immediacy enhances claims to authority is inevitable. *Which* authority is an area of contestation. Pope invokes immediacy in *The Epistle to Burlington* to support an anti-commercialist brand of civic-humanist judgement; in Hume's *History of England*, a notion of tasteful immediacy supports his narrative of Britain's progress. Immediacy may underwrite authority in radically different ways at once. Hannah More in the 1770s affirms that women's especially immediate taste grants special authority to them and the 'middle-class' virtues they best embody, even while noticing that this immediacy subordinates their taste to men's more stolid deliberations. Such ideological flexibility does not mean taste's instantaneousness represents a prelapsarian purity that comes to be tainted when an interested purpose is added to it later. Rather, its innocence is always already disposed to take up such interests and perpetuates itself as a crucial part of taste's cultural power.

Immediacy may carry with it other, metaphysical implications, though it does not necessarily entail anything about the subject's essential 'liberty', its 'disinterestedness', or its 'spontaneity'—neither in the ordinary nor the Kantian senses of those latter two terms. In an associationist vein, Burke will argue in 1757 that a discerning taste becomes immediate after a lot of practice, just as reading 'with ease and with celerity' comes after the slow labour of learning to spell.²³ But the celerity remains, revealing the subject to be a site of unreflective 'operations' (Gerard's word), of capacities, innate or acquired, that are at work out ahead of our analytical awareness of what exactly our minds are doing. Even if these operations have been subject to education, shaped by improving or corrupting processes, their instantaneousness as such remains (in its special sense) innocent; the psychological functioning of our brute nature. To be trained to immediately and always prefer the best thing can never be quite the same as training in the best preferences. While some theories of taste (such as those relying on the association of ideas) may successfully reduce this difference

whole discourse). De Bolla associates the former with elitism and the latter with a demotic sharing of culture, though at times does qualify his sharp and evaluative opposition: 'It will appear at times that I regard the regime of the eye as worthy of emulation—as a "good" way to structure and police visibility—and the regime of the picture as a repressive or "bad" way'; he goes on to say the relation is 'more complicated' (10) than that. In widening my focus beyond de Bolla's, I will along the way demonstrate that taste's elitist, 'repressive' function takes many forms, and that very often the taste of immediate perception (the regime of the eye) is taken as evidence of the putatively naturally high social status of the subject in question (as Bourdieu also stresses).

²³ Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, ed. James T. Boulton (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968), 26.