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Literature, Morals and Utility: Bentham, Dumont and de Staël

In the 1770s, the French minister Turgot discussed the utilitarian doctrines of Helvétius in a series of letters with his friend Nicolas de Condorcet, a mathematician and a philosopher. After reminding his correspondent that calls to increase pleasure and minimise pains perverted morals, he added that the principle of utility was unable to create emotion or appeal to aesthetic sentiment. ‘The proof, he concluded, is that men are moved by novels and tragedies, and that a novel would not please if its characters conformed to the principles of Helvétius, or rather put them into practice.’¹ In Turgot’s statement, like in most contemporary discussions on taste, moral values were strongly entwined with aesthetic judgement. Like morals, taste was shaped by society and allowed shared values to circulate. Peaceful manners, the rise of polite society, conversation between the sexes and the refinement of taste were therefore marks of a high degree of civilisation. Like many of his contemporaries on both sides of the Channel – including, as we shall see, Helvétius himself – Turgot believed that these values had reached a high point in Enlightenment sociability. But, according to him, the weight given to individual pleasures in utilitarianism threatened to subvert the consensus on which society rested.

As recent work by Malcolm Quinn and Philip Schofield has shown, the notion of taste, as an aesthetic and moral value, provides a good entry point into the issues raised by Benthamite utilitarianism. More specifically, it highlights the specific juncture between individual enjoyment and collective utility: against most of his contemporaries, Bentham contended that taste was strictly an individual matter, that it did not depend on any collective standard.² He was fond of repeating that ‘there [was] no good or bad taste’.³ For this reason, his view that ‘prejudice apart, the game of push-pin is of equal value with the arts and

¹ Jean-Antoine-Nicolas de Condorcet and Anne-Robert-Jacques Turgot, *Correspondance inédite de Condorcet et de Turgot: 1770-1779*, ed. Charles Henry (Geneva: Slatkine Reprints, 1970), 144.

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² Malcolm Quinn, *Utilitarianism and the Art School in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2013); Philip Schofield, ‘Bentham on Taste, Sex, and Religion’, in *Bentham’s Theory of Law and Public Opinion*, ed. Xiaobo Zhai and Quinn, Michael (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 90–118; Malcolm Quinn, ‘Jeremy Bentham on Liberty of Taste’, *History of European Ideas* 43, no. 6 (2017): 614–27.

³ Schofield, ‘Bentham on Taste’, 92. According to John Stuart Mill, Bentham was heard regularly repeating this view, see *ibid.*, 116. Etienne Dumont made a similar remark, see below.

sciences of music and poetry'⁴ has long been taken as revealing the shallowness of his aesthetic thought and his refusal to take the arts seriously.

Did the principle of utility as such challenge the conventions of taste, as Turgot believed, and as Bentham's statement seems to confirm? In what sense can utility be substituted to taste as a ruling principle? This article contends that Bentham's position may be better understood by locating it within late Enlightenment debates in France, with which Bentham was directly acquainted.⁵ This is by no means the only context in which Bentham's views could or should be read, as Malcolm Quinn's recent article on Bentham's aesthetic views in relation to Hume's makes clear, but the European dimensions of these debates deserves to be taken into account. Indeed, Bentham's works of the 1780s were infused with references drawn from sources written in French as well as in English. They were also targeted both to anglophone and francophone readers. Revealingly, the manuscripts in which Bentham's ideas on taste were presented were written in two versions, one in French and one in English.⁶

Shortly after completing *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, Bentham went back to the question of pleasure in the context of a series of bilingual manuscripts on the topic of reward written around 1782. What he planned to do with these sheets is not entirely clear.⁷ It is there however that the most complete statements about aesthetic pleasures are to be found. None of this material was published before 1811, in French, under the editorship of Etienne Dumont, as part of *Théorie des récompenses*.⁸ It was in turn translated into English in 1825 as *The Rationale of Reward*.⁹ Though discussions of aesthetic pursuits are relatively short, they cast meaningful light on Bentham's position. The first part of this chapter therefore looks at the place of morals and aesthetics in these manuscripts. It locates it in the complex field of aesthetic reflection in the French Enlightenment, especially among materialist thinkers frequently acknowledged by Bentham as his sources.

⁴ Jeremy Bentham, *The Complete Works of Jeremy Bentham*, ed. John Bowring (Edinburgh: William Tait, 1843), II, 253.

⁵ For a methodological discussion of the issues at stake in displacing Bentham's thought to a French-speaking context, see Emmanuelle de Champs, *Enlightenment and Utility. Bentham in France / Bentham in French* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 11–7.

⁶ For this reason, the original language of quoted passages is systematically noted in this paper.

⁷ The first allusions to an 'Essay on reward' are to be found in a letter to Lord Ashburton in 1782. Bentham continued to work on the topic throughout his stay in Russia, until 1787. Jeremy Bentham, *The Correspondence of Jeremy Bentham, Vol. 3, 1781-1788*, ed. Ian R. Christie (London: Athlone Press, 1971), xxxi, 182, 524.

⁸ Jeremy Bentham, *Théorie des peines et des récompenses*, ed. Etienne Dumont (London: B. Dulau, 1811).

⁹ Jeremy Bentham, *The Rationale of Reward*, ed. Southwood Smith (London: Robert Heward, 1825); here quoted from the Bowring edition, *The Collected Works of Jeremy Bentham*, vol. II.

The complex connection between utility and beauty not only shaped Bentham's own understanding of the moral value of taste in general and of literature in particular, but also early readers' own reactions to the material. What is more, it also impacted the reception of Bentham's ideas in the 1810s and 1820s, a time when the foundations of moral and aesthetic judgement were being profoundly reshaped throughout Europe. The second part of this chapter therefore relies on two case-studies which trace the early reception of Bentham's views by two francophone Genevans, both active agents of cultural transfers in Europe. It explains first on which terms Etienne Dumont read and edited the material, and then how Bentham's aesthetic ideas came to be known and discussed by Germaine de Staël in the 1810s.

1. Bentham's aesthetic individualism

A. The arts in Bentham's morals and legislation

In chapter V of *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, written in 1780, Bentham did not single out aesthetic sentiment as a source of pleasures or pains. Music only deserved a mention but the passage focused on the pleasure of performance rather than on that of the audience.¹⁰ Similarly, the description of the 'pleasures of a country scene', taken as an example of complex pleasures, was centred around the enjoyment afforded by the sights, smells and sounds of the natural world, not those of representation.¹¹ However, the *Introduction* being mostly concerned with laying the foundations for a utilitarian reform of penal law, the omission would not have been significant if Bentham had not himself, in other texts, drawn attention to the place of the arts and taste within a utilitarian system.

In the manuscripts on reward of the 1780s, Bentham examined the various ways in which the legislator could make use of the 'matter or reward' (or, in other words, money and honour) to procure services or encourage actions that were beneficial to general utility. The force of reward alongside that of punishment in influencing human actions had been throughout neglected by legislators and moralists, he argued. In such statements, Bentham followed Helvétius, whose influence he consistently acknowledged.¹² If human actions were caused by individual interest, i.e. the search for pleasure and the avoidance of pain, then these

¹⁰ Jeremy Bentham, *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, ed. James H. Burns, H. L. A. Hart, and Frederick Rosen (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 43c.

¹¹ Bentham, 49-50 note p.

¹² Frederick Rosen, 'Helvétius, the Scottish Enlightenment, and Bentham's Idea of Utility', in *Classical Utilitarianism from Hume to Mill* (London: Routledge, 2003), 82-96; de Champs, *Enlightenment and Utility*, 42-45.

were also the instruments the legislator and the moralist should use to shape individual behaviour. For Helvétius, ‘the purpose of moralists is nothing but to determine the use that these rewards and punishments must be put to, and the help they might afford in uniting personal and general interests. This union’, he concluded, was ‘the masterpiece which morals should have in view.’¹³

By using reward and punishment together, the legislator and the moralist would be able to shape behaviour and achieve the conciliation of individual and collective interests. In the 1780s, Bentham was thus keenly aware of the fact that the ‘negative’ means in the hands of the legislator (legal sanctions) had to be supplemented by ‘positive’ incentives to change people’s behaviour. Helvétius’s close friend the baron d’Holbach, whose extensive writings were widely acknowledged as a summary of materialist thought in the 1770s, especially insisted on the power of reward as a way of shaping behaviour. That Bentham might have read his books can be surmised, even if there is no direct reference. In his manuscripts on reward, he discussed one of d’Holbach’s examples on the power of reward to encourage virtue, borrowing an example quoted in *Système Social* (1773): the custom of awarding an honorary title to the most virtuous young woman in the French village of Salency.¹⁴

In the manuscripts on reward, Bentham used the field of the fine arts as a matrix to understand how official institutions could shape the public sphere in matters which did not fall under penal sanction. First, the arts furnished a means to reinforce the positive impact of actions which benefited both the individual and society without punishment and, conversely, bring out the disastrous consequences of actions which were detrimental to the individual and to society.¹⁵ In that line, Bentham’s praised Hogarth’s series ‘Gin Lane’ as an effective means of illustrating the noxious effects of alcohol consumption – the engravings were praised not for their beauty, but for their expressiveness and didactic clarity.¹⁶

The State could also act in more indirect ways. As Bentham pointed out, the Royal Society of Arts established in 1754 in London provided a good example of how reward could be meted out to shape behaviour. On the one hand it bestowed rewards in the shape of prizes

¹³ Claude-Adrien Helvétius, *De l’esprit*, ed. Gerhard Stenger and Jonas Steffen (Paris: Champion, 2016), 189.

¹⁴ ‘Système Social’, Paul-Henri Thiry d’Holbach, *Système social. La morale universelle. Catéchisme de la nature. Œuvres philosophiques 1773-1790*, ed. Jean-Pierre Jackson (Paris: Coda, 2004), 286n. Bentham took up the example at UC 142, f.119.

¹⁵ This aspect of his thought has attracted interest in recent years, due in part to the parallel development of ‘nudge theory’. See Stephen Engelmann, “‘Indirect Legislation’, Bentham’s Liberal Government”, *Polity* XXXV, no. 3 (2003): 368–88; Michael Quinn, ‘Jeremy Bentham, Choice Architect: Law, Indirect Legislation, and the Context of Choice’, *History of European Ideas* 43, no. 1 (2017): 11–33; Anne Brunon-Ernst, *Utilitarian Biopolitics. Bentham, Foucault and Modern Power* (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2012).

¹⁶ Quinn, ‘Jeremy Bentham, Choice Architect’, 28 and note.

and medals to artists and inventors whose works were worthy of being commanded, and on the other, through open competitions on specific themes, it invited the best minds to submit works on a given topic. Bentham suggested that his two-pronged approach could be put to different purposes beyond artistic achievement: to invite discoveries and improvements in the sciences, for instance – he had in mind the rewards promised by the Board of Longitude, or honours and distinctions rewarding individual achievements in any branch.¹⁷ Bentham also laid down rules for the judicious use of subsidies and to avoid prevarication and nepotism, two abuses of reward. This led him to consider whether public money should be devoted to the encouragement of the fine arts in general, and therefore to address the issue of their utility.

Bentham defined the place of the fine arts within a broader typology of useful pursuits. Within ‘Arts and Sciences’, four broad categories could be delineated: ‘arts and sciences of agreement’, ‘arts and sciences of curiosity’, ‘of immediate utility’ and of ‘remote utility’. As purely agreeable pursuits, the fine arts belonged to the first category:

By arts and sciences of agreement, I mean those which are ordinarily called the *fine arts*; such as music, poetry – or at least most branches of poetry –, painting, sculpture and the other arts which aim to imitate figures, architecture and gardening considered in their ornamental branches, &c. I must here use &c., for this is not the place to embark on metaphysical distinctions. One could also comprise games of all kinds under this head.¹⁸

In including games in the same category as the fine arts, Bentham followed Montesquieu, whose fragmentary ‘Essay on Taste’ had been posthumously included by Diderot and D’Alembert in the *Encyclopédie*.¹⁹ He also clearly presented their utility as limited: altogether, the fine arts occupied only one of the four categories of the Arts and Sciences: the other three were reserved for useful inventions and scientific discoveries.

But Bentham made it clear that as sources of pleasure, the fine arts had *some* utility and should be encouraged by the utilitarian legislator.²⁰ He insisted: ‘[o]ne must not feel justified in regarding them as devoid of all utility: on the contrary, no [other activities] have

¹⁷ ‘In the language of the London Society of Arts reward *ex promisso* is termed a *premium*: while a reward given *ex post facto* is distinguished by the name of *bounty*. This nomenclature however could not be generally adopted without confusion: put in the language of the legislator the term *bounty* is applied to rewards given *ex promisso*: The bounties upon exportation and importation for example are all in this predicament.’ UC 142, 128. Remarks on the Board of Longitude are at UC 142, 94 (French).

¹⁸ UC 142, f. 248 (French), *Théorie* II, 215-6, *Rationale*, II, 253. Throughout this paper, when multiple versions have been found, references are first to the manuscripts, then to the corresponding passages in *Théorie des Récompenses* and lastly to *Rationale of Reward* (Bowring edition).

¹⁹ ‘Goût’, *Encyclopédie, ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences et des arts*, vol. VII, 1757, p.761.

²⁰ See also, Schofield, ‘Bentham on Taste’, 92–3.

more claims to be called useful. For what is useful, if not that which gives pleasure?’²¹ He had already expressed similar views in manuscript notes a decade earlier, when he had examined Rousseau’s argument against the frivolousness of theatre-going. Rousseau – here paraphrased by Bentham – had argued against D’Alembert that ‘every amusement that is useless is an evil to a being to whom life is so short and time so pretious [sic.]’. Bentham flatly set out to ‘deny the truth of [this]’ and insisted that no pleasure was to be considered evil.²² In singling out Rousseau in this instance, Bentham attacked one form of asceticism (the deliberate prohibition of one kind of pleasure).²³

While allowing the legislator to acknowledge the role of the fine arts in procuring pleasure, Bentham’s presentation also set strict limits to his intervention. Indeed, in *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, he had reminded his readers that the faculty to derive pleasure from this or that pursuit depended on ‘circumstances influencing sensibility’, which varied from one individual to another.²⁴ The role of the government was therefore not directly to provide pleasure to individuals but to support contributions which had a beneficial impact on the public in general, and not those which procured pleasure to one patron or amateur, or to only one class of people.²⁵ In including games in the category of ‘agreeable arts and sciences’ alongside the fine arts, Bentham not only refused to carve a specific space for aesthetic sentiment, he also opened up the social sphere of enjoyments.

B. Taste, interest and the people

Like Rousseau’s, Bentham’s approach to art was marked by a strong anti-aristocratic concern, but, as will become apparent later, on very different grounds and with very different implications. First, the radicalism of Bentham’s refusal to admit a hierarchy between pleasures and to set apart aesthetic sentiment deserves to be explored. It is useful to compare his position with that of Helvétius. Starting from similar considerations that the fine arts procured pleasure to the senses, Helvétius believed that the refinement of taste provided evidence of progress in our ability to experience pleasure. Describing the pleasures of the ‘philosopher’ in a posthumously published poem entitled *Le bonheur*, he wrote that the

²¹ UC 142, f.248 (French), *Théorie*, II, 216; Bentham, *Rationale*, II, 253.

²² Jeremy Bentham, *Preparatory Principles*, ed. Douglas G. Long and Philip Schofield (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 351; See Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Letter to D’Alembert and Writings for the Theatre*, ed. Allan Bloom, Charles Butterworth, and Christopher Kelly (Dartmouth College: University Press of New England, 2004), 251–351.

²³ Bentham, *IPML (CW)*, 17–21.

²⁴ Bentham, *IPML (CW)*, 51–73.

²⁵ *Théorie*, II, 67; *Rationale*, II, 212–3.

philosopher ‘does not abandon the pleasures of the senses, but he masters them. Poetry, Music, Painting, Sculpture and Architecture are for him new sources of pleasures.’²⁶ In Helvétius’s view, the object of any utilitarian legislator should thus be to increase sensibility to the fine arts in order to maximise pleasure.

In *De l’esprit*, Helvétius explored the political implications of the idea. The junction between the aesthetic sphere and that of politics was effected seamlessly through the concept of ‘interest’, which, as Reinhard Koselleck pointed out, operated in both fields: in Helvétius’s words, a painting pleases us because it *interests* us.²⁷ What’s more, in a political system organised around the principle of interest, common tastes were a guarantee that the citizens shared similar interests or sources of pleasures. Enlarging the audience of the arts therefore served a political function. On the contrary, fragmented audiences revealed that no common ground existed between citizens:

In governments [in which] citizens are not united by a common interest, the diversity of personal interests must necessarily go against universal applause. In such countries, one can only reach limited success, because the passions depicted appear more or less interesting to particular audiences.²⁸

This argument could support a criticism of aristocratic government: for instance, d’Holbach answered the common opinion that the arts had prospered under Louis XIV by insisting that nobody had cared to spread artistic taste among the people, which had ultimately jeopardised the safety of government by dividing the rich and the poor.²⁹ The implications of Helvétius and d’Holbach’s statements were that, to ensure a cohesive and politically stable society, artistic taste should be shared and open to as many people as possible. The role of the legislator was to promote a common interest, i.e. a common appreciation of the beautiful.

In eighteenth-century terms, as the polite sphere was believed to be expanding, this translated into a debate on the usefulness of artistic criticism. Critics were important agents in creating a common taste and acted as intermediaries between the artists and the public, they played a central part in the artistic education of the people. But Bentham had only harsh words for those who sought to bestow praise or blame on specific art forms, or art works:

If these principles are correct, we shall know how to estimate those ingenious rather than useful critics who, under pretence of purifying the public taste,

²⁶ Claude-Adrien Helvétius, *Le Bonheur* (London: s.n., 1772), 33.

²⁷ Reinhart Koselleck and Ernst Wolfgang Orth, ‘Interesse’, in *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe. Historisches Lexikon Zur Politisch-Sozialen Sprache in Deutschland*, ed. Otto Brunner, Werner Conze, and Reinhart Koselleck, vol. 3 H-Me (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1982), 305–65.

²⁸ Helvétius, *De l’esprit*, II, XIX, 169.

²⁹ d’Holbach, *Système Social*, 256.

endeavour successively to deprive mankind of a larger or smaller part of the sources of their amusement. These modest judges of elegance and taste consider themselves as benefactors to the human race, whilst they are really only the interrupters of their pleasure—a sort of importunate hosts, who place themselves at the table to diminish, by their pretended delicacy, the appetite of their guests.³⁰

Criticising critics was a familiar argument within debates on taste in the period. For instance, in his *Philosophical Dictionary*, Voltaire lambasted such an influential figure as Boileau, whom he accused of using the means of criticism to ridicule the work of his rivals.³¹ However, Voltaire did believe that there was such a thing as good taste, whose prescriptions could be said to be universal, and which could be spread by ‘*connoisseurs*’. The taste of the public, even of the vulgar, could and should be improved – it marked the refinement of a society: ‘only connoisseurs can reclaim the favour of the public, and this is the only difference between the most enlightened and the most brutish nations’.³² In the same line, d’Holbach lambasted ‘those impudent critics, full of bad faith, armed by low jealousy, who seem to declare war on talent’, but he encouraged ‘fair, instructive and polite’ criticism.³³ For Diderot, attacking critics served to reclaim taste for the people themselves, emphatically not to subvert the idea of a common taste. The public was the sole arbiter of taste, experts and critics only served to distract them from the expression of their preferences. The political implications of such a view became clear when the French revolution turned against the aristocratic patronage of the arts and closed down the academies in 1793.³⁴

Bentham’s position ran along different lines: by imposing a given standard of taste, critics robbed everyone of their enjoyment. They ruined the pleasure of many and caused the financial ruin of authors thrown out of fashion by their dictates.³⁵ His strong focus on individual appreciation and his refusal to admit of one common standard of taste set him apart. Indeed, for him, the arts played no role in the structuring of a political public sphere, they only illustrated the confiscation of power by an aristocracy, be it that of the nobility or

³⁰ *Théorie*, II, 219–20; *Rationale*, II, 254.

³¹ ‘Criticism’. Voltaire, *A Pocket Philosophical Dictionary*, ed. Nicholas Cronk (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 112–6.

³² ‘Goût’. Voltaire, *Œuvres alphabétiques II*. ed. Cronk, Nicholas and Christiane Mervaud, (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2016), 511–2.

³³ d’Holbach, *Système social*, 631.

³⁴ Charlotte Guichard, ‘Taste Communities. The Rise of the Amateur in Eighteenth-Century Paris’, *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 45, no. 4 (2012): 519–47.

³⁵ Bentham, *Théorie*, II, 220–1.

that of self-proclaimed critics.³⁶ In this specific case, Bentham implied, utility lay in the pursuit of individual pleasures, not of collective ones.

C. Poetry, truth and morals

The specificity and radicalism of Bentham's position both stand out in his treatment of poetry. It was the only artistic pursuit he examined in detail in the manuscripts, concluding not only that pushpin was in most cases as good as poetry, but that it was to be *preferred* to poetry: '[p]oetry is useful insofar as it amuses. But the game of push-pin, if it amused as much, would be preferable'.³⁷ Such remarks were not confined to the section on the fine arts. More than other arts, poetry was presented as intrinsically corrupting, especially because of its closeness to political power. Indeed, through flattery and exaggeration, poets encouraged the lowest instincts in rulers, as Louis XIV's bloody wars testified. Voltaire himself, whom Bentham otherwise admired, was made partly responsible for encouraging Frederick II of Prussia's military conquest in Silesia through elegies and poems. Poetry was dangerous because it inflamed sentiments instead of appealing to reason and led sovereigns away from considerations of utility. What's more, the embellishments required by poetry were structurally contrary to truth:

The felicity of life and the perfection of happiness and virtue depend upon the accuracy of our information and the rectitude of our judgements with relation to several topics we are interested in. But the tendency which poetry has to promote such accuracy and that rectitude is not very remarkable: on the contrary the tendency it has, at least in most branches, in all perhaps, but the dramatic, seems to be rather on the other side.³⁸

On poetry, Bentham's usual references appear to be inverted: he sided with Plato, who famously ejected poets from the Republic and conflicted with Helvétius, who had pointed out that poetry and eloquence were positive when they reinforced the impressions made on the public and added moral value and efficiency to discourse.³⁹ D'Holbach was more cautious and underlined the fact that eloquence was a double-edged sword which could be used to

³⁶ The democratic implications of this view were explicitly drawn out later in the Constitutional code, see Schofield, 'Bentham on Taste, Sex, and Religion', 95.

³⁷ UC 142 f. 249, 240; *Théorie*, II, 217; *Rationale*, II, 253.

³⁸ UC 142, f. 241.

³⁹ Helvétius, *De l'esprit*, 398–9.

further false principles as well as good ones.⁴⁰ Bentham went much further and claimed that poetry was intrinsically synonymous with falsehood and distortion.

Bentham's insistence on the closeness between poetry and falsehood can also be connected to his epistemological thought. Indeed, the analysis of poetry, as a mode of discourse, played a pivotal function in eighteenth-century aesthetics. As Hans Aarsleff recently explained, after the work of Etienne de Condillac it was widely believed that primitive language was the direct product of emotion and sensation, not of reflection. What we perceive, we perceive at once. According to Condillac, early languages reflected this simultaneousness. Unlike contemporary languages which depend on analysis and reflect logical relations in complex grammatical sentences, the first language of man directly mirrored immediate perceptions and conveyed several ideas and sentiments simultaneously. This pseudo-historical hypothesis translated into an epistemological theory which contended that ancient languages like the Greek and, to a lesser extent Latin, relied more than contemporary ones on the grammatical 'inversion' of parts of speech and were therefore more expressive and closer to poetry.⁴¹

In contrast, when Bentham wrote on the origins of language, he suggested another narrative. For him, the true unit of meaning was not emotion or sensation, but a thought process which associated analysis and synthesis and resulted in the production of a proposition. The basic unit of meaning was therefore a logical thought process. Instead of praising Latin and Greek for their direct appeal to emotions, Bentham commanded the English language, which fulfilled 'all the purposes of discourse taken together'.⁴² Beauty in a language, which he did not exclude altogether, had to do not with conciseness but with the existence of numerous parts of speech expressing accurate logical relations.⁴³ Poetry was therefore remote from the original working of the mind and prone to distort reality. In singling out poetry as the *locus* of lies and exaggeration, Bentham denied it could have any moral value.

⁴⁰ d'Holbach, *Système social*, 622.

⁴¹ Hans Aarsleff, 'An Essay on the Context and Formation of Wilhelm von Humboldt's Linguistic Thought', *History of European Ideas* 42, no. 6 (2016): 733–35; see also the remark that, for Diderot, 'the study of inversion becomes the transition to aesthetics' Jacques Chouillet, *La formation des idées esthétiques de Diderot (1745-1763)* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1973), 170.

⁴² Jeremy Bentham, 'Appendix IX. Hints towards the Composition of an Elementary Treatise on Universal Grammar', in *Chrestomathia*, ed. M. J. Smith and W. H. Burston (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), 395.

⁴³ Bentham, *Chrestomathia*, 407. It is however worth noting that, alongside this theory of language, Bentham also proposed another one, which attributed an important role to images: meaning could also be conveyed through the method of 'archetypation', that is to say by conjuring up an image and appealing to the imagination as well as to reason.

Bentham's refusal to ascribe more than a minimal moral value to the arts went beyond his indictment of the mendacity of poetry. More generally, he believed that love for the fine arts was harmless and beneficial only to the extent that it drove people away from boredom and therefore from violence.⁴⁴ This opinion consistently ran against the idea that the fine arts had a civilising effect on the morals of a nation by shaping common taste between the people. The force of this argument was regularly reasserted in the eighteenth century as narratives about the formation of taste followed those of the formation of morals: in both cases, philosophers needed to account for the way in which individual appreciation gradually came to espouse common standards or common views. This issue was especially pressing for empiricists who started methodologically from individual perception: if everything proceeded from sensation, how could one reach beyond one's own feelings? In morals, Bentham consistently opposed appeals to a 'common sense' or a 'moral sense' and grounded moral appreciation in the estimation of the greatest happiness of the greatest number.⁴⁵ In aesthetics – and probably also in sexual morality – he refused to make such a move and only accepted individual pleasure as a standard.

Again, this refusal set him apart from Helvétius and d'Holbach who tried to reconcile calls to utility with artistic appreciation. D'Holbach claimed, for instance, that 'a beautiful action of Antiquity pleases us because we feel its utility, because we put ourselves in the place of the person who did it and of those who witnessed it, and because we wish those we live with would do the same.' His explicit conclusion was that 'good taste in morals does not differ from good taste in the arts.'⁴⁶ In this, he was doing little more than repeating a common eighteenth-century trope which could also be illustrated by Rousseau's statement that 'the good is nothing else than the beautiful put into action'.⁴⁷ This was a standard pillar of the debate on the moral role of novels, which irrigated the second half of the eighteenth century both in France and in Britain and provided the background to Turgot's position stated in the introduction to this paper.

The vocabulary of 'moral taste' allowed d'Holbach to examine the origins of moral ideas through a running comparison with aesthetic ones. Natural sensibility differed from one person to the other: the diversity of original tastes was related to the differences in the organs of perception, be they external (good or bad eyesight, or an ear for music) or internal (the

⁴⁴ UC 142, f. 248; *Théorie*, II, 219; *Rationale*, II, 254; On this point, see also Schofield, 'Bentham on Taste', 94.

⁴⁵ Bentham, *IPML* (CW), 26d.

⁴⁶ d'Holbach, *Système Social*, 57–8.

⁴⁷ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Julie, or the New Heloise. Letters of Two Lovers Who Live in a Small Town at the Foot of the Alps*, ed. Philip Stewart and Jean Vaché (Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 1997), 47.

configuration of our brain). It followed that ‘men disagree as much on their assessment of physical beauty as on that of moral beauty.’ However, education and customs trained and shaped individual organs, making it gradually possible to reach agreement in aesthetic and in moral matters with our contemporaries. In other words, we become ‘connoisseurs in morals, just as we become connoisseurs in painting, sculpture, architecture and so on.’⁴⁸ Bentham consistently rejected such a parallel.

In considering the fine arts Bentham was throughout intent on keeping taste on the level of the individual, refusing to consider it as a social, or collective form of appreciation and therefore also refusing to establish any hierarchy between them – the criterion of ‘the greatest happiness of the greatest number’ came here to be applied strictly to one individual. In the field of artistic taste, the principle that everyone was the best judge of his or her interest was rigorously applied. In asserting this, Bentham derived radical implications from a strictly individualistic understanding of pleasure and pains. His theory of taste was however subordinate to a theory of social and political organisation, which limited the anarchical consequences of such a strictly individualistic perspective. However, one may contend that a complete individualism predominates in Bentham’s aesthetic thought and that its materialistic implications deserve to be further studied.

2. The early reception of Bentham’s aesthetics: Rousseau, Dumont and Madame de Staël

A. Bentham and Rousseau: Etienne Dumont’s attempt as synthesis

Dumont received Bentham’s manuscripts on Reward (probably both in French and in English) in July 1794.⁴⁹ These sheets were not included in the first batch of writings he published in 1802 but came out nine years later in *Théorie des peines et des récompenses* (1811). Dumont conducted most of the work on this material in the summer of 1807.⁵⁰ He came back again to the manuscripts for the third French edition that appeared in 1826, but without making any noticeable change to the sections on the fine arts.⁵¹

⁴⁸ d’Holbach, *Système social*, 57–62.

⁴⁹ Jeremy Bentham, *The Correspondence of Jeremy Bentham, Vol. 5, 1794-1797*, ed. A. T. Milne (London: Athlone Press, 1981), 50.

⁵⁰ ‘I have almost finished revising *Rewards*’, Dumont wrote to Samuel Romilly on 18 June 1807 (Mss Dumont, 17, f. 206).

⁵¹ Dumont claimed he had made numerous small improvements to the style of the volume, see letter to Frédéric Soret, 13 February 1825, Mss Dumont, 34, f.79.

Despite Dumont's usual disclaimer in the preface that he had partly rewritten Bentham's words, a comparison with the manuscripts reveals that he remained faithful to the original for his chapters on the fine arts. He reproduced passages in which Bentham warned against the lure of poetry as an instrument of falsehood. He included the fragments on the civilising tendency of games as well as Bentham's criticism of literary critics in general and Addison in particular. Dumont's version even expanded Bentham's attack on satirists.⁵² In an editorial footnote he however hinted at a possible disagreement with Bentham's position. 'I could not,' he wrote, 'follow the author's position that as far as literary tastes are concerned there is no right or wrong.' But he did not develop his own views there and in the rest of the footnote he in fact supported Bentham's views and adapted them to the cultural references of his francophone readers. Wasn't it true, he wrote, that 'plays by Hardi and Garnier' gave audiences as much pleasure as those by the great Corneille?⁵³ This contrasts with Dumont's own reaction to the passages, as he recalled in his notebooks:

In his treatise on *Rewards*, B[entham] severely attacks literary critics, especially Addison's *Spectator*, who under pretence of reforming taste destroyed a variety of harmless muses: under his mace, he crushed the small literary family of doggerel rhymes, acrostics, poems cast into the figures of eggs or wings, of witticisms, &c. What has he done? asks Bentham, what has it led to? He has deprived those who enjoyed these witticisms of innocent pleasures, he has treated them as idiots and men of depraved and bizarre taste, he has ridiculed them and abandoned them to the contempt of society.⁵⁴

After thus acknowledging Bentham's position, Dumont insisted on the *usefulness* of literary criticism, as a genre. Indeed while Bentham believed that critics inflicted pain on the authors they attacked, Dumont argued that bad publicity was better than no publicity, authors 'should not', he wrote, 'fear criticism, but [fear] being forgotten'. Critiques prompted refutations and counter-critiques, bad reviews 'brought larger audiences to the theatre houses'. Such a view of the literary field where reputations were being fought over is interesting, because Dumont's argument was not primarily about literary merit in itself, but solely about the excitement and animation brought by literary quarrels which agitated the

⁵² Bentham, *Théorie*, II, 217–24.

⁵³ Bentham, *Théorie*, II, 221n.

⁵⁴ Ms Dumont, 21, ff.90. The reference is to Joseph Addison, 'True and False Wit', *The Spectator*, no. 62 (11 May 1711). For Bentham and Addison, see Malcom Quinn's contribution to this volume.

literary sphere in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.⁵⁵ By looking at the effects of controversies on sales, Dumont took Bentham's utilitarian reasoning into a new direction. He also legitimated the idea that the literary field was central to understand the formation of public opinion, an idea which, as we saw, Bentham rejected.⁵⁶

But Dumont also explored other avenues. He examined Bentham's view that 'good taste' was synonymous with 'prejudice', and that 'there is no good or bad taste, or rather that they are all good provided they are not contrary to utility'.⁵⁷ This rephrasing of Bentham's position was only partially correct, for Bentham refused to connect public utility and taste systematically, as we saw. To trace the origin of Dumont's ideas, we need to turn to the second biggest intellectual influence on his thought: Jean-Jacques Rousseau. In *Letter to D'Alembert*, as we saw, Rousseau had famously argued against the frivolousness of the theatre which perverted the moral and political character of citizens. In his notebooks, Dumont attacked, like Rousseau, the moral debasement brought about by games and entertainment:

Imagine two equally talented men, the first having been raised in a society in which these [literary] frivolities were in vogue, and the second in a society in which only serious and philosophical works were valued. How different from one another will they be twenty years on! The first will have turned into a Pantalone-Phoebus, a frivolous speaker, the second will be generally useful, or prepared to be useful.

Throughout, Dumont attacked petty literature in terms that would be entirely alien to Bentham and were reminiscent of Rousseau's contempt. Both believed that the pleasure of frivolous amusement was intrinsically corrupting: society needed 'labourers', not 'rope-dancers' and 'conjurers', Dumont argued. Where Bentham praised the harmless pleasures of pushpin, Dumont lambasted games that 'prolong childhood into the mature age'.

Dumont did not, any more than Rousseau, consider that artistic pleasures were intrinsically corrupting. There were good and bad poems, good and bad novels and taste was the crucial discriminating principle at work. Bad poetry was simply formal, it set out to triumph of self-imposed constraints, it was nothing but a show of cleverness. But true poetry, however, had a strong moral dimension: 'when its object is to bring the harmony of style to

⁵⁵ For an overview, see Antoine Lilti, 'Querelles et controverses, Abstract', *Mil neuf cent. Revue d'histoire intellectuelle*, no. 25 (2007): 13–28.

⁵⁶ On this connection, see Céline Spector, 'Les Lumières avant les Lumières: tribunal de la raison et opinion publique', *Révolution Française.Net*, 2009.

⁵⁷ MS Dumont, 21, f. 91v.

perfection, to present ideas with more details, to decorate them with deeper images, to help memory by regularly returning sounds or rhythmical measures, it deserves an honourable place among the works of the human mind.’⁵⁸ As we saw, there was nothing new about those arguments which praised poetry as the perfection of the use of language to persuade, to memorise and, above all, to feel. On this point too, Dumont’s manuscripts prove simultaneously how much he imbibed from Bentham and how far he still remained from wholeheartedly accepting the moral implications of utilitarianism.

In another notebook (undated like the first but also evidently written while or shortly after he was working on Bentham’s manuscripts on reward), he proposed an original synthesis. On the one hand, he followed Bentham in attacking writers who made use of literary flourishes to present their own feelings and opinions as ‘eternal, unshakeable, immortal truths like God and nature’, and acted like ‘despots’.⁵⁹ Such mercenary writers corrupted the morals of the people. Dumont provided several examples of how literature could confirm prejudices and blind reason: Voltaire’s antisemitism and anticlericalism, Rousseau’s hatred of the rich, Sieyès’s attack on the nobility. Like Bentham, Dumont believed that acting according to utility meant renouncing persuasion in order to appeal to reason and facts. Simultaneously, Dumont also continued to hold that style could be sublime when it was ‘devoid of all allegiance to the two false principles’ of asceticism and sympathy/antipathy. Some works, indeed ‘can pass as beautiful in very different times’. Style was good when it reinforced good ideas.⁶⁰ His own remarks on what constituted good style reinforced this view: it avoided superfluous words and phrases, it did not add gratuitous ornaments nor indulged in unnecessary repetitions.

Brought up in Geneva, Dumont had imbibed Rousseau’s writings and held them as a standard as far as style was concerned. After his death in 1829, the *Bibliothèque de Genève* published two short articles drawn from his manuscripts on Rousseau.⁶¹ In these pages, Dumont drew a sharp distinction between Rousseau as political philosopher and Rousseau as writer and moralist. As Richard Whatmore explained in a recent article, like many Genevan reformers of his generation, Dumont rejected Rousseau’s radical political views.⁶² His

⁵⁸ MS Dumont, 21, f. 92-3. In eighteenth-century satires, ‘*Pantolon-Phébus*’ was a pompous character with ludicrous literary aspirations.

⁵⁹ MS Dumont, 22, f. 26.

⁶⁰ MS Dumont, 22, f. 26-27, and Dumont 47, f.7.

⁶¹ Etienne Dumont, ‘Observations sur le caractère et les écrits de Rousseau’ and ‘Observations sur le style de Rousseau’, *Bibliothèque Universelle de Genève. Nouvelle Série* 2 (1836): 128–35 and 298–313.

⁶² Richard Whatmore, “‘A Lover of Peace More than Liberty’”. The Genevan Rejection of Rousseau’s Politics’, in *Engaging with Rousseau. Reaction and Interpretation from the Eighteenth Century to the Present*, ed. Avi S. Lifschitz (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 4.

embrace of Bentham's ideas in the mid-1790s furnished him with new arguments to attack Rousseau's political philosophy. Borrowing Bentham's vocabulary, he argued that Rousseau had been enslaved by the 'sentimental principle, the principle of sympathy and antipathy, a dogmatic and cutting principle demanding blind acceptance, while it itself refuses to bow to the standards of common reason.' Refusing to define his words, Rousseau remained, Dumont argued, 'ill-at-ease in abstract writing', unable to prove his assertions, preferring sentiment to analysis. Following passion and not reason had direct consequences on Rousseau's politics: this led him to 'prefer savagery over civilisation' and to claim hastily that 'all governments on earth are based on usurpation'.⁶³

Dumont's itinerary has sometimes been described as a move 'from Rousseauism to Bentham'.⁶⁴ If we follow Richard Whatmore, in politics, Dumont's estrangement from Rousseau's ideas seems to have been clear since the aftermath of the Terror, in the mid-1790s, though he was frequently 'drawn back'⁶⁵ to his works and engaged with them throughout his life, as countless references in his manuscripts testify. What has not been noticed, however, is how long Dumont maintained his admiration for Rousseau's literary achievements. This, as we saw, could not be separated from a moral evaluation of his philosophy.

For Dumont argued that in literary and moral matters, Rousseau's weaknesses turned into strengths as his stylistic genius approached perfection. Rousseau knew how to bring situations to life, how to 'rise from ideas to images and from images to feelings'.⁶⁶ Dumont pitted the dry and subversive style of the *Social Contract* against the charming scenes of *Julie, or the New Heloise*, which placed its characters in the midst of moral quandaries and described their reactions. In praising the moral examples found in the novel, Dumont embraced Rousseau's view that morals could be acquired by imitating virtuous models (be they fictitious or real) rather than by applying systematic reasoning: '[I]et us take for ourselves great examples to imitate rather than vain systems to follow', Rousseau had written.⁶⁷ By 'presenting' his characters 'as if one knew them', Dumont pursued, Rousseau struck the right chord. This method, by which scenes were presented to the readers, served to

⁶³ Dumont, 'Observations sur le caractère', 130; Against this 'impracticable' philosophy, Dumont found in Bentham the model for 'a science of legislation separate from the discussion of forms of government, the irresolvable issue that had caused dreadful upheaval in civil life across the European mainland.' Whatmore, 'A Lover of Peace', 12.

⁶⁴ Cyprian Blamires, *The French Revolution and the Creation of Benthamism* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 207.

⁶⁵ Whatmore, 'A Lover of Peace', 1.

⁶⁶ Dumont, 'Observations sur le style', 299.

⁶⁷ Rousseau, *New Heloise*, 47.

‘imprint moral truths into their memories’ because ‘a dry maxim will not penetrate the heart, it cannot be received unless it is united to an action in which we feel an interest.’⁶⁸ Rousseau himself had described this process through an analogy between the field of morals and that of aesthetics:

One practices seeing as well as sensing, or rather exquisite vision is but a delicate and refined sentiment. So it is that a painter beholding a beautiful landscape or standing before a beautiful tableau is enraptured by objects that are not even noticed by the common Observer. How many things are there which one perceives only through sentiment and which one cannot account for?⁶⁹

Surprisingly for an admirer of Bentham, Dumont praised Rousseau’s morals at length, describing it as an alliance of ‘Spartan’ inflexibility and of human fallibility. In *The New Heloise*, Rousseau had indeed shown how even the most virtuous soul, that of Julie, could sometimes lapse, which made her virtue more admirable. But separating Rousseau’s morals from his politics, as Dumont did, went against the avowed intention of the author who believed that fiction was a proper vehicle to illustrate not only morals, but also the origins of political society, or the role of luxury in national economy, to give but a few examples.⁷⁰ It is to be noted that in his private papers, Dumont operated a similar disjunction in the case of Bentham’s morals, which he rejected while continuing to praise his model of a social science.

Whether Dumont’s understanding of the political and moral implications of Rousseau and Bentham’s works was correct or not is not in question here. His own writings on the subject however confirm the difficulty of apprehending Bentham’s aesthetics, even for one of his closest readers, and fitting it within the shared culture of the late Enlightenment. Dumont’s own attempt at synthesis is interesting because it shows how increasingly difficult it became to make sense of Bentham’s position after Rousseau and in the early Romantic period. This comes further to light when we examine the evolution of Germaine de Staël’s ideas on utilitarianism and the arts. Her views were considerably more influential than Dumont’s because they were widely publicised, unlike his which were kept private. Much more openly than Dumont, she claimed that the moral and aesthetic flaws of utilitarianism directly undermined its political and methodological prescriptions.

⁶⁸ Dumont, ‘Observations sur le style’, 303–5.

⁶⁹ Rousseau, *New Heloise*, 48.

⁷⁰ The connection is however sometimes problematic, for instance in the case of the vindication of social and political hierarchies in *The New Heloise*.

B. Madame de Staël, style against utility

Madame de Staël's writings, which spanned the period from 1788 to 1817, represented another step in the changing articulation of aesthetics and politics. The daughter of Jacques Necker (twice finance minister to Louis XVI and a Genevan banker), Germaine de Staël embraced a literary career and soon became one of the most influential French-language writers of her generation. Her first published work, *Letters on the writings and the character of Jean-Jacques Rousseau* (1788) provided in more ways than one a model for Dumont's own essays on Rousseau. Like Dumont, she considered Rousseau's politics impracticable, but she abundantly praised his style in close connection with his moral thought.⁷¹ *The New Heloïse*, for instance, was admirable because it was 'a great moral idea put into action and made dramatic'.⁷² As Dumont later did, she subscribed to the idea that morals came to life in Rousseau's fictions and was served by a style which appealed to sentiments rather than to reason. But she went further and argued that in morals, eloquence and sentiment provided a safeguard against the slow calculations of the mind on the one hand, and from the hasty and dangerous passions of the heart on the other. Rhetoric she therefore saw in a good light, as a necessary social adjuvant to virtue.⁷³ For her, eloquence developed the sentiments which then allowed individuals to 'tap the resources they find in themselves', those of friendship, family love and the intellectual pleasures.⁷⁴ Literary fictions, in this respect, played a central part – a theory which Mme de Staël put into practice in her own novels *Delphine* (1802) or *Corinne* (1807). For her, as for Rousseau, literature was the proper vehicle of morals:

One may extract from good novels a purer, higher morals than from any didactic work on virtue. The latter genre is dryer, and therefore necessarily more indulgent. Maxims made to be applied generally never reach the delicate heroism which may be held as model [in a novel], but which one cannot reasonably turn into a duty.⁷⁵

⁷¹ For de Staël's position regarding Rousseau's politics, see Aurelian Craiutu, 'Rousseau and Madame de Staël: A Surprising Dialogue', in *Thinking with Rousseau: From Machiavelli to Schmitt*, ed. Helena Rosenblatt and P. Schweigert (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 235–51. De Staël's influence in shaping the romantic connection between poetry and politics has recently received attention in English, see Roger Pearson, *Unacknowledged Legislators: The Poet as Lawgiver in Post-Revolutionary France* (Oxford University Press, 2016).

⁷² 'Lettres sur les écrits et sur le caractère de Jean-Jacques Rousseau' Germaine de Staël, *Œuvres Complètes de Madame La Baronne de Staël-Holstein* (Paris: Firmin Didot frères, 1871), I, 5.

⁷³ 'Eloquence has often been called dangerous, but I believe it is necessary when one needs to set virtue against passion. It begets movements in the mind which decide immediately in favour of a course of action... eloquence alone can add impulsive force to reason and give it enough spirit to fight against the passions.' 'Lettres', de Staël, *Œuvres Complètes* I, 14.

⁷⁴ 'De l'influence des passions sur le bonheur des individus et des nations', de Staël, *Œuvres Complètes* I, 160–71.

⁷⁵ 'Essai sur les fictions', de Staël, *Œuvres Complètes* I, 70.

In *On Literature*, published in 1800, she insisted on the powers of literary style which triggered moral and aesthetic sentiment together and, ‘moving the mind and the body together, produced a shudder of admiration which incited us to generous actions.’⁷⁶ By fortifying sentiment, reading good literature also developed moral sensibility. This entailed more than a simple parallel between two different spheres of judgement: Madame de Staël insisted by placing characters in specific circumstances and illustrating their moral deliberations, novels put the reader in the characters’ shoes and thereby acted as a training ground for moral decision-making. Moreover, this was true of words as well as of actions: ‘every time they are called to choose between different phrases, writers and orators select the one which calls up the most delicate idea – their minds choose between phrases, just as their souls should decide between different actions in life. And the habit of doing one may lead to the other.’⁷⁷ In this way, style regained, in Madame de Staël’s work, a central moral function.

Her encounter with Benthamite utilitarianism coincided with her own philosophical and political development. Through Genevan circles, she was acquainted with Dumont with whom she also corresponded. In 1802, when *Traité de législation civile et pénale* were published in Paris, extracts had been read and discussed at Coppet, her house in the vicinity of Geneva.⁷⁸ In the summer of 1807, as he was working on Bentham’s manuscripts on reward, he received from her a copy of *Corinne, ou l’Italie*, her latest novel.⁷⁹ They met again in London in 1813.

Bentham’s ideas interested her because they addressed a question which went to the heart of her reflections on contemporary politics after the Revolution, at a time when ‘one is lead to reflect deeply on the nature of happiness in morals and in politics, on its direction, on its goals, on the hurdles which still separate us from this goal.’⁸⁰ In late 1790s, she briefly toyed with the idea that utilitarianism could provide a solution to this problem because it gave legislators a method to reach general happiness, if not individual one. At that stage, she did not altogether reject calculation and political engineering from the sphere of politics. But already, she believed that what was true for the people as a whole was inherently incorrect in the case of individuals, a paradox which she formulated in this way:

⁷⁶ Germaine de Staël, *De la littérature*, ed. Gérard Gengembre and Jean Goldzink (Paris: GF-Flammarion, 1991), 68.

⁷⁷ de Staël, *De la littérature*, 69-70.

⁷⁸ See de Champs, *Enlightenment and Utility*, 188.

⁷⁹ ‘I received a very interesting letter from Mme de Staël: she has lately published *Corinne or Italy*, she sent it to me, she wrote, because her friends believe it is her best to date’, Dumont wrote in June 1807, see Dumont Mss, 17, f. 205.

⁸⁰ ‘De l’influence des passions’ de Staël, *Œuvres Complètes*, I, 107.

The legislator takes men as a whole, the moralist one by one; the legislator must deal with the nature of things, the moralist with the diversity of sensations; finally, the legislator must always examine men from the point of view of their mutual relations and the moralist, considering each individual as a moral entity, a compound of pleasures and pains, of passions and reason, sees man under various angles, but always in relation to himself.⁸¹

In drawing a clear line between the moral and the political subject, she went against one of the postulates of many of her contemporaries. This was not unconnected with her increasing belief that literature, not legislation, could transcend the opposition of individual and collective interest because it appealed to humanity as such.

Reading Kant in the early 1800s had a profound impact on Madame de Staël, not least because it allowed her to take her views of the connection between aesthetic and moral judgement further. But in those years, as her position became increasingly precarious because of her growing opposition to Napoleon. She came to increasingly reject utilitarianism as a philosophical system because she associated it with the opportunism of many of her French contemporaries who had adapted to the increasing violations of liberty under the Terror and the Empire. Kant's works allowed her to propose an alternative aesthetic, moral and political theory and went together with her rejection of Enlightenment rationalism.⁸² In *On Germany*, published in 1813, she set her recent reading of Kant against both English empiricism and French materialism, whose common roots she found in Hobbes and Locke's writings. Without closing the door to experience nor maintaining an indefensible innatism, she believed that Kant's system achieved 'a synthesis of experimental philosophy with the idealist doctrine'. Tellingly, it was Kant's definition of the sublime which provided the key to individual liberty against all forms of political coercion, now allowing to bridge again the gap between morals (rooted as it was in aesthetic appreciation) and politics. This led her to see 'enthusiasm' as the root of all moral qualities and as evidence of our common humanity: unlike pleasant sensations which remained individual, admiration for the beautiful, in the arts or in morals, was universal.

The enthusiasm triggered by the beautiful does not have anything to do with either sensations or judgement; it is an innate disposition akin to the sentiment of duty and the necessary primitive notions of the mind. We recognise truth when we see

⁸¹ 'De l'influence des passions' de Staël, *Œuvres Complètes* I, 171.

⁸² André Monchoux, 'Madame de Staël, interprète de Kant', *Revue d'histoire littéraire de la France* 66, no. 1 (1966): 71–84.

it, because it is the external image of an ideal whose type resides in our intelligence. Tastes might be diverse in all things that are agreeable, for such pleasures are rooted in sensation, but admiration for the beautiful in the arts or in nature must be universal, because all men's souls contain sentiments of divine origin which beauty awakens and makes them enjoy.⁸³

Tellingly, the praise of enthusiasm was conducted alongside a sustained criticism of Bentham's principle of utility as presented by Dumont.

This confrontation was played out in London in 1813, shortly after the book came out. Banned from France and under threat in Geneva, Madame de Staël reached London after a long journey through Germany and northern Europe. During her stay, she was received in Whig salons, especially at Bowood, now the seat of the third marquess of Lansdowne. Her visit was documented in some detail by Etienne Dumont, a familiar of Bowood and Whig circles since the late 1780s and therefore a perfect host for his Genevan friend.⁸⁴ In these conversations, Dumont unambiguously defended Bentham's utilitarianism – on moral and political grounds rather than on aesthetic ones. As he recalled in his letters to Maria Edgeworth (whose attempts to put utilitarian experience into novels would also deserve further study), he soon refused to argue with her in public:

I shall only tell you that she has nothing but utmost contempt for poor utilitarian philosophy, that she reduces it to a miserable calculus of personal interest. I threw a four-or-five-page protest at her and was furiously attacked in return. I do not want to have anything more to do with this – I am too heavy for aerostatic balloons. To define, according to her, is to kill. Moral classifications are nothing but anatomy: one builds a skeleton and when one says 'rise up and walk', it remains still. This is the point she will not be brought to depart from.⁸⁵

By 1813, as Dumont bitterly remarked, two distinct positions were deeply entrenched and Dumont's own attempt at synthesis remained buried in his manuscripts.

Conclusion

The impossible dialogue between Madame de Staël and Dumont was an important step in the radicalisation of positions which had been closely intertwined since the second half of the eighteenth century. Madame de Staël's arguments against utilitarianism, both in print and

⁸³ *De l'Allemagne*, de Staël, II, 168, 186, 185. For the attack on utilitarianism, see 206–7.

⁸⁴ For a description of her visit that draws on Dumont's letters, see Norman King, "The Airy Form of Things Forgotten": Madame de Staël, l'utilitarisme et l'impulsion libérale', *Cahiers Staëliens* 11 (1970): 5–26.

⁸⁵ Quoted in King, 15.

in person, had a deep influence, especially in England. One can for instance turn to Carlyle's 1827 essay for the *Edinburgh Review*, entitled 'State of German Literature', which explicitly drew on de Staël's *On Germany*. Though he did not mention Bentham directly, he evidently had English Utilitarians in mind when he further dramatised the opposition between utility and poetry. In the late eighteenth century, he wrote, '[utility] was set up for the universal measure of mental as well as material value; poetry, except of an economical and preceptorial character, was found to be the product of a rude age; and religious enthusiasm was but derangement in the biliary organs.' '[I]ts partisans', he concluded, 'in subsequent satirical controversies, received the nickname of *Philistern* (Philistines).' ⁸⁶ This characterisation became immensely popular as it was taken up by John Ruskin and Matthew Arnold and continued to be influential throughout the nineteenth century. ⁸⁷

In contrast, one purpose of this chapter has been to show that such a radical presentation does not do justice to the challenge utilitarianism posed to eighteenth-century aesthetics and morals. In the half century that separated Turgot's statement from Madame de Staël's, utilitarian writers such as Helvétius, Bentham and Dumont each explored different ways in which utility and aesthetic sentiment could be articulated. Bentham's position appears to be the most radical – a conclusion which a comparison with John Stuart Mill's seemed to confirm in the following years.

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⁸⁶ Thomas Carlyle, 'State of German Literature', in *Critical and Miscellaneous Essays*, vol. I (London: James Fraser, 1839), 74.

⁸⁷ Donald Winch, 'Mr Gradgrind and Jerusalem', in *Economy, Polity and Society. British Intellectual History, 1750-1950*, ed. Stefan Collini, Richard Whatmore, and Brian Young (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 243–66; Emmanuelle de Champs, 'Aestheticism and Utilitarianism: A Victorian Debate and Its Critical Legacy', in *Reconnecting Aestheticism and Modernism - Continuities, Revisions, Speculations*, ed. Christine Reynier and Catherine Delyfer (London: Routledge, 2016), 107–19.

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