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Aesthetics, Government, Freedom

Tony Bennett

How are we to see now the relations between literature and freedom? This question is unavoidably posed by the theme of the conference – *Literature and Liberation* – that was organised to celebrate Graham Martin’s life and work. It is posed too by Martin’s own assessment of the close, almost intrinsic connection between the two in his endorsement of Arnold Kettle’s view that ‘Literature had its own special contribution to make to that process of liberation, and the critic’s job was to help literature have that effect’.¹ My purpose here, however, is not to augment literature’s ‘freedom effects’ but to probe the historical and discursive conditions which make intelligible the relations between criticism, freedom and literature that Martin advocated. I shall, in doing so, broaden my focus beyond the sphere of the specifically literary to include the relations between aesthetics and freedom more generally. The perspective from which I broach these questions is that provided by post-Foucauldian debates on liberal government and the role these accord freedom not as the *vis-a-vis* of government but as a mechanism that is central to its operations. This will involve a consideration of the respects in which the relations between literature, aesthetics, and freedom have operated as parts of a distinctive field of government rather than as an outside of government capable of furnishing the grounds for its transcendental critique in the name of liberation.

A part of my concern here – although more as background than as its centre – is to offer a historical framing of the Left Leavism that nurtured Martin’s understanding of the role of criticism, by tracing *its* affiliation to the post-Kantian construction of culture as a realm of freedom.² As Kant put it: ‘The production in a rational being of an aptitude for any ends whatever of its own choosing, consequently of the aptitude of a being –in its freedom, is *culture [Kultur]*’.³ The influence of Kant’s account of the relations between aesthetics, culture and freedom in Britain was, of course, distinct in *its* form. Rather than generating a tradition of formalised aesthetic theories, as it did in Germany, its influence was mediated via Coleridge and the Romantics⁴ and thence, via its connections to the question of character that preoccupied liberal political thought, from Mill through to Arnold, with debates about the role of education.⁵ But we can hear its echoes well into the twentieth century.

We can hear them, for example, in Jonathan Rose’s *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes*, in the account he offers of the role that a literary or art education had for generations of working-class students – whether in the WEA or at Ruskin College – who expressed their appreciation of its benefits precisely in terms of the dual relations of disinterestedness and freedom, and their influence on both self and social reform, that is the Kantian bequest. Take, for example, the following comments on the value of education from the 1936 *Learn and Live* survey of WEA students:

The giving of prominence to things of the mind and spirit and the encouraging of an attitude of mind which places man first and his economic function second; freedom from commercialism; disinterestedness. All of which, I believe, go to stimulate the student to social service.

[...]

By then I had realised that some people fully appreciated and enjoyed life, because, I thought, they had solved life's problems for themselves, and the rest of the world were mere drudges, slaves, and drunkards, and I did not wish to be classified with this latter class.⁶

And we can hear them in the suggestion by the literary critic, John Carey, that reading literature might serve as an effective antidote to binge-drinking.⁷ In his polemic *What Good are the Arts?* Carey discusses a report in *The Times* in which two fifteen-year old schoolgirls construe their binge-drinking as an attempt to escape the boredom of life in a small Gloucestershire village. Connecting this to the decline of the public library, Carey prescribes reading good literature as a mind-enhancing and life-changing escape from boredom in contrast to the merely temporary escape offered by drugs, drink, and antidepressants. As such, he presents exposure to good literature as an alternative to the attempt to tackle binge drinking by punitive or corrective measures. In doing so, he proposes a contemporary version of nineteenth-century dreams of luring the working man away from the pub and into the library or art gallery as a means of combating drunkenness and the all the social ills (wife beating, promiscuity, and unchecked population growth) that accompanied it.⁸

On the face of it these might seem to be two quite different 'takes' on the relations between freedom and culture that Kant proposes: the first, connecting it to the self-emancipation of the working class – culture, as the escape from necessity, representing the free pursuit of knowledge as an end in itself; and the second inscribing culture as a mechanism of government that works through the means of self-regulation it makes possible. But they are closely linked: the history of the relations between adult education in Britain and the development of literary education show how closely the former was modelled on the latter as a space of free expression in which, via their responses to the literary text, students were encouraged to express their selves in a specially controlled settings (the tutorial) in ways that made their thoughts and feelings subject to correction and revision in the light of the guidance offered by an experienced reader (the tutor) and their fellow students.⁹ 'Its essential characteristic,' Albert Mansbridge said of the WEA Tutorial Class, 'is freedom. Each student is a teacher, each teacher is a student'.¹⁰ It was, indeed, as Ian Hunter has shown in compelling detail, precisely this extension of the use of literature for elite forms of self-cultivation to the population more generally via the public schooling system and adult education that placed the literary class at the heart of a new machinery of self-government.¹¹

The argument I want to propose here is that, if we are to understand both of these cases, we need to consider how the attribute of uselessness that constituted the original defining attribute of the aesthetic was redefined so that it could serve as an instrument of government. I shall look first at the ways in which Kant transformed the connections between the uselessness or disinterestedness that had been ascribed to aesthetic judgement in the culture of civic humanism and the role this played in his critique of the relations between Christian Wolff's aesthetics and the *polizeiwissenschaften* of the Prussian state.¹² I shall then look back beyond Kant to review the relations between Shaftesbury's aesthetics and Adam Smith's 'man within' in the development of eighteenth century forms of liberal government, before returning to relate these historical excursions to the issues that are at stake in the present concerning the relations between aesthetics, government and freedom.

From government to self-government

Wolffe's *The Real Happiness of a People under a Philosophical King* offers an economical summary of his conception of the relationship that ought to obtain between philosophy and government. The ideal is '*that if Kings or Rulers are Philosophers, or Philosophers King~then it is that the End of Society is obtained*', where that end is envisaged as an ordered set of social and political relations governed by the principles of police.¹³ The '*common Good*' is secured when the philosopher-king is able to bring about '*the highest Good, which every individual can attain to in this World, according to the different State he is in*'.¹⁴ The role of philosophy in this regard consists in the logic of subsumptive judgement: that is, in its ability to bring every particular case under the heading of a determinate concept in order that the requirements of the common good can be accurately and consistently determined from one case to the next.

The difficulty that judgements of beauty posed for Wolffe concerned their implications for the relations between the lower sensate faculty of intuition and the higher faculty of reason which, in the context of the police state of Frederick the Great's Prussia, functioned as a coded reference to the relations between rulers and ruled: that is, between the enlightened absolutism of the monarch and the state bureaucracy on the one hand, and their unenlightened subjects on the other. If beauty, as a form of perfection, can be sensibly intuited and is therefore potentially available to everyone, what is the relationship between this and the rational knowledge of perfection achieved by the higher faculty of reason? Or, when translated into questions of governance: what is the relationship between the confused perception of the people if, in matters pertaining to beauty, they are allowed the power of judgement and the subsumptive rationality of kings and philosophers that is to guide the ordering of the state? Wolffe's solution, in allowing the existence of the intuitive or sensible perception of beauty, is to do so only on the condition that it is subject to correction and revision by being brought under the influence of a rational appreciation of beauty governed by definite rules of judgement. The higher faculty is thus to raise the lower faculty from its confused and dim appreciation of perfection just as enlightened rulers are to lift the unenlightened out of confusion and darkness through a didactic programme, legislated from above that does not involve any self-activity on the part of the governed.

In this revival of the Hobbesian view in which the unification of the manifold results from the political act of sovereignty, the social order is governed from above – just as the lower faculty is ordered by the higher one – by the king and philosopher-bureaucrats who administer the affairs of state in the light of their rational understanding of the common welfare. Government thus by-passes the individual members of civil society who are, so to speak, to be coerced into freedom and autonomy rather than either possessing these as natural attributes or achieving them through their own activity. The role of the citizen is to be led into willing obedience by learning, through public discussion, to understand the reason that is embodied in the law. The common man, however, is to be led into blind obedience through a perpetuation of the politics of spectacle associated with earlier, unenlightened forms of sovereignty:

The common man, who depends on his senses and can barely use his reason, is unable to grasp what royal majesty is; but through the things which he takes in through his eyes and which affect his other senses, he knows majesty, power and force with an indistinct but clear concept.¹⁵

It was as a consequence of Wolffe's denial of any generally distributed capacity for independent judgement that questions of aesthetics became so politically loaded in mid- and

late eighteenth-century Germany. Caygill singles out two figures who played key roles in dismantling the Wolffian philosophical apparatus by probing the aporias associated with his account of judgements of beauty: Baumgarten and Herder. Baumgarten's early work is conventionally regarded as remaining within the order of Wolffe's system in seeking to establish a scientific basis for recognising the aesthetic as a distinct and separate faculty, thereby effecting a procedural subordination of the sensible to reason. While concurring with this view, Caygill argues that, in his later *Aesthetica*, Baumgarten makes the relations between sensate judgements of beauty and reason both continuous and discontinuous in ways that opened up the possibility for new relations between governors and governed. Since, in this work, aesthetic judgement and rational knowledge differ only in degree and not in kind, and since, for Baumgarten, the aesthetic operates as a field of independent judgement that is not automatically subservient to the higher court of reason ('My recognition of the perfection and imperfection of things is judgement. Therefore I have the power of judgement,), the aesthetic is opened up as an area of self-activity within the context of what remains a tutelary relation of judgement (the people/citizenry) to reason (the state).¹⁶ Herder's *Sculpture* is more radical in locating judgement within a dynamic economy of the senses in which the privileging of sight associated with painting is discrowned by being subordinated to touch. This functions as the organising centre for an economy of the senses in which society, rather than being 'ordered as if on a visual surface by a superior eye', is produced as citizens form themselves into an object for their own contemplation through their relations to sculpture in what Jason Greiger, in his introduction to Herder's text, describes as a combination of 'spatial seeing and an anamnesis of touch'.¹⁷ Judgement here, then, is a formative activity – 'a reflective process of self-sculpting' – breaking with the visual paradigm and its 'corollary of a passive, policed subject'.¹⁸

These, then, are some of the relevant coordinates against which Kant's *Critique of Judgement* needs to be set.¹⁹ Published in 1790, it played a key role in the debates leading to the 1806 reforms which marked the transition from the police to the legal state in view of the place it produced for the aesthetic by inscribing *it* in a conception of Culture as process of free self-making that is enacted in civil society. Coming after his critiques of pure and practical reason, Kant's account of the disinterestedness of aesthetic judgement articulates the logic that orchestrates the relations between these three faculties as complementary parts of a practice of freedom. As such it completes Kant's alternative to Wolffe's state-centred account of reason as necessarily depending on subsumptive principles for its exercise. Whereas these require that all objects are subsumed under universals, Kant's system is a relational one in which judgement determines the real relations of attraction and negation between objects within the systems, or horizons, of relations that are established by the dispositions of the subject arising from the faculties of knowledge, desire, and feeling. In order to reconcile his account of the faculties with the practice of freedom, Gilles Deleuze argues, Kant sought, in the case of each faculty, to identify a higher form of that faculty so that it might find, in that higher form, the law of its own exercise within itself and thus not be obliged to defer to any external authority. It is, moreover, through this higher form that the subject is placed in charge of the world and the interest of reason is secured. For when, in the case of knowledge, 'the faculty of knowledge finds its own law in itself', it then 'legislates in this way over the objects of knowledge'.²⁰

In the case of the faculty of feeling, however, the higher form of this faculty – aesthetic judgement, the sense of the beautiful – neither legislates over objects nor secures an interest in reason. It cannot do the latter since it is, by definition, disinterested and so is independent of both the speculative interest and the practical interest which motivate, respectively, the

faculties of knowledge and desire. It is not legislative since it is, again by definition, always particular ('this rose is beautiful' not 'roses in general are beautiful', since such generalisations imply logical comparisons that are the province of the faculty of knowledge) and so cannot subject a field of objects to its exercise. Powerless to legislate over objects, 'judgement can only be *heautonomous*, that is, it legislates over itself'.²¹ But in doing so it provides a basis for harmonising the exercise of all the faculties. The supposition that aesthetic judgement is universal, and so communicable to all without the intervention of concepts, provides the basis for a common sense based on the free interplay of the faculties in which imagination and the understanding are brought into a free, undetermined accord with one another. Aesthetic judgement, as the higher form of the faculty of feeling, thus provides for the free subjective harmony between the faculties that is necessary if the other faculties are to perform the legislative roles that Kant assigns them.

As is well known, for Kant, the higher faculty of feeling is split into two forms: the sense of beauty that is experienced in relation to works of art, and the sense of the sublime that is experienced in relation to nature. Deleuze, glossing this division and Kant's higher estimation of the sublime, notes Kant's dictum that 'he who leaves a museum to turn towards the beauties of nature deserves respect'.²² However, at this point, with the liberal subject of aesthetic judgement now almost fully assembled and, when translated to the English context, ready to set off to either the Lake District or to the nearest art gallery, I want to backtrack to consider the earlier history of the relations between the notions of disinterestedness, aesthetic judgement and freedom that were associated with the practices of civic humanism and eighteenth-century discourses of taste. For this will help to clarify how Kant deployed aspects of these traditions to undermine Wolff's system and how, in the process, he transformed them.

Uselessness, aesthetics and social ordering

The general context for the eighteenth-century concern with the relations between taste and social ordering is provided by the need, post-1688, to reconfigure the relations between state and civil society. There are a number of considerations to be factored in here: the (relatively) unfettered growth of market society and, as a part of *this*, the undermining of feudal status and power hierarchies and the declining influence of sumptuary codes as a way of prescribing and publicly marking social distinctions; the continuing potential, in the aftermath of the Civil War, for sectarian religious divisions to produce turbulent social division; and the reduced power of sovereignty given the reduced authority of the monarchy and the continued potency of territorial divisions within the nation in spite (or because) of the enforcement of political unity on England, Scotland and Wales. If these are the factors that Paul Guyer singles out for attention, Mary Poovey adds the collapse, by 1688, of William Petty's project of political arithmetic that had aimed to substitute a programme of 'government through information' for sovereignty by proposing a rational classification of population by means of economic function as a grid for social ordering that would displace the social disordering of religious factionalism.²³ For the failure of this meant that, unlike their continental counterparts, social theorists in Britain were unable to look to the bureaucratic procedures of *polizeiwissenschaften* to provide a mechanism of social ordering and looked, instead, to taste, as a mechanism that might emerge out of the free activities of individuals in their capacity as consumers.

The variety of positions that were staked out in the context of the eighteenth century debates over taste is too wide to be fully reviewed here. Instead, I shall focus on two figures – the

Earl of Shaftesbury and Adam Smith – to trace the formation of two aspects of the eighteenth-century discourse of aesthetics that bear significantly on its later assemblage into technologies of liberal governance. The first concerns the influence of Shaftesbury's conception of the role of aesthetic judgement in opening up a new space within the self – a space of self-inspection and self-reform – whose uneven distribution becomes one of the main means of marking the frontiers of liberal government. The second concerns how the notion of disinterestedness is reworked from its association, within the culture of civic humanism, with the independence of the landed gentry into the 'purposiveness without purpose' of the Kantian conception of aesthetic appreciation as an end in itself, and the role this plays in Kant's conception of self governance as a practice of freedom.

I begin with Shaftesbury in view of his location at the junction of two traditions. First, Caygill tells us, he is heir to the critique of Hobbes by the seventeenth-century natural rights theorist Cumberland who, in contrast to the tradition that leads from Hobbes via Pufendorf to the police state, disputes the ordering power of sovereignty by seeing civil society as being like a work of art: regular and proportional in its functioning and constitution, but without having been legislated or produced by any political authority, testifying, instead, to the 'invisible hand' of a divine providence. Second, Josef Chytry traces his relationship to the Florentine tradition of civic humanism and thence to the neo-Roman conception of freedom.²⁴ According to this view, it is the duty of government to secure the conditions for freedom by providing the political institutions in which citizens can take part in civic affairs free from those relations of dependency on or servitude to others that will topple them from virtue by making them susceptible to corruption or intimidation by others.²⁵

This Florentine legacy was reworked in the context of Shaftesbury's concern, in the post 1688 'Whig settlement', to define and shape the norms of gentlemanly culture as codes of politeness conceived, according to Lawrence Klein, as an interactive conversational practice that served both to mark out distinctions within the body politic and to distribute authority in new ways in a society that was post-courtly, post-godly, pre-professional and pre-meritocratic.²⁶ By constructing an intersubjective domain through the exchange of feelings and opinions via discourse on the arts and letters, the culture of politeness assumed differences of opinion while also operating as a mechanism for coordinating and reconciling those differences, allowing the self to be formed in dialogic relations with others. In its more demotic versions, this culture was connected to the declining influence of the court and church and to the rise of the new forms of urbanism associated with the development of the West End and of spa cities with their network of institutions (coffee houses, clubs, gardens, promenades, and theatres) which organised new forms of sociability between elements of the aristocracy, the landed gentry, and mercantile and business interests. In such contexts the 'paradigm of politeness offered an alternative to the reliance on traditional authoritative institutions for ordering the discursive world, because it sought processes within the babble, diversity, and liberty of the new discursive world of the Town that would produce order and direction'.²⁷ The model for Shaftesbury's conception of conversational practice was a more limited one related closely to the position of the Whig gentry. Its ideal form, Klein argues, was that of gentlemen conversing in a coach in a country house park. Here politeness had little to do with the multiple-stranded dialogism of town life but operated, instead, as a counter to the impolite and authoritarian practices of clerics and virtuosi.

However, it also operated as a counter to the Hobbesian account of sovereignty and its role in the production of social and political order. For Shaftesbury, polite discourse on the beautiful was to provide a basis for political authority and social order that depended neither on divine

right nor on Hobbesian might but one which aimed, rather, for the governed to be ‘all sharers (though at so far a distance from each other) in the government of themselves’.²⁸ Polite discourse about questions of taste and judgement was to be translated into an inner mechanism of self-governance through the surgical splitting of the self that Shaftesbury effected by translating the dialogical aspects of sociable conversation into a means through which the self conducts a dialogue with, and regulates, itself by bringing its many parts into harmony. Shaftesbury proposes, as a model for this splitting of the self, the dramatic soliloquy through which the character ‘carries on the business of self dissection’ via an inner conversation with absent others, thereby becoming ‘two distinct persons ... pupil and preceptor’ so that he is thereby able to both teach and learn at the same time: a model of self-governance achieved through the mechanism of conversation.²⁹

This turns out, however, to be the adjustment of the individual to an already-ordered order. Although a strong opponent of the church, Shaftesbury believed in a divinely ordered cosmos governed by principles of mathematical proportion which the individual could come to apprehend directly and freely (rather than through the mediation of a priesthood) through the practice of aesthetic judgement conceived as a disinterested contemplation of the mathematical proportion that governed the orders of beauty. ‘For Shaftesbury, then,’ as Poovey summarises the position, ‘human subjectivity – the ground of the liberal governmentality – was formed in the image of mathematical order, and thus was naturally attracted to it. Society could be orderly ... because individuals ... wanted nothing more than to actualise the order they perceived in themselves.’³⁰

There are a number of aspects to the role that disinterestedness plays in Shaftesbury’s aesthetic. The aspect Poovey refers to here concerns Shaftesbury’s importation into aesthetic debate of the principles of disinterested observation associated with the role of ‘reliable witnesses’ in establishing the truth claims of the empirical sciences.³¹ A second aspect refers to his severance of aesthetic pleasure from possession or ownership (although, as Guyer shows, not from all forms of utility) as a necessary condition for aesthetic judgement to be formed through conversational practice.³² The most significant aspect, however, is, in common with the culture of civic humanism more generally, his limitation of the capacity for disinterestedness to those (i) whose possession of landed property freed them from dependence on others, (ii) who are entitled to bear arms, and (iii) whose liberal occupations gave them the time and intellectual capacity to have a care for the public weal free of self-interest.³³ This excluded ‘rustics’, ‘plain artisans and people of lower rank’, and those in mechanical occupations whose all-consuming and routine nature afforded neither the time nor the capacity for disinterested contemplation of either art or the affairs of state.³⁴ Paulson summarises the social and political logic of the position as follows:

In this way, in these terms, he invented and defined modern aesthetics. But if he replaced the deity with Beauty, he also shifted attention from God the governor (if not creator) to the men who can perceive and judge for themselves. In the same way, Shaftesbury the Whig (grandson of the great first earl) replaced a king and his priests with an oligarchy of nobles In terms of aesthetics, the civic humanist discourse that he expounded turned attention from the maker, the painter or the architect, to the men of taste, the connoisseurs, and the collectors. Shaftesbury’s politics and aesthetics join in his concept of disinterestedness: as a property owner, the civic humanist is above considerations of ambition, possession, consumption, and desire, and therefore is capable of a ‘rational and refined’ contemplation of both morality and beauty – capable of both governing men and judging art.³⁵

Unsurprisingly this conception of disinterestedness was roundly criticised as both a creature and cover for the interests of the landed faction: Hogarth satirises it when he notes that ‘it has ever been observ’d at all auctions of pictures, that the very worst painters sit as the most profound judges, and are trusted, I suppose, on account of their *disinterestedness*’.³⁶ This and similar criticisms provide a template for what has been and remains, in the work of Bourdieu and the literature it has inspired, a criticism of the disinterestedness of the aesthetic as a mask for special interests, legitimating and perpetuating divisions of wealth and distinction.³⁷ However, I want here to take a different tack by drawing on Jacques Rancière’s approach to the aesthetic as a system for the distribution of the sensible which operates, he argues, less to legitimate inequalities than to produce and mark a political division: an unequal distribution of political and civic entitlements according to which only those whose position allows them to become judges of art are able to take part in government as both governors and governed.³⁸ For it is this aspect of the history of the social inscription of aesthetic discourse that is centrally relevant to the relations between aesthetics and liberal government in view of its role in producing a position in political space which confers on those who can exercise command over and control of the self the capacity to direct the conduct of others.

Shaftesbury’s account, in the *Characteristics*, of the organisation of a space for dialogue within the self that he models on the soliloquy has proved particularly important here as a mechanism which proved to be detachable from its particular anchorage in the landed gentry in Shaftesbury’s work to form a part of more expansive conceptions of liberal government while simultaneously marking the frontiers – of class, gender, and race – beyond which it could not be extended. As Vivienne Brown and others have noted, however, Shaftesbury frequently mixed his metaphors, often switching from the auditory associations of the soliloquy to the auditory / spectatorial imagery of ‘a vocal looking glass’ to describe how the self is split into two so that it might monitor and act on itself.³⁹ And there are places where the soliloquy is described exclusively in spectatorial terms, as men become regular spectators of themselves in order to be governors of themselves:

And, what was of singular note in these *magical Glasses*; it wou’d happen that, by constant and long Inspection, the Partys accustom’d to the Practice, wou’d acquire a peculiar *speculative Habit*; so as virtually to carry about with ‘em a sort of Pocket–Mirrour, always ready, and in use.⁴⁰

It is this mechanism, primarily in its spectatorial form, but still with traces of the auditory associations of the soliloquy, that Adam Smith develops in his account of ‘the man within’ in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. Working through norms of reciprocity – of the mutual mirroring of the views of others – that Smith derives from Hume’s account of natural sympathy, this inner mechanism of self–inspection accounts for how men become governors of themselves:

We endeavour to examine our own conduct as we imagine any other fair and impartial spectator would examine it. If, upon placing ourselves in his situation, we thoroughly enter into all the passions and motives which influenced it, we approve of it, by sympathy with the approbation of this supposed equitable judge. If otherwise, we enter into his disapprobation, and condemn it.⁴¹

The invocation of natural sympathy here transforms the functioning of this specular mechanism. In Shaftesbury's account of the aesthetic, judgement, while shaped by the subject's conversational interlocutors, is ultimately validated by the belief, as Howard Caygill summarises it, (i) that there is a providence which disposes of all things into (ii) a beautiful order which (iii) gives to human beings the capacity to recognise and act in accordance with that order, which (iv) thus ensures a harmonious ordering of individual judgements and the general good without the need for state intervention.⁴² By contrast, Vivienne Brown argues, in *The Theory of Moral Sentiment* 'truly moral outcomes are open; they are not rule-bound or obligatory but are the result of an open process of debate between the moral agent and the impartial spectator, in which the final outcome is neither predetermined nor legislated upon by a theological determinism'.⁴³ Here, before the 'invisible hand' of *The Wealth of Nations*, the catoptric production of the unity of the manifold through a Hobbesian act of sovereignty is replaced by the emergence of order through the reciprocal adjustments of conduct arising from the 'sideways glances' that are produced by the system of mirrors through which the members of civil society view their own conduct through the eyes of others.⁴⁴

However, as with Shaftesbury, this 'specular morality' is reserved for those whose station in life equips them with the capacity to acquire it. Smith does not consider women as possible candidates for this role, and he discounts both savages and the mob, albeit on different grounds. The savage, he contends, is driven by the harsh exigencies of necessity to exercise a Spartan discipline which affords neither the time nor the space to give or expect sympathy from those around him.⁴⁵ His, then, is an iron-like self-command driven entirely by need. The mob, who, like Shaftesbury, Smith represents as still being dazzled by spectacle, are to be governed by leading them to obey sound moral codes routinely via the mechanism of habit rather than that of self-conscious assent acquired through the mechanism of 'specular morality'. However, Smith is also clear that, even among the higher social classes, the capacity for an inner directed specular morality is only available to 'a select, though, I am afraid but small party' whose capacity for 'studious and careful' observation allows them to discern that the path of the wise and virtuous is 'more exquisitely beautiful in its outline' and more worthy of emulation than is the 'gaudy and glittering' model of wealth and power that impresses itself 'upon the notice of every wandering eye'.⁴⁶ This appeal to aesthetic criteria as a means of sifting those who are most fully capable of exercising self-government, and thus the most qualified to be responsible for the government of others, echoes Smith's earlier appeal to the perfection embodied in works of art as a means of calibrating the degree to which individuals meet or fall short of the standards of self-command that good governance requires.⁴⁷

Cultural assemblages of freedom and government

However, enough said: I have, since leaving Kant, tried to sketch in some of the elements of aesthetic discourse that were developed in eighteenth century British debates about aesthetics which, as I showed earlier, Kant later reconfigured into a new set of articulations of the relations between freedom, aesthetic judgement and government. A proper account of these developments would, however, clearly need a more meticulous treatment of the ways in which such conceptions of aesthetic culture were shaped by, and as a part of, the development of new material assemblages of cultural governance in which it was precisely by being set apart from the social that aesthetic culture was rendered useful as a means of acting on it governmentally.⁴⁸ Such an account, the principles of which I have sketched elsewhere, would focus on the material, technical and institutional processes through which aesthetic culture was made tangible, visible and performable in new settings (museums, art

museums, concert halls, libraries, literary and scientific associations) which assembled texts, artefacts, techniques, and persons in new relations to each other.⁴⁹ In the process, it was also made actionable in new ways as, in being disconnected from the networks in which aesthetic practices had earlier been inscribed (principally, in Britain, those that had bound the landed gentry together in the culture of civic humanism), they were made available for new forms of action on the social through the institutions in which they were newly assembled together. An example is the development of the public art gallery as a means for extending the reach of *Bildung* beyond the ethical training of state bureaucrats and the private cultivation of the bourgeois, to translate it into a programme of public education through which the governed were to be drawn into orbit of the practices of self-government it promulgated.⁵⁰ And another example, to return to my point of departure, consists in the relations between literature and liberation that Graham Martin urged criticism to augment, relations which, as I have argued, do not have a purely abstract immaterial form but are rather inscribed within specific governmental assemblages – those of, in Martin's case, the distinctive intellectual formation of 'English' in which aesthetic culture was cast in a distinctively communitarian form.⁵¹

To place aesthetics, government and freedom alongside each other in these ways is, though, likely to strike a discordant note among those who think of freedom as something pure and unalloyed, arising from sources located outside the sphere of governmental practices. Indeed, aesthetics itself is frequently identified as such a locus for freedom – as an outside to governmentality, a realm of pure freedom, and a source for critique. Foucault's account of the relationship between the Enlightenment and aesthetic culture and his conception of the 'aesthetics of existence' might, indeed, seem to point in this direction.⁵² I believe, however, that this would be mistaken. This is not, though, to discount the 'freedom effects' of the relations between aesthetics, government and freedom that I have described. If we go back to the WEA students Jonathan Rose discusses, their testimony provides clear evidence of the ways in which 'ordinary people' have latched on to the forms of art and culture that are disseminated via public provision and used them as resources to help craft a life for themselves. And this, I think, is what Foucault had in mind in his concept of 'the aesthetics of existence' – a concept in which the qualities Kant attributes only to those works of art which are the product of genius are extended to something that everyone can do in their daily lives: 'the creation of a style of life,' as Thomas Osborn puts it, 'without recourse to the fixity of moral codes on the one hand, or of epistemological guarantees on the other'.⁵³ If this identifies an extended role that a criticism for our time might play by placing itself within the relations between 'literature' and 'liberation', it is a role that emerges from a particular, historically-forged set of connections between modern assemblages of culture and the practices of liberal government; and it is a role that can only be played by recognising that the creation of a style of life poised between the fixity of moral codes and epistemological guarantees is a particular set of competencies and aptitudes that need to be cultivated and trained and not an autochthonous attribute of the human subject. To paraphrase Foucault, it is a style of life which enunciates the demand not that we should not be governed but that We should not be governed like that – whatever 'that' might happen to be. It is in this way that the historical nexus of the relations between aesthetics, government and freedom inscribes a certain endemic tension within the mechanisms of liberal government.

Notes

¹ Taken from the organisers' blurb for the *Literature and Liberation* conference.

² These aspects of my concerns bear some similarity to, but also differ from those of, Francis Mulhern's account of metaculture – see Francis Mulhern, *Culture/Metaculture* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000). For a fuller elaborations of these questions see Tony Bennett, 'Making Culture, Changing Society: the Perspective of "Culture Studies", *Cultural Studies* 21, 4-5, pp. 610-29.

³ Quoted in Howard Caygill, *Art of Judgement* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1981), p. 389.

⁴ Ian Hunter, 'The History of Theory', *Critical Inquiry* 33 (Autumn 2006), pp. 78-111.

⁵ N. Roberts, 'Character in the Mind: Citizenship, Education and Psychology in Britain, 1880-1914', *History of Education* 33, 2 (2004), pp. 177-97.

⁶ Quoted in Jonathan Rose, *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Class* (New Haven and London: Yale Nota Bene, 2002), p. 284.

⁷ John Carey, *What Good Are the Arts?* (London: Faber and Faber, 2005).

⁸ See Tony Bennett, 'Acting on the Social: Art, Culture, and Government', *American Behavioural Science* 43, 9 (2000), pp. 1412-28.

⁹ Richard E. Lee, *Life and Times of Cultural Studies* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2003).

¹⁰ Quoted in Rose, p. 276.

¹¹ Ian Hunter, *Culture and Government: The Emergence of Literary Education* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988).

¹² I am aware of the difficulties of using Kant as a 'hinge' in this way since it grants him the transcendence of previous positions that he produced for his own through his method of dialectical critique: see Ian Hunter, *Rival Enlightenments: Civil and Metaphysical Philosophy in Early Modern Germany* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001). This is, however, a convenient presentational device for this stage in my inquiries.

¹³ Christian Wolff, *The Real Happiness of a People under a Philosophical King* (London: M. Cooper, 1750), p. 5.

¹⁴ Wolff, p. 4.

¹⁵ Wolff, quoted by Caygill, p. 139.

¹⁶ Baumgarten, quoted by Caygill, p. 164.

¹⁷ Johann Gottfried Herder, *Sculpture: Some Observations on Shape and Form from Pygmalion's Creative Dream* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2002), pp. 185, 16.

¹⁸ Herder, pp. 181-2.

¹⁹ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, trans. W.S. Pluhar (Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett, 1987).

²⁰ Gilles Deleuze, *Kant's Critical Philosophy: The Doctrine of the Faculties* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), p. 5.

²¹ Deleuze, p. 48.

²² Deleuze, p. 56.

²³ Paul Guyer, *Values of Beauty: Historical Essays in Aesthetics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 57; Mary Poovey, *A History of the Modern Fact: Problems of Knowledge in the Sciences of Wealth and Society* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1998). See also Mary Poovey, 'The Social Constitution of "Class": Toward a History of Classificatory Thinking', in Wai Chee Dimock and Michael T. Gilmore, eds, *Rethinking Class: Literary Studies and Social Formations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), pp. 15-56. By defining every individual in terms of his relation to production, Petty's political arithmetic, developed initially in connection with the tasks of colonial government in Ireland, meant that every individual could be measured according to the same universal equivalent by which the productivity of land was measured. This produced a ground on which the Irish and English could become like one another, as instances of *homo economicus*, with religious preference, culture, language, and political affiliation, becoming no more than 'Perversions of Humour'.

²⁴ Josef Chytry, *The Aesthetic State: A Quest in Modern German Thought* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1989).

²⁵ Quentin Skinner, *Visions of Politics, Volume 2: Renaissance Virtues* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

²⁶ Lawrence Klein, *Shaftesbury and the Culture of Politeness: Moral Discourse and Cultural Politics in Early Eighteenth-Century England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

²⁷ Kiein, pp.11-12.

²⁸ Shaftesbury, quoted by Linda Dowling, *The Vulgarisation of Art: The Victorians and Aesthetic Democracy* (Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 1996), p. 5.

²⁹ Quoted by Poovey, *A History of the Modern Fact*, p. 178.

³⁰ Poovey, *A History of the Modern Fact*, p. 179.

³¹ Steven Shapin and Simon Schaffer, *Leviathan and the Air-Pump: Hobbes, Boyle, and the Experimental Life* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985).

³² Guyer, pp. 110-11.

³³ John Barrell, *The Political Theory of Painting from Reynolds to Hazlitt: 'The Body of the Public'* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1986).

³⁴ Quoted by Ronald Paulson, *The Beautiful, Novel and Strange: Aesthetics and Heterodoxy* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), p. 7.

³⁵ Paulson, pp. 4-5.

³⁶ William Hogarth, *The Analysis of Beauty* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press/ Paul Mellon Centre for British Art, 1997), p. 19.

³⁷ Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984). There is not space here to assess the strengths and limitations of this tradition; however, for an assessment of the one-sided nature of Bourdieu's account of the social inscription of aesthetic discourses, see Tony Bennett, 'Habitus Clive: Aesthetics and Politics in the Work of Pierre Bourdieu', *New Literary History* 38,1 (2007), pp. 201-28.

³⁸ Jacques Rancicre, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible* (London and New York: Continuum, 2004).

³⁹ Vivienne Brown, *Adam Smith's Discourse: Canonicity, Commerce and Conscience* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994) and 'Dialogism, the Gaze, and the Emergence of Economic Discourse', *New Literary History* 28 (1997), pp. 697-710.

⁴⁰ Shaftesbury quoted by Klein, p. 117.

⁴¹ Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp.128-9.

⁴² Caygill, p. 46.

⁴³ Brown, *Adam Smith's Discourse*, p. 64.

⁴⁴ Catoptric vision refers to a device invented by the Mersenne circle which obviated the need for the spectator to change position in order to decipher anamorphoic works of art. It served Hobbes as a means of visualising the production of political order from the single and unchanging position of sovereignty (Caygill, pp. 19-25).

⁴⁵ Smith, pp. 239-43.

⁴⁶ Smith, p. 73.

⁴⁷ Smith, p. 32.

⁴⁸ This is, in spirit, an enterprise similar to that of Martha Woodmansee who notes that 'those who make an occupation of aesthetics tend to deny the history of their own subject' by recounting the history of aesthetics in the form of a 'tradition of great minds speaking with one another' over and above the specific historical circumstances that connect specific conceptions of the aesthetic to particular circumstances of cultural production and consumption. She thus notes, of Terry Eagleton's would-be historicisation of the aesthetic,

that he ‘takes the same “high priori” road’ as that of philosopher–historians, ‘selecting for comment the ideas of a few giants arranged chronologically’ matter’: Martha Woodmansee, *The Author, Art, and the Market: Rereading the History of Aesthetics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), p. 7.

⁴⁹ See Tony Bennett, ‘Civic Laboratories: Museums, Cultural Objecthood, and the Governance of the Social’, *Cultural Studies* 19,5 (2005), pp. 521-47, and ‘The Work of Culture’, *Journal of Cultural Sociology* 1, 1 (2007), pp. 31-48.

⁵⁰ I draw here on the discussion of these three aspects of *Bildung* in R Koselleck, *The Practice of Conceptual History: Timing History, Spacing Concepts* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002).

⁵¹ James English, ‘literary Studies’, in Tony Bennett and John Frow, eds, *The SAGE Handbook of Cultural Analysis* (London: SAGE, 2008), pp. 126-44.

⁵² Michel Foucault, *The Politics of Truth* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2007).

⁵³ Thomas Osborne, *Aspects of Enlightenment: Social Theory and the Ethics of Truth* (London: UCL Press, 1998).