

# The Chemistry of Taste

## Aesthetics, Literature, and the Rise of the Impure

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**Abstract** The article explores the evolution of the discourse of taste during the XVIII and XIX centuries, adopting the categories of pure and impure as paradigmatic keys to the subject. Reynolds' standards of aesthetic judgement, and the voices of Hogarth and Richard Payne Knight, mark the drive towards taste as subjective response. Thus young Marianne Dashwood can judge whether Edward Ferrars' taste is pure or impure. Taste, despite Hazlitt's warnings, becomes synonymous with fashion, and fashion is an impure element, conditioned by new technologies, allowing the manufacture of endless replicas from original art works. The Great Exhibition is the pivotal event that consecrates the productions of industry, commerce and art. Such triangulation thrives on the scientific progress of chemistry, which presides over the offer of new materials, colours, printing techniques, Parian marble, electroplated metal, allowing all kinds of cheap imitations. John Ruskin comments upon the triumphant progress of chemistry: and often uses analogies or metaphors taken from this science in order to explain the obscure processes of the artist's associative imagination. Purity of taste – or its impure connections with chemical works and their products – are discussed by Ruskin. But the paradigm pure/impure is also relevant to the work of Victorian art critics. Walter Pater and Vernon Lee recur to chemistry in order to explain the mysteries of the subjective response to art. Writers follow, such as Collins and Stevenson, who weld the strange mixture of pure and impure elements in human nature to chemistry, and thus place on the epistemic horizon of this science the fundamental questions of their age.

**Summary** 1 Taste: the Early Debate. – 2 Debating Taste in the Age of Aesthetic Democracy. – 3 Taste and Modern Science. – 4 The Chemistry of Taste, Industry and Aesthetic Judgement. – 5 Pure/Impure in the Laboratory of Literature

**Keywords** Aesthetics. Chemistry. Narration. Taste.

### 1 Taste: the Early Debate

In order to broach the subject of taste in the nineteenth century, and to analyse it within the paradigmatic notions of purity and impurity, I suggest as a preliminary survey *Il Gusto: Storia di una idea estetica* (Russo 2000), where the essays of Sertoli (2000, pp. 79-125) and Franzini (2000, pp. 183-202) respectively clarify the initial debate on taste and its «ending» or «dissolution» in the age of mechanical reproduction.

During the eighteenth century we witness the gradual undoing of the

objective standards of taste inherited from the classicist tradition, which endowed an object with substantial artistic quality. The process starts with Addison, who sees aesthetic value as shorn of moral implications, while the emphasis is set on the experience of fruition, indeed on Mr. Spectator (Sertoli 2000, p. 83). Subsequently, albeit for different reasons, Hogarth and Burke argue against the sweeping tide of subjectivism in matters of taste. William Hogarth's *Analysis of Beauty* (1753), subtitled *Written with a View of Fixing the Fluctuating Ideas of Taste*, reads as a bold argument in favour of the line of beauty. Beauty is not only the prerogative of finished art works kept in Italian churches and museums, but has to be discerned in the serpentine lines of pineapples, in scroll legs tables and curly wigs. In addition to his main thesis, Hogarth provides his readers with superb etchings, where famous statues from classical antiquity stand side by side with the shape of a bell, a candlestick, a tulip, a cyclamen (as in: William Hogarth, *The Analysis of Beauty* [1753], plate 1).



Figure 1. William Hogarth, *The Analysis of Beauty*, 1753. Plate 1

In this context, the religious portrait of the Madonna, tempting the monk Ambrosius in the eponymous novel by Matthew Lewis (1796), indirectly confirms Hogarth's emphasis on the purity of formal beauty, and on the moral infection - «Away, impure ideas!» (Anderson 1980, p. 41) the monk exclaims - that results from a degeneration of taste.

Beauty resides - and Burke's position is even more radical, according to Sertoli (2000, p. 96) - in some material, objective qualities which, nevertheless, affect the mind. The dissolution of the objective standard of beauty will be accomplished by the philosophy of associations. From the pulpit of the Royal Academy, Sir Joshua Reynolds champions the category of ideal beauty by remarking «all arts have means within them of applying themselves with success both to the intellectual and sensitive part of our natures» (Rogers 1992, p. 188). As a consequence he states that

The value and rank of every art is in proportion to the mental labour employed in it, or the mental pleasure produced by it. As this principle is observed or neglected, our profession becomes either a liberal art, or a mechanical trade. In the hands of one man it makes the highest pretensions, as it is addressed to the noblest faculties: in those of another it is reduced to a mere matter of ornament; and the painter has but the humble province of furnishing our apartments with elegance. (p. 116)

Thus, in Reynolds's *Discourse III*, the Grand Style, with the religious subjects ideally interpreted by the Great Italian Masters, is set above the Ornamental, and both are above the Composite Style, formed on local customs - on realism. Not only the subject, from highest to lowest, but also the idea of mechanic repetition is conceived by Reynolds as gradually depriving the original masterpiece of its purity and beauty. A mechanical trade - and this notion will be even more relevant in the following century - produces ornamental copies out of one noble original - and owing to their sheer numbers, copies have a fragmented, diminished value. In the same *Discourse* Reynolds remarks that Hogarth applies his genius «to low and vulgar characters» (p. 113): excellence in the visual arts, and painting, is only conferred by the hand and genius of the master, and the original product is to be set above the copy and the mechanical skill of imitation. While Hogarth already deploys the means of technological reproduction afforded by his etchings to promote his idea of visual beauty, Reynolds maintains that only his cluster of rules and highly moral subjects can fix the standard of excellence in the arts. Taste is the prerogative of the man of taste, and towards the end of the century the notion of «fine taste» undergoes the democratization implied by the concept of «common standard of taste» and by self-appointed connoisseurs (Sertoli 2000, p. 114; Orestano 2012a).

Reynolds's system of evaluation, with its neat hierarchy of beauty and artistic value, offering a safe pathway between the ideal purity of the Great

Italian Masters and the vulgarity of low modern subjects – Dutch inns with inebriated peasants and fruit baskets – is gradually undermined by the philosophy of associations. The relevant text is Archibald Alison's *Essays on the Nature and Principles of Taste* (1790), defined by Sertoli as the «terminal case» in that long debate toward the erasure of all objectivity in aesthetic judgement, ending up, eventually, in the narcissistic play of the subjective imagination (Sertoli 2000, pp. 104-105). After Alison, Richard Payne Knight in *Analytical Inquiry into the Principles of Taste* (1805) deploys his connoisseurship to discuss the «simple purity» of the classics. Impurity would taint the very champions of sculptural style:

Both Michel Angelo and Bernini were enthusiastic in their admiration [...] of the Grecian style of sculpture; but nevertheless Michel Angelo and Bernini were, in opposite ways, the great corruptors of pure style; the one having expanded it into the monstrous and extravagant, and the other sunk it into effeminacy and affectation. (Knight 1808, p. 6)

Knight's inquiry makes clear that beauty does not stand on absolute rules, but on the beholder's perception: and here the category of taste confines aesthetic discourse, soon to become the chosen subject of conversations spanning from high art to furniture and current fashion. In this phase of the history of culture, taste accommodates the requirements of a middle class, which, according to Bourdieu (1987), seeks to achieve the distinction of a higher social milieu. Knight remarks: «All refinement of taste, in the liberal arts, arises, in the first instance, on this faculty of improved perception» (Knight 1808, p. 100). Association of ideas is what enhances taste, through a comparative assessment of beauty. Again, it is a question of class and wealth, of connoisseurship, in the end:

Much of the pleasure, which we receive from painting, sculpture, music, poetry, &c. arises from our associating other ideas with those immediately excited by them. Hence the productions of these arts are never thoroughly enjoyed but by persons, whose minds are enriched by a variety of kindred and corresponding imagery. (p. 145)

Consequently, the judge in matters of taste rises to unprecedented importance: defined as the 'connoisseur', he – a man of wealth, a collector, a Grand Tourist – has to discern between the purity of genuine originals, and the impure copies. By a sad trick of destiny, the same Richard Payne Knight, who in *Specimens of Antient Sculpture* (1809) had destroyed the reputation of many ancient statues by arguing that they were inferior Roman copies of Greek originals, will dramatically express a wrong judgment about the Elgin Marbles, bought in 1816 at a very high price – £35,000 – and then treasured at the British Museum. The Elgin marbles controversy

would enlist against Knight, dubbed 'the arrogant connoisseur' (Clarke; Penny 1982), the pens of Benjamin Robert Haydon and William Hazlitt.

Sertoli's essay closes the trajectory of the eighteenth-century debate on taste with Richard Payne Knight, and with the notion that taste is a phenomenon depending on historico-social circumstances. After Knight, the Romantic deluge. Franzini reminds us of the dissolution of taste (Franzini 2000, p. 191), when the Romantic pre-eminence given to genius as depository of the truth of art, and the power exerted by sheer subjectivity over art production, jointly determine the historical decadence of the standards of taste. The social evolution of artistic genres, the plurality of the languages of art, and the parallel evolution in the public modify the notion of taste, which does no longer dwell at the centre of the aesthetic horizon, like a golden segment, but is affected by contemporary fashion and modernity, by economics and physiology (p. 193).

To trace the last steps of this dissolution, I suggest to focus on Richard Payne Knight's «Sceptical View of the Subject», where despite the fact that «the superiority» of «pure and faultless models has been invariably recognized by all», the author acknowledges that modern practices and professions, physiology and natural inclinations, plus the sensations conveyed by the organs of taste, are the factors to be considered when attempting the analysis of taste, that is «equally unconnected with, and uninfluenced by, the higher faculties of the mind» (Knight 1808, pp. 5-18). It is thus appropriate as well as immensely ironic of Jane Austen to attribute the faculty of improved perception to an impetuous, ignorant, provincial and dangerously romantic young woman, who is neither a wealthy collector, nor a Grand Tourist - nor indeed 'the man of taste' of well-trained, impeccable judgement.

In *Sense and Sensibility* (1811) Marianne Dashwood remarks to her sister: «What a pity it is, Elinor, [...] that Edward should have no taste for drawing» (Tanner 1974, p. 53). Elinor's defense is that Edward's opinions indicate that «his observation is just and correct, his taste delicate and pure» (p. 54). Austen's genial spoof on connoisseurship does not spare Willoughby's preference for a romantic cottage with dark narrow stairs, and a kitchen that smokes, in preference to a modern, clean, comfortable home. And the reader is even taught in a few sentences a few useful notions about the taste for the picturesque in art and gardening, with the dangers attending those who apply the principles of picturesque beauty - decay, nettles, and ruins - to a fine prospect (pp. 121-122). Here are the first ironic hints of the coming landslide of taste. Marianne's portrait is the masterful, gendered caricature of the eighteenth-century connoisseur.

## 2 Debating Taste in the Age of Aesthetic Democracy

Fashion is sweeping away golden rules and lines of beauty alike, and William Hazlitt, after pronouncing his faith in the perfection of high art in «Fragments on Art. Why the Arts Are Not Progressive?» (1814), offers a full view of the situation in his essay «Whether the Fine Arts Are promoted by Academies» (1814). In his age, he argues, connoisseurship has become a fashion, and the artist is judged by «pretenders to taste, through vanity, affectation, and idleness» (Cook 1991, p. 262).

The purity or liberality of professional decisions cannot [...] be expected to counteract the tendency which an appeal to the public has to lower the standard of taste. [...] Common sense, which has been sometimes appealed to as the criterion of taste, is nothing but the common capacity, applied to common facts and feelings; [...] but does not every ignorant connoisseur pretend the same veneration, and talk with the same vapid assurance of Michel Angelo, though he has never seen even a copy of any of his pictures [...]? (pp. 265-266)

Against the rising tide of the vulgarization of art, which Linda Dowling describes as «aesthetic democracy» (Dowling 1996), against the cultural hunger for images which hatches scores of academies, and a legion of artists and would-be judges, who will rule the Victorian market, Hazlitt could only complain that «The principle of universal suffrage, however applicable to matters of government, [...] is by no means applicable to matters of taste» (Cook 1991, p. 263). Self-appointed connoisseurs judge in matters of art, according to principles set by the fashion of the moment. And in his 1818 essay «On Fashion» Hazlitt remarks:

[Fashion] is the perpetual setting up and disowning a certain standard of taste, elegance and refinement, which has no other foundation or authority than that it is the prevailing distinction of the moment, which was yesterday ridiculous from its being new, and to-morrow will be odious from its being common. (p. 149)

Fashion, according to Hazlitt, is superficial, frivolous, haughty, trifling, affected, servile, despotic, mean, ambitious, «tied to no rule, and bound to conform to every whim of the minute» (p. 150). After this violent tirade, we read that in England old distinctions are collapsing as «the ideas of natural equality and the Manchester steam-engines have, like a double battery, levelled the high towers [...] of fashion» (p. 150). Thus purity of taste is no longer an impregnable category vivified by high art, but an element within the volatile circus of modern fashion: and from the purity of art, by easy descent, Hazlitt assesses the purity of women.

A distinct counter-reformation attitude marks Hazlitt's cry for purity, his modern anathema:

The only difference between the woman of fashion and the woman of pleasure is, that the one *is* what the other *only seems to be*; and yet, the victims of dissipation who thus rival and almost outshine women of the first quality in all the blaze, and pride, and glitter of shew and fashion, are, in general, no better than a set of raw, uneducated, inexperienced country girls or awkward, coarse-fisted servant maids. (pp. 153-154)

Women and fashion are not the only target: it looks as if between women and art there existed a divide, according to Hazlitt, which is made even more dramatic by the present confusion in gender roles: «Obscenity, irreligion, small oaths, tippling, gaming, effeminacy in one sex and Amazon airs in the other, any thing is the fashion while it lasts» (p. 151). The critic here is invoking clear-cut distinctions, and warning his age against dangerous mixtures of incompatible elements.<sup>1</sup> He remarks that «the two nearest things in the world are gentility and vulgarity» (p. 154), a fact which may lead society to moral confusion, and self-destruction (Marroni 2002) – and indeed to a very confusing notion of taste.

A few years later, John Ruskin – a young and articulate critic, bent on reforming what he perceives as moral corruption –, while promoting the art of his favourite painter, J.M.W. Turner, and silencing the intimidating voice of Sir Joshua Reynolds, will venture on the subject (Orestano 2000 and 2009). With a typical odd mixture of Romantic pragmatism, Evangelical rhetoric, and sweeping statements, Ruskin sets out to define the notion of taste in the first volume of *Modern Painters* (1843). This is not indeed his first attempt (Orestano 2000 and 2012b); but his attitude is one easily leading to the aporias marking his long career and his work as a critic – not only in matters of art. In the early 1840s, he defines taste as the result of a moral condition. The man who follows the «natural laws of aversion and desire» so as to derive pleasure always «from that which God originally intended should give him pleasure [...] is the man of taste» (Cook, Wedderburn 1903-1912, vol. 3, pp. 109-110).

This, then, is the real meaning of this disputed word. Perfect taste is the faculty of receiving the greatest possible pleasure from those material sources which are attractive to our moral nature in its pu-

<sup>1</sup> According to Hazlitt in «On the Elgin Marbles» gender and art are incompatible: «What then, are we, [...] to confound the difference of sex in a sort of hermaphrodite softness, as [...] Angelica Kauffman, and others, have done in their effeminate performances?» (Cook 1991, pp. 278-279).

rity and perfection. He who receives little pleasure from these sources, wants taste; he who receives pleasure from any other sources, has false or bad taste.

And it is thus that the term «taste» is to be distinguished from that of «judgment», with which it is constantly confounded. Judgment is a general term, expressing definite action of the intellect, and applicable to every kind of subject which can be submitted to it. There may be judgment of congruity, judgment of truth, judgment of justice, and judgment of difficulty and excellence. But all these exertions of the intellect are totally distinct from taste, properly so called, which is the instinctive and instant preferring of one material object to another without any obvious reason, except that it is proper to human nature in its perfection so to do. (vol. 3, p. 110)

In the second volume of *Modern Painters* (1846) the attempt to define taste will slide even deeper into a Romantic ontology tinged with stern Evangelical morality, producing his aesthetic sermons, which admonish his contemporaries against beauty becoming «the servant of lust» (vol. 4, p. 49). Taste is a faculty that only applies to the pure of heart (vol. 4, pp. 51-65). The notion of purity resurfaces again, in the Preface, with the support of the quote «Cleanse your hands, ye sinners; and purify your hearts, ye double-minded» (vol. 4, p. 5). With these statements, the early battles of the first Reformation, fought over the impure images of superstitious Catholic art, seem to be revived again. When he concludes: «Our purity of taste, therefore, is best tested by its universality; for if we can only admire this thing or that, we may be sure that our cause for liking is of a finite and false nature» (vol. 4, p. 60), one may infer that for all his Romantic tension Ruskin aspires to a timeless horizon, of classical and religious nature.

Leaving his readers to mull the mysteries of taste, and the not-so-obvious reasons that connect its material sources in the present to our eternal moral nature, but nevertheless invoking the truth of art, of sky, of vegetation, of Turner's work, Ruskin finally confronts the problem and nature of public taste. Describing it as «a fitful and vacillating current of vague impression, perpetually liable to change, subject to epidemic desires, and agitated by infectious passion, the slave of fashion, and the fool of fancy» (vol. 3, p. 617), Ruskin echoes Hazlitt's statements, but he lacks the contact with the real press and the public which endowed Hazlitt's articles with vibrant first-hand knowledge. As usual, Ruskin preaches a very ambiguous truth: here stopping halfway between the evil responsibilities of public taste and the almost divining leadership the press should exert in matters of art.

Public taste may thus degrade a race of men capable of the highest efforts in art into the portrait painters of ephemeral fashions, but it will yet not fail of discovering who, among these portrait painters, is the



man of most mind [...]. Of course a thousand modifying circumstances interfere with the action of the general rule; [...]. The press, therefore, and all who pretend to lead the public taste, have not so much to direct the multitude whom to go to, as what to ask for. Their business is not to tell us which is our best painter, but to tell us whether we are making our best painter do his best. (vol. 3, pp. 617-618)

Hazlitt's considerations on matters of fashion did indeed suggest not only the impending danger of a confusing uniformity of fashion and taste, but also a blurring of all fine distinctions, of class and gender, which would consequently affect social relationships as well. If, on the one hand, taste is becoming a matter of fashion, rather than a standard fixed by art criticism and art production, on the other hand taste provides recipes that are essential to the mores of society, as a useful yardstick in contexts very far from high art and its masterpieces. And the context which seems increasingly closer to the sacred precincts of art, owing to the validation of taste, is industry.

Reynolds had given a clear hint about mechanical reproduction. In Hazlitt's essay «On the Elgin Marbles» (1822), the artist's imitation of ideal nature is extolled once again, because «The highest art, like nature, is a living spring of unconstrained excellence, and does not produce a continued repetition of itself, like plaster-casts from the same figure» (Cook 1991, p. 279). Hazlitt is pleading for uniqueness versus uniformity of repetition. His caveat against the plaster-casts will soon prove prophetic, but his voice will indeed be silenced by the loud drone of the Manchester steam-engines, and by the inevitable change they are to produce within the texture of Victorian society.

Ruskin, no less aware of the social changes described by Hazlitt, will focus on the issue of education as the means to teach the public to distinguish between good and bad, vulgar and noble, purist and profane: purity and impurity.

Wherever the word «taste» is used with respect to matters of art, it indicates either that the thing spoken of belongs to some inferior class of objects, or that the person speaking has a false conception of its nature. For, consider the exact sense in which a work of art is said to be «in good or bad taste». It does not mean that it is true, or false; that it is beautiful, or ugly; but that it does or does not comply either with the laws of choice, which are enforced by certain modes of life; or the habits of mind produced by a particular sort of education. It does not mean merely fashionable, that is, complying with a momentary caprice of the upper classes; but it means agreeing with the habitual sense which the most refined education, common to those upper classes at the period, gives to their whole mind. Now, therefore, so far as that education does

indeed tend to make the senses delicate, and the perceptions accurate, and thus enables people to be pleased with quiet instead of gaudy color, and with graceful instead of coarse form; and, by long acquaintance with the best things, to discern quickly what is fine from what is common; – so far, acquired taste is an honorable faculty, and it is true praise of anything to say it is «in good taste». But so far as this higher education has a tendency to narrow the sympathies and harden the heart, diminishing the interest of all beautiful things by familiarity, until even what is best can hardly please, and what is brightest hardly entertain; – so far as it fosters pride, and leads men to found the pleasure they take in anything, not on the worthiness of the thing, but on the degree in which it indicates some greatness of their own (as people build marble porticos, and inlay marble floors, not so much because they like the colors of marble, or find it pleasant to the foot, as because such porches and floors are costly, and separated in all human eyes from plain entrances of stone and timber); – so far as it leads people to prefer gracefulness of dress, manner, and aspect, to value of substance and heart, liking a well said thing better than a true thing, and a well trained manner better than a sincere one, and a delicately formed face better than a good-natured one, and in all other ways and things setting custom and semblance above everlasting truth; – so far, finally, as it induces a sense of inherent distinction between class and class, and causes everything to be more or less despised which has no social rank, so that the affection, pleasure, or grief of a clown are looked upon as of no interest compared with the affection and grief of a well-bred man; – just so far, in all these several ways, the feeling induced by what is called a «liberal education» is utterly adverse to the understanding of noble art; and the name which is given to the feeling, – Taste, Goût, Gusto, – in all languages, indicates the baseness of it, for it implies that art gives only a kind of pleasure analogous to that derived from eating by the palate. (Cook, Wedderburn 1903-1912, vol. 5, pp. 94-96)

This long statement can be taken as encompassing the predicament of the whole century, inasmuch as it encapsulates contrasts of class and economics, fashion and education, beauty and religion. In the following paragraphs, the multiplication of coarse copies of art works, the commonest lithographs, the degradation of art, induce Ruskin to declare that he cannot pursue this inquiry. Ruskin's voice will move from art criticism and painting, toward an emphasis on form and structure (Orestano 2008); hence to architecture; hence again, from architecture to the social context producing it, and the cultural challenges discussed in *Unto His Last* (1860) and eventually in *Fors Clavigera* (1871-1884), his monthly *Letters to the Workmen and Labourers of Great Britain*.

The purity of art and the purity of taste are notions that have to be

readjusted within the present context: the notion of taste not silenced, but made subservient, with a blessing, to economic interests triggered by the technology of mechanical reproduction. The age of common sense is indeed a common ground, filled with thousands of good copies, with numberless excellent reproductions in all styles and materials that offer to the public at a cheaper price what was formerly unique, valuable, and precious. Such abundance does not only affect the production process through which art replicas are offered to the public: in the literary field the proliferation of genres generates texts in which heterogeneous materials – epistolary, detective, journal, legal, travel book, commercial, medical report – combine, and compose new sensational narratives, fostered by new professional skills (Costantini 2015).

### 3 Taste and Modern Science

In his treasure book on *Victorian Things* (1988), Asa Briggs reminds us that the preoccupation with taste is evident in books such as *Hints on Household Taste* (1868) by Charles Lock Eastlake, and *A Plea for Art in the House* (1876) by W.J. Loftie. The connection between art and manufactures exists and thrives owing to scientific progress in chemistry: chemistry, and the technology derived from it, was «the creator of wealth» (Briggs 1988, p. 21). Thus the beginning of Victoria's reign saw «the end of the Rule of Taste» (p. 27) and the development of a market offering a uniform variety of products which apparently came from the «inexhaustible mines of bad taste», Birmingham and Sheffield, while Manchester was the capital of cheap-made machine goods (Briggs 1988, p. 38). Henry Cole, who would not only actively promote the Great Exhibition but also found in 1855 the Victoria & Albert Museum, described such products as «art objects» thus placing a seal on the impure relationship at the core of many Victorian art works, welding mechanical skill to high art. Copies or models – in metal, stone, marble, plaster, fabric, carpet, oil painting, ceramic, linoleum, celluloid – filled shop windows, elegant arcades, and indeed were gathered in the biggest display of such items, the Great Exhibition of Art and Industry held in London in 1851.

The Great Exhibition is an international affair: the number of exhibitors, 13,937; the exhibits are arranged according to categories, such as (in succession, ascending or the reverse): Raw Materials; Machinery; Manufactures; Textile Fabrics; Metallic; Vitreous and Ceramic; Miscellaneous; and finally, Fine Arts. The borderline between the pure original and the impure copy is nowhere to be seen, or even detected, owing to the accent set by propaganda on the artistry of the manufactured objects, and to their composite nature as well, mixing practical use and surface ornamentation. Actually the principles adopted by the juries to confer prizes and medals were

novelty, ingenuity, economy in cost and maintenance, durability, excellence of workmanship, fitness for purpose, new application of old principles, application of new principles [...] improved beauty of form, [...] accuracy and certainty of performance, [...] beauty of design in form and colour, or both, with reference to utility. (Anon. 1981, p. 17)

Despite the inclusion of «Fine Arts» among the items on display, there is no reference to purity of taste, romantically intended as the unique and genuine expression of genius. Nevertheless, the connection of these frankly utilitarian categories with taste, and its improvement, based upon technological advancements in the manufacturing process, is noted and emphasized by Queen Victoria in her own diary:

It is very gratifying to see the immense improvement in taste in all the manufactures, for the greater part of which they have to thank my beloved husband. The taste of some of the plate and jewelry is beautiful, none struck us so much, as so likely to be useful for the taste of the country, as Elkington's beautiful specimens of electro-plate [...]. (p. 20)

Thus, we realize that – according to the Queen and her beloved husband – the word «taste» has indeed come to define the very product of the once-dreaded Manchester steam engines, and similar manufactures. This is considered an immense improvement. The new techniques for coating, electroplating, moulding, dyeing, printing cheap materials as if they were genuine silver, marble, china or brocade are awarded the prize medal, especially if the products prove durable, economic, new, easy to maintain, coloured and useful. On the one hand, there is no end to imitation, and to the skilful use of cheaper material instead of valuable precious substances; on the other hand, the new art objects thus produced display a strange mixture, welding together high subject, cheap surface decoration, and low, everyday, humble use.

The catalogue of the Great Exhibition has ornamental clocks which include a gothic belfry with ringers; electroplated cutlery with fanciful handles shaped like a naked Venus; a Gladiatorial Table, sustained by the armed fighter, naked, kneeling underneath; a Photographic Table, with oval daguerreotypes inserted on the top; a Stove of polished iron plate, in the form of a knight in full armour; a bird cage in the shape of a Chinese pagoda; and a collection of stuffed animals, ludicrous, especially the frog shaving his companion, described by Queen Victoria as «really marvellous» (pp. 64-91).

George Baxter (1804-1867), the inventor of the colour print process (over 20 colours applied to the metal keyplate, patented in 1835), did most of the illustrations for the Great Exhibition (Scheuerle 2011). This is indeed an age of mass-visual culture, and the proliferation of images is as technologically various and diversified into photographs, prints, magic lanterns shows, stereoscopes, transfers (Jordan, Christ 1995). Most tan-

talizingly, within the huge Victorian market of images, one can spot again those religious subjects, which had been previously and most dogmatically banned, as the product of impure taste. A poster advertising a magic lantern show contains a telling oxymoron:

Grand Magic Lantern Exhibition: 40 Schriptural Views, 12 Pilgrims Progress; 60 Miscellaneous [...] 25 Crayon Transparencies [...] 40 Comics. In all over 200 views of a strictly moral character. Nothing to offend the most fastidious person. (Brunetta 1988, p. 14)

In the chapter «Images of Fame» Briggs reminds us that besides magic lantern slides, dioramas and *cartes de visite*, also the Staffordshire figures offered portraits of famous characters to customers at home as well as in Europe, and in quite ecumenical fashion. Apart from the British market, to which the Staffordshire manufactures offered Queen Victorias, Prince Alberts, Wellingtons, Tennysons, Gladstones, Latimers and figures of the famous singer Jenny Lind,

There were no religious inhibitions in the export business either. While some of the images designed for Britain were aggressively protestant [...] there was no hesitation in producing Roman Catholic images for Roman Catholic countries [...]. This was trade, and English Roman Catholics could be catered for, too. Two untitled pairs, showing a friar and a nun, were produced at the height of the anti-Popery campaigns [...]. (Briggs 1988, p. 148)

Thus Lewis's impure monk and sinful nuns are now industrially produced as decorative figures, and sold by the thousand. The profits of commerce steer the relationship of British industry with the worshippers of impure images in Europe, and beyond. And even the pure classical Greek charm of the Elgin marbles - and other unique masterpieces - is now diluted into a new type of ware, the so-called Parian marble, «a development of biscuit porcelain which is often quite wrongly described as marble» or as «statuary porcelain» (p. 150). In 1846, the *Art Journal* extols the value and implicitly the good taste of artifacts made in Parian ware:

We attach very great importance to this material [...] as offering a valuable medium for the multiplication of works of a higher order of art, at a price which will render them generally available. (p. 150)

From the purity of the Greek originals admired in museums, the British now move to the numberless replicas obtained owing to chemical technology and mechanic skill, which can adorn the drawing room, and in smaller, portable size, the mantelpiece and the what-not.



Figure 2. *Part of the Fine Arts Court*. Lithograph after J. Michael, with secular and religious virtuoso carving. In: John Absolon, *Recollections of the Great Exhibition*, Lloyd Brothers & Co.; Simpkin Marshall & Co., 1851. Available at <http://library.si.edu/digital-library/book/recollectionsgr00abso>

As for the purity of taste, Charles Dickens in *Hard Times* (1854) gives us a clear statement of the dramatic reversal that has occurred. The gentleman from London, a government officer, delivers a speech to the Coketown boys and girls, which is meant to steer their notion of taste, in fact according to the guidelines issued by the Department of Practical Art in the aftermath of the Great Exhibition (Collins 1963, p. 157):

«You must discard the word Fancy altogether. You have nothing to do with it. You are not to have, in any object of use or ornament, what would be a contradiction in fact. You don't walk upon flowers in fact; you cannot be allowed to walk upon flowers in carpets. You don't find that foreign birds and butterflies come and perch upon your crockery; you cannot be permitted to paint foreign birds and butterflies upon your crockery. You never meet with quadrupeds going up and down walls; you must not have quadrupeds represented upon walls. You must use», said the gentleman, «for all these purposes, combinations and modifications

(in primary colours) of mathematical figures which are susceptible of proof and demonstration. This is the new discovery. This is fact. This is taste». (Craig 1969, p. 52)

The agenda of taste is now synonymous with fact: that is to say, with the catalogues of products offered by manufacturers of cheap goods to those who live in places like Coketown. The idea is to promote industrial design (Dickens 1969, p. 319). No doubt, other wealthier citizens are allowed a greater decorative and imaginative freedom in matters of taste, but in Coketown people are told that wall paper with fancy patterns, carpets with flowers in Brussels style, crockery with exotic patterns (the Minton china so admired by Queen Victoria) are not applicable to the homes of the working-class, who must stick to facts: and buy carpets and wall-paper only bearing mathematical figures and combinations of primary colours. While attacking the over-decorating side of Victorian taste, Dickens also caricatures the bureaucratic view of art, with, possibly, a critique of the Philistine view of art (p. 319). Again, Henry Cole, the promoter of the Great Exhibition, whose identity is possibly inspiring Dickens's mouthpiece of taste in *Hard Times*, had stated that in 1851

for the first time in the world's history, the Men of Arts, Science and Commerce were permitted by their respective governments to meet together to discuss and promote those objects for which civilized natures exist. (Briggs 1988, p. 72)

#### 4 The Chemistry of Taste, Industry and Aesthetic Judgement

Henry Cole's statement celebrates the triangulation between art, science and commerce as an achievement beneficial to human nature in its most civilized state: and no doubt such a comprehensive effect is possible owing to the augmented agency given to the category of taste, and all the products it can encompass in its reach. I should like to suggest here that such a triangulation occurs, and may be critically viewed, under the overarching umbrella of chemistry. Chemistry is not only the science which serves the interests of industrial technology and of the manufacturing firms, but also, and most frequently in Victorian times, the epistemological source from which the aptest metaphors about human nature are derived. Hence chemistry, in the context of this article, as the science welding together art and commerce, is also relevant to the «facts» of modern taste.

Leading critics, intellectuals, novelists, adopt chemistry as symbol and metaphor of those mixed elements - whether in history, art, or aesthetics - that react one upon each other, producing new substances. Chemistry

had already been described as the science whose progressive reach would obtain leading status within the Victorian epistemic horizon: such a view was implied by the education of Victor Frankenstein, initially entangled with alchemy and its ancient philosophers, then a student of chemistry at Ingolstadt: «Through the revelations of modern chemical science the young man has a blinding vision of how the old dreams of the alchemists may be realized» (Sutherland 1998, p. 29). But it's Ruskin's again, in *The Eagle's Nest: Ten Lectures on the Relation of Natural Science to Art* (1872), the voice declaring the pre-eminence of chemistry in the century, and the dangers arising from it:<sup>2</sup>

Nay, truth, and success, are often to us more deadly than error. Perhaps no progress more triumphant has been made in any science than that of Chemistry; but the practical fact which will remain for the contemplation of the future, is that we have lost the art of painting on glass, and invented gun-cotton and nitro-glycerine. (Cook, Wedderburn 1903-1912, vol. 22, p. 147)

Chemistry is synonymous with progress, but he wonders: «what are we good for, but to damage the spire, knock down half the houses, and burn the library, – and declare there is no God but Chemistry?» (vol. 22, p. 262).

While declaring that chemical works, all over England, show the worst picture of progress, spoiling its landscape, soil and air, Ruskin also recommends that students should study chemistry, and that artists should learn the chemistry of colours, of manipulation and of manufacture (vol. 11, p. 53). This last statement again suggests that the triangulation of art, science and commerce must be kept on the foreground – especially when the chemistry of Victorian taste is the subject of investigation.

The quotations offered in the following paragraphs show that Ruskin, Walter Pater and Vernon Lee mention chemistry as the ideal metaphor to describe – by analogy with a process at once obscure to the non-initiated, but aspiring to the clarity of scientific precision – inexplicable, confused, indeed impure phenomena. One of these phenomena Ruskin investigates in *Modern Painters* is «imagination associative, the grandest mechanical power that the human intelligence possesses»:

By its operation, two ideas are chosen out of an infinite mass [...], two ideas which are separately wrong, which together shall be right, and of whose unity, therefore, the idea must be formed at the instant they are seized, as it is only in that unity that either is good [...]. This opera-

<sup>2</sup> In *The Haunted Man* (1848) Dickens portrays a chemistry professor, Redlaw, posited halfway between alchemy and modern science, with its dehumanizing effects (Marroni 2015, pp. 27-47).



tion of mind, so far as I can see, is absolutely inexplicable, but there is something like it in chemistry.

The action of sulphuric acid on metallic zinc affords an instance of what was once called Disposing Affinity. [...] Zinc decomposes pure water at common temperatures with extreme slowness; but as soon as sulphuric acid is added, decomposition of the water takes place rapidly, though the acid merely unites with oxide of zinc. [...] The obscurity of this explanation arises from regarding changes as consecutive, which are in reality simultaneous. [...] Now, if the imaginative artist will permit us, with all deference, to represent his combining intelligence under the figure of sulphuric acid [...] we shall have an excellent type, in material things, of the action of the imagination on the immaterial. Both actions are, I think, inexplicable. (vol. 4, pp. 234-235)<sup>3</sup>

Despite the scientific outlook, the action of the imagination is inexplicable: and this is exactly the value Ruskin distils from the analogy, chemistry providing the best instance of an obscure simultaneous reaction. Chemistry is recurred to again when Ruskin has to explain «The Nature of Gothic» in *The Stones of Venice* (1851-1853):

We have, then, the Gothic character submitted to our analysis, just as the rough mineral is submitted to that of the chemist, entangled with many other foreign substances, itself perhaps in no place pure, or ever to be obtained or seen in purity for more than an instant; but nevertheless a thing of definite and separate nature; however inextricable or confused in appearance. Now observe: the chemist defines his mineral by two separate kinds of character; one external, its crystalline form, hardness, lustre, etc., the other internal, the proportions and nature of its constituent atoms. Exactly in the same manner, we shall find that Gothic architecture has external forms and internal elements. (vol. 10, pp. 182-183)

Here as elsewhere, in *The Ethics of the Dust: Ten Lectures to Little Housewives on the Elements of Crystallisation* (1866),<sup>4</sup> Ruskin displays a marked

<sup>3</sup> Years later in *Fors Clavigera* (Letter 83, Nov. 1877) Ruskin will go back to that statement in order to explain the inventive power of art and enchanted design: «Among the other virtues of the great classic masters, this of enchanted Design is, of all, the least visible to the present apothecary mind; for although, when I first gave analysis of the inventive power in Modern Painters, I was best able to illustrate its combining method by showing that 'there was something like it in chemistry', it is precisely what is like it in chemistry, that the chemist of to-day denies» (Cook, Wedderburn 1903-1912, vol. 29, p. 265).

<sup>4</sup> Also in *The Two Paths: Being Lectures on Art, and Its Application to Decoration and Manufacture, Delivered in 1858-59* (1859); see Cook, Wedderburn 1903-1912, vol. 16, pp. 245-424.

interest in chemistry and its processes - especially crystallization. The study of crystals, and the mysterious relationship between their outward form and the constituent atoms, opens up the landscape of geology and thus the extended epistemic horizon of natural and human history. Again, Ruskin is seeking those immaterial relationships between the most advanced scientific knowledge and the mysterious laws which govern human nature, and its seemingly impure components (Orestano 2012). Investigating the Mental Expression as well as the Material Form of Gothic architecture, Ruskin has to adopt the useful analogy with chemistry 'because' of its impure nature:

§ V. Let us go back for a moment to our chemistry, and note that, in defining a mineral by its constituent parts, it is not one nor another of them, that can make up the mineral, but the union of all: for instance, it is neither in charcoal, nor in oxygen, nor in lime, that there is the making of chalk, but in the combination of all three in certain measures; they are all found in very different things from chalk, and there is nothing like chalk either in charcoal or in oxygen, but they are nevertheless necessary to its existence. So in the various mental characters which make up the soul of Gothic. (Cook, Wedderburn 1903-1912, vol. 10, p. 183)

In Ruskin - who reads *Elements of Chemistry* (1827) by Edward Turner, M.D. - the chemical analogy is adopted to describe the associative powers of the mind, or a complex period in the history of architecture. In Walter Pater's «Preface» to *The Renaissance. Studies in Art and Poetry* (1877), the work of the chemist is referred to again, now to describe the passionate response of the aesthetic critic - the reaction to beauty that even more than subjective taste can affect the senses. Beauty indeed, rather than described by abstract formulas or distant hagiography, has to do with those impressions which affect and stimulate the intimate response of the beholder, the reader, the critic. Walter Pater, like a modern chemist, works as it were in a scientific laboratory, where strange mixed elements are analysed, tracing the latent energy of an image or an idea, from its impure natural state to a condition of purity that may permit its identification and classification:

And the function of the aesthetic critic is to distinguish, to analyse, and separate from its adjuncts, the virtue by which a picture, a landscape, a fair personality in life or in a book, produces this special impression of beauty or pleasure, to indicate what the source of that impression is, and under what conditions it is experienced. His end is reached when he has disengaged that virtue, and noted it, as a chemist notes some natural element, for himself and others. (Hill 1980, pp. xx-xxi)

Indeed, while dealing with the Renaissance, the accent falls «on the coming of what is called 'the modern spirit', with its realism, its appeal to experience»: thus Leonardo da Vinci would anticipate the ideas of modern science, and Pater is fascinated by the transmutation Leonardo seems to operate, carrying the spirit of ancient alchemy into his scientific version of knowledge. Ruskin and Pater will be the first in a line of critics – T.S. Eliot included – who use chemistry to describe the personal reaction to art, its constituents, and the artist's imagination.

Dedicated to Pater, also Vernon Lee's *Euphorion. Being Studies of the Antique and the Medieval in the Renaissance* (1884) describes periods in human history, culture and art as so many landscapes dyed in different chemical colours: «For a period in history is like a more or less extended real landscape: it has, if you will, actual, chemically defined colours» (Lee 1884, vol. 1, pp. 9-10). More specifically, Lee moves from the metaphor of the chemical dyes to that of the gases, and the fascinating, potentially poisonous gaseous mixture that may arise from their mutual chemical reaction:

The Renaissance has interested and interests me, [...] for the manner in which the many things inherited from both Middle Ages and Renaissance, [...] acted and reacted upon each other, united in concord or antagonism; forming, like the gases of the chemist, new things, sometimes like and sometimes unlike themselves and each other; producing now some unknown substance of excellence and utility, at other times some baneful element, known but too well elsewhere, but unexpected here. (vol. 1, pp. 7-8)

But again, as with Walter Pater, the principal function of the chemistry metaphor or simile is that of throwing its prismatic light upon the present, so as to trace back from antiquity, and specifically from the myth of the Italian Renaissance, the notion of its impure energy, and its hidden, yet threatening, potential. The character of *Euphorion* is the case in point. An exemplary missing link within the discourse of atavism, highlighted by Charles Darwin in *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex* (1871), *Euphorion* is remodeled by Vernon Lee as part of our cultural memory (See Canani 2015):

Not only is our modern culture no child of Faustus and Helena, but it is the complex descendant, strangely featured by atavism from various sides, of many and various civilizations; and the eighteenth century, so far from being a Faustus evoking as his bride the long dead Helen of Antiquity, was in itself a curiously varied grandchild or great-grandchild of such a marriage, its every moral feature, its every intellectual movement proclaiming how much of its being was inherited from Antiquity. (vol. 1, pp. 6-7)

The critical discourse, which in fin de siècle England activates the passionate reception of the unorthodox mixture in the arts, religions and philosophy of the Italian Renaissance, has its catalyst function well beyond the category of taste, owing to its accent on modern culture, and the modern mind, within the context of the Victorian cultural orthodoxies: Victorian purity versus Renaissance impurity. But it is not only a matter of art criticism, of periodization. The function of chemistry is to vouchsafe the mixture between the pure and the impure which characterizes so many assessments of the nature of the Renaissance, but also underscores its seductive images with pointed references to the present.

## 5 Pure/Impure in the Laboratory of Literature

Such a world is indeed «the world in which we live»: the one R.L. Stevenson evokes in his essay «Pan's Pipes» (1881), where a distant nostalgia for one of the mythical figures of the Renaissance is translated into the modern dilemma which actively engages philosophers and chemists:

The world in which we live has been variously said and sung by the most ingenious poets and philosophers: these reducing it to formulae and chemical ingredients, those striking the lyre in high-sounding measures for the handiwork of God. What experience supplies is of a mingled tissue, and the choosing mind has much to reject before it can get together the materials of a theory. (Stevenson 1925, p. 125)

The figure of Pan, for all its mythological antique trimmings, survives at once in the terrors and desires of modern humankind: as the iconic representation of a psychological condition, insofar as «There are moments when the mind refuses to be satisfied with evolution, and demands a ruddier representation of the sum of man's experience» (p. 128). Like a chemist in his laboratory, Stevenson remarks that to extract a formula - to distil and purify the compound of mind and body - looks like an impossible task, despite the proud assertions of modern science:

To certain smoke-dried spirits matter and motion and elastic æthers, and the hypothesis of this to that spectacled professor, tell a speaking story; but for youth and all ductile and congenial minds, Pan is not dead, but of all the classic hierarchy alone survives in triumph. (p. 126)

Chemistry indeed is not the only answer to the fundamental questions of modern life. Panic terror, joy and desire are not accounted for, inasmuch as «Science writes of the world as if with the cold finger of a starfish» (p. 128). Stevenson will give full fictional stature to this opposition in work to come.

Chemistry, however, proceeds in its own triumphant right, not only as the recurring metaphor for the analytical process required by the present condition of England, but as a science most prominent in the epistemic horizon of the times. Chemistry is the object of the «pseudo-frank confession» offered by the great chemist and wise criminal Count Fosco in Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White* (1859-1860). Fosco, who is affiliated to the Italian Carboneria (and thus an early member of that brotherhood of chemists employed in manufacturing bombs all over Europe),<sup>5</sup> gives the reader a «rhapsody on mind-altering substances» – on chemistry indeed – that according to John Sutherland «reverberates to the topics of the day» (Sutherland 2008, pp. xviii-xix).

Chemistry, especially, has always had irresistible attractions for me, from the enormous, the illimitable power which the knowledge of it confers. Chemists, I assert it emphatically, might sway, if they pleased, the destinies of humanity. Let me explain this before I go further.

Mind, they say, rules the world. But what rules the mind? The body. The body (follow me closely here) lies at the mercy of the most omnipotent of all potentates – the Chemist. [...] On my sacred word of honor, it is lucky for society that modern chemists are, by incomprehensible good fortune, the most harmless of mankind. The mass are worthy fathers of families who keep shops. The few are philosophers besotted with admiration for the sound of their own lecturing voices; [...]. Thus Society escapes; and the illimitable power of chemistry remains the slave of the most superficial and the most insignificant ends. (pp. 617-618)

According to Fosco, chemistry is endowed with illimitable power, so that even an artist like Shakespeare, a scientist like Newton, a warrior like Alexander the Great, would be automatically transformed by a chemical potion into their undeserving counterparts, into low replicas made of the vilest material: into a drooling writer, a stolid mind, a coward. It is not difficult to view in this statement the ultimate result of Dr. Jekyll's experiment, narrated in Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886).

Stevenson's hero, apparently one of the most respectable members of the scientific community, will have to face his replica, which he produces after an experiment performed owing to his notions in chemistry.<sup>6</sup> Dr. Lan-

5 On bombs and detonators using chemistry and clock mechanism in Stevenson's and Conrad's fiction, see Arnett Melchiori (1985).

6 In his *Annotated Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, Dury reminds us that the scientific basis for the transformation was criticized by Bennet, James and Bridges. See Dury (2005, p. 166, n. 1).

yon's narrative aptly fills the stage with all the chemical paraphernalia, insisting on the peculiarly changing dyes:<sup>7</sup>

The powders were neatly enough made up, but not with the nicety of the dispensing chemist; so that it was plain they were of Jekyll's private manufacture; and when I opened one of the wrappers I found what seemed to me a simple crystalline salt of a white colour. The phial, to which I next turned my attention, might have been about half-full of a blood-red liquor, which was highly pungent to the sense of smell and seemed to me to contain phosphorus and some volatile ether. At the other ingredients I could make no guess.

[...]

[Hyde] measured out a few minims of the red tincture and added one of the powders. The mixture, which was at first of a reddish hue, began, in proportion as the crystals melted, to brighten in colour, to effervesce audibly, and to throw off small fumes of vapour. Suddenly and at the same moment, the ebullition ceased and the compound changed to a dark purple, which faded again more slowly to a watery green. (Dury 2005, pp. 154-157)

Faith in chemistry undergoes, in this ambiguously recited drama, the same oscillations which affect human nature, and previously eroded all notions of pure taste. Confidently preparing the tincture, Dr. Jekyll wants to split the mingled duplicity of his nature into its essential units, identified as the higher and the lower elements of his soul. A Ruskinian ambition, indeed. From what he deems impure, he wants to distil pure, separate identities. What he achieves, instead, is a smaller replica, uglier, ape-like, as far as we can know, energetic and wicked, who increasingly haunts his good self, even when Jekyll does not assume the potion. Trying to escape the persecution from his lower replica, Dr. Jekyll resorts to chemistry, as the natural source of a possible solution.

My provision of the salt, which had never been renewed since the date of the first experiment, began to run low. I sent out for a fresh supply, and mixed the draught; the ebullition followed, and the first change of colour, not the second; I drank it and it was without efficiency. You will learn from Poole how I have had London ransacked; it was in vain. (p. 185)

Despite these efforts, Jekyll's attempt to get rid of his wicked double is unsuccessful. In this moral parable on the human condition, served as a lurid

7 The blood-red colour of the liquid also evokes Doctor Faustus's blood used as ink. See C. de Stasio (1982).

gothic story where terror is enhanced by the rational aura of science and the high status of chemistry, the supreme irony is unleashed at the very ending. In his final statement, Dr. Jekyll has to admit: «I am now persuaded that my first supply was impure, and that it was that unknown impurity which lent efficacy to the draught» (p. 185).

Stevenson did intentionally point out – with his man of science – the fundamental question, apparently ignored in the mingled tissue of Victorian society: where did the impure element lie? Not in ideology, gender, class, race, not in the hegemonic discourse of history: those were based on clear-cut categories, ideally pure, resting on sharply-defined borderlines. But then critics and intellectuals, on the one hand, and writers of fiction, on the other, would focus on changing dyes, gaseous mixtures, aggregations of atoms of diverse elements to describe the present condition, whose nature demanded the acknowledgement of impurity. In his story Stevenson precipitates notions about pure and impure substances, to the extent that he seems to offer an impurity theory, with Dr. Jekyll's last statement of the case. Critics dwell on *Jekyll and Hyde* as on a Doppelgänger narrative strategy, made more poignant by the impossibility to reflect the double in the psychic mirror, or by the sheer absence of Hyde's face and its description in the very text he physically inhabits (Ambrosini 2001; Sutherland 1998). In the context of this article, however, the element of purity becomes paramount: together with the final acknowledgment of the impurity inextricably mingled with it.

Indeed, like Collins before him, here Stevenson provides a mixture of different literary elements: his story suggests a systematic revision of the traditional gothic conventions, starting from the transformation of the castle into the cabinet, and the adaptation of the gothic chase to a pattern of different genres as so many screens hiding the ultimate discovery. To incorporate such diversity within one single narrative meant indeed to embrace a composite, ornamental style – a procedure which marks the literary offer towards the end of the century, with imitation and incorporation of so many specialized discourses. If a formula should be suggested for the process here described, we could indicate that, from high art and taste, we shift to replicas and fashion, and end up in sensation and professionalism (Costantini 2015), or in the mechanical trade, so despised by Reynolds and Ruskin alike. Such literary products are similar to baroque compositions, owing to the blurring of frame and content, the multiplicity of genre perspectives, omniscience and monologue, simultaneity of physical and spiritual, realism and fantasy, excess of surface ornamentation. Professional writers attract and entice a mass readership by offering a democratic proliferation of spicy replicas. Selective taste now agrees with the eclectic bulimia of the consumers of literature. Thus the well-known, frequently quoted tag by the Italian baroque poet Giovan Battista Marino – «è del poeta il fin la meraviglia» – may well be used to describe,

*mutatis mutandis*, a condition in which the sensation effect has become paramount to art and to literary production.

Against the admission of the fundamental impurity of the mingled tissue of life, of the impure nature of man, and the arts he or she may produce, the twentieth-century avant-garde will operate with a clean hard sweep, a ruthless formalism, a move into pure abstraction as the strategy needed to purify the proliferation of images which swamp the Victorian market, the Victorian home, the eyes of the beholder, the taste of the reader. Soon, however, Kitsch and Camp will re-affirm the domain of impurity, as the only alternative we are offered, within a horizon where purity means sheer emptiness and solitude. But this is another story.

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