

and location of the organic is, in the longer term, a fundamental decentering of anthropology.

However, after this period (broadly 1780–1830) the complexity of the organic analogy is progressively closed down. The later nineteenth-century transference of organicism into other spheres is still aware of the organism as connected to a life cycle. J. A. Symonds (who, unlike the New Critics, was well-read in Idealist science) follows Herbert Spencer in using evolution, which he defines as “the passage of all things ... from simplicity to complexity,” to think about other fields of knowledge. Symonds applies the resulting “biological view of the universe,” wherein the “whole scheme of things ... [is] regarded as a single organism,” to genres, while Spengler famously applies it to whole cultures. It is notable, however, that the possibilities for the contingent and singular opened up by Romantic organicism are here normalized, as the biological model becomes a way of predicting not only the “growth” of cultures and forms “in obedience to inevitable laws of self-expansion,” but also the fact that a form runs its course and “comes to a natural end” (Symonds I.6–7, 43, 46–57). Growth is therefore valorized over a “decadence” that is denied its autonomous creativity. And in our own time, at least in AngloAmerican thought, the theory of organic form has become associated with complexly unified structures, and because of this curious conflation of organism and “structure,” operates in a timeless oblivion to the fact that organisms are generated, born and die.

Tilottama Rajan
University of Western Ontario

Taste

Taste in a physical sense has been in English since C13, though its earliest meaning was wider than tasting with the mouth and was nearer to the modern *touch* or *feel*. It came from *fw taster*; *oF, tastare*, IT—feel, handle, touch. A predominant association with the mouth was evident from C14, but the more general meaning survived, for a time as itself but mainly by metaphorical extension. “Good taast” in the sense of good understanding is recorded from 1425.... The word became significant and difficult ... in C18, when it was capitalized as a general quality: “the correcting of their Taste, or Relish in the concerns of *Life*”

(*Shaftesbury*).... *Taste* became equivalent to *discrimination*: ‘the word Taste ... means that quick discerning faculty or power of the mind by which we accurately distinguish the good, bad, or indifferent (Barry, 1784).

Raymond Williams, *Keywords*

Not surprisingly, Raymond Williams has little use for the eighteenth-century sense of taste as discrimination, a mental faculty that can (and should) be trained by education and example. The *OED* tells us—in a definition Williams omits—that **taste** was originally equivalent to **test**—“a trial, test, examination,” as in Lear’s speech (1.2.47), “I hope for my brother’s justification he wrote this but as an essay, or taste of my Virtue.” The notion that taste is a kind of test of one’s ability to make judgments was bound to become a bugbear for a Marxist critic like Williams, for whom the very notion that “correct” taste can be acquired by the right kind of training represents nothing but the imposition of class privilege. “The idea of taste,” writes Williams, “cannot now be separated from the idea of the CONSUMER ... exercising and subsequently showing his taste” (315).

Indeed, late twentieth-century theory has witnessed a wholesale deconstruction of the notion of good taste. For Marxist critics like Janet Wolff and Terry Eagleton, taste is no more than “the power of certain classes and nations to select cultural artifacts for special attention and to denigrate as base or savage the artifacts both of popular, nonelite provenance and of alien cultures.”⁸ And Pierre Bourdieu offers a devastating critique of taste in his book *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (1984). As a practical sociologist, Bourdieu was able to demonstrate in this study and elsewhere that taste is never “natural”; it is always socially produced. What we call good taste in art, fashion or food is only that which is preferred by the dominant social classes. Enjoyment of classical music, by this account, is no different from the taste for fine wines or cuisine—a marker of a cultural elite. Accordingly, discussions of taste must shift from statements like “John has no taste when it comes to modern painting” to the analysis of the actual social, national, and gender determinants of taste in a given time and place. In the modern world, Bourdieu argues, systems of domination find expression in virtually all areas of cultural practice, including preferences in dress, sports, food, and music, as well as literature. “Taste,” Bourdieu concludes, “classifies and it classifies the classifier” (Johnson 1–2).

8 See Caroline Korsmeyer, “Taste: Modern and Recent History,” in *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics*, especially p. 361. Dabney Townsend’s essay on “Taste. Early History” is also very valuable and I draw on it here for my discussion of Aristotle and Kant.

MARJORIE PERLOFF is Sadie Demham Patek Professor of Humanities, Emerita, at Stanford University and currently Scholar-in-Residence at the University of Southern California. Her most recent books are *The Vienna Paradox* and *Differentials: Poetry, Poetics, Pedagogy*, which won the Warren-Brooks Prize for 2004. Her *Wittgenstein’s Ladder* is appearing in Portuguese translation in Brazil in 2006.

As a demonstration of who likes what art or who listens to what music and why, Bourdieu's account is largely convincing. But its implication that there is therefore nothing inherently artistic, nothing that makes one work of art more successful than another flies in the face of simple common sense. For, like it or not, there is simply no way of talking about poetry or painting, architecture or fashion design without resorting to expressions of taste and the making of judgments. And even if cultural conditioning does play a major role in the creation of taste, those so conditioned continue to want to debate the virtues and shortcomings of this or that artwork and by no means agree even when they do belong to the same class and have undergone the same education. Deviance, it seems, is more interesting to most of us than group identification: one wants to know, for example, why John Ashbery prefers the Thomas Lovell Beddoes of *Death's Jest Book* to Byron or Shelley, or why William Carlos Williams never quite caught on in England. And, like it or not, we believe in experts, in connoisseurs who help us to improve our tastes. Indeed, taste remains, despite all moral strictures, endlessly fascinating.

Then, too, Bourdieu, Williams, and Eagleton notwithstanding, the theory of taste was by no means the invention of the eighteenth century; taste played a major role in aesthetic from Aristotle through the Renaissance to Kant. In the *Metaphysics*, for example, Aristotle assigns an important position to the five senses as the starting point for all cognition. Sensation, he argued, inevitably leads to memory, and it is only memory, based on a sequence of sensations over time, that produces the knowledge of a thing as well as the ability to make judgments about it. In the *De Anima*, Aristotle suggests that "What can be tasted is always something that can be touched, and just for that reason it cannot be perceived through an interposed foreign body.... In the case of taste [as opposed to sight, hearing, and smell] there is no medium" (Aristotle 2: 671–75). Hence taste is perhaps the most immediate and discriminating sense, and we must be attentive to its workings.

But in Aristotle, taste is not yet treated metaphorically, that is, as the equivalent of judgment. For this equation to be fully operative, we must turn to Kant, whose *Critique of Judgment*, oddly not so much as mentioned by Raymond Williams, remains the key locus of all discussions of taste. In the *Critique*, Kant defines taste as "the faculty of judging of the beautiful" and further separates judgment into interested and disinterested forms. Disinterested judgment is independent of the practical and theoretical considerations that belong to science and morality. Thus the judgment of

taste, from simple statement (e.g., “This flower is beautiful”) to complex formulation (e.g., “This poem is beautiful”) is a statement of autonomy, in that it is at once based on individual feeling and judgment and yet lays claim to cognitive faculties shared by all, in short, to universal agreement. How the individual and the universal come together is never made quite clear—Kant takes this connection to be the “free play” of the disinterested mind that is not under the sway of a given concept or theory—but the relation of the two is said to occur under the same circumstances in all human beings.

It is this claim, of course, that Marxist theorists like Williams and social constructionists in general could not accept. But although the Kantian theorem is not amenable to proof of any sort and although Bourdieu argues persuasively that taste is always dictated by class or some other classificatory principle, the fact remains that everyday life consists of the making of judgments dependent on our own particular tastes—tastes which turn out to vary in interesting ways even within the nuclei of class, race, nation, or gender. And aesthetic discourse, accordingly, becomes the effort of one person or group of persons to persuade the others that his or her taste for a given object is more reliable or valuable than someone else’s.

Thus, even as poststructuralist criticism has been extremely valuable in unmasking the pretensions of bourgeois taste-making and uncovering its real sources, it cannot explain why we don’t in fact agree on the particulars of art *even when we do belong to the same social group*. Bourdieu may be right to argue that the “love” of Mozart is a bourgeois marker that doesn’t apply to the working class, which may prefer a very different form of music, but he can’t really show why, say, Wittgenstein, whose class in Viennese society adored Schumann, disliked this composer so much, he left the concert hall while a Schumann piece was being played, only returning afterward for the Beethoven or Brahms.

Wittgenstein himself, interestingly enough, thought “scientific” generalizations about taste were absurd. “You might think Aesthetics is a science telling us what’s beautiful,” he remarks in the *Lectures on Aesthetics*, “almost too ridiculous for words. I suppose it ought to include also what sort of coffee tastes good” (11). And again, this time in *Culture and Value*, “If I say A has beautiful eyes someone may ask me: what do you find beautiful about his eyes, and perhaps I shall reply: the almond shape, long eye-lashes, delicate lids. What do these eyes have in common with a Gothic church that I find beautiful too? Should I say they make a similar impression on me?” (24e).

Is Wittgenstein’s position thus one of pure skepticism? No, for like Bourdieu, he places the emphasis on the cultural determination of aes-

thetic judgments. “To describe what you mean by a cultured taste, you have to describe a culture.” For “Suppose Lewy has what is called a cultured taste in painting. This is something entirely different to what was called a cultured taste in the fifteenth century. An entirely different game was played” (*Lectures* 26, 29). And Wittgenstein admits that he himself has little understanding for African art and hence cannot pass judgment.

But *within one’s own cultural frame*—within, in other words, one’s own particular language game—one inevitably does make aesthetic judgments. And some, Wittgenstein holds, are better than others:

Some people have a taste that is related to an educated taste as is the visual impression of a purblind eye to that of a normal eye. Where the normal eye sees clear articulation, the weak one sees blurred patches of colour. (*Culture and Value* 68e)

This, we might note, is especially true for the avant-garde. The “purblind eye” sees nothing in, say, Duchamp’s readymade called *Fountain*. “Anybody,” we hear people scoff in museums, “could make this!” The Duchamp readymades need to be understood in the context of their time; if one knows nothing about Courbet, the Impressionists, Picasso, and early twentieth-century center science technology, the readymades seem meaningless but the eye can be trained to understand and enjoy the work. Knowledge is what’s at issue. The same is true for a poet like Gertrude Stein. Once readers understand that her decompositions very much make sense in their own ways, they develop a taste for them. For the lay reader, however, the work is “nonsense.” It is less a matter of social class or even schooling than of being exposed to alternate ways of reading a text like *Tender Buttons*.

Wittgenstein would have us see that a theory of taste is not equivalent to its actual exercise. No aesthetic theory, whether Kant’s on the one hand or Bourdieu’s on the other, will ever be entirely satisfactory. Yet taste can be shaped by knowledge and experience. Consider John Cage’s famous composition *4 ‘33’*, first performed by his friend, the pianist-composer David Tudor in an outdoor setting in Woodstock, New York in 1952. The piece consists of four minutes and thirty-three seconds in which the performer plays nothing. Tudor merely signalled its commencement by lowering the keyboard lid of the piano; he then raised it for each “movement” and finally lowered it again. During the piece itself, he turned the pages of its “score” at proper intervals. The audience, even the sophisticated first-night “new art” audience at Woodstock, by all accounts laughed and booed at this example of “nothingness.” But those who knew Cage’s own writings and

related musical compositions, understood that in his “silent piece,” Cage was using the frame to make his audience aware of the natural sounds in their environment and was forcing people to reconsider the whole nature of a concert piece, a performance, a structure, and so on.

4 ‘33” has since become a modern classic; it has been widely written about and continues to be “performed” long after Cage’s death. Not everyone, of course, will develop a taste for it—many so-called sophisticated concert audiences continue to make fun of it—and it is hard to take the piece as a class marker or indeed a work of art that obeys Kant’s injunctions regarding the relationship of the one to the many. Yet the taste for Cage’s conceptual music and writing continues to grow; and it continues to be subject to explanation and education. Taste, in any case remains central to discussions of the aesthetic, provided we recognize that its nature is not amenable to proof, quantification, or theoretical formulation.

Marjorie Perloff
Stanford University

Violence

Raymond Williams reminds us that violence has both a straightforward meaning and a latent complexity. The former is associated with the use of open and direct physical force, as in the phrase “robbery with violence.” The latter involves a political inflection and distinction such that violence is associated only with the illegitimate use of force. When it is carried out legitimately, other terms are deployed to describe what would otherwise be seen as the same kind activity. Whereas criminals or “men of violence” use violence, the police or the “security forces” restore law and order. The underlying structure of thought on which this conceptually loose but significant distinction is made is the subject of this comment.

It is useful to begin with the historical context identified by Williams in his original comment. Violence is associated at the individual level with “force,” “vehemence,” “impetuosity,” and through “violation,” with ideas of morally wrong breach of a custom or interference with a sense of dignity. It is also used at a wider level as part of a general description of a state into which a society might fall: one “Of filthe and of corrupcion / Of violence and oppression” (quote from Williams 330). It is in relation to this last usage that modernity introduces the latent complexity mentioned above, for it