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David Hume's view regarding the standard of taste

(David Hume, *Despre măsura gustului și alte eseuri*, Editura EIKON, București, 2002)

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A recent translation from the works of the Scottish philosopher David Hume, *Despre măsura gustului și alte eseuri*, published by the Eikon publishing house, has the potential to reveal a different image of one of the most prominent thinkers in modern philosophy to the Romanian public.

The book comprises five of the most important literary essays of David Hume: *Of the Delicacy of Taste and Passion*, *Of Simplicity and Refinement in Writing*, *Of Tragedy*, *Of the Standard of Taste* and *Of Essay-Writing*. The order of the essays follows the Miller edition published in 1889. However, not only the original editions were used for the translation, but also an impressive list of more recent versions. Additionally, the Romanian translation also benefited from a comparison with some prominent French and German translations. Moreover, it is safe to say, that the Romanian translator, Ștefan-Sebastian Maftai assumed the difficult challenge of providing not only a Romanian version, but also a valuable critical edition of the aforementioned essays. This is the reason why, the original texts are accompanied by numerous and extensive explanatory footnotes, and also by a comprehensive introductory study regarding the complex connections between the ideas developed by Hume and the political and cultural context of his life and his work.

Special attention was dedicated to identifying the various sources that shaped Hume's distinctive philosophical view, and especially his conception regarding the standard of taste. Ștefan-Sebastian Maftai mentions a long list of authors, like Dumarsais, Rousseau, Voltaire, D'Alembert, Cicero, Shaftesbury, Mandeville, Addison and others that played an important role in inspiring Hume's ideas about the "humanisation of philosophy" and about the tasteful way of writing and philosophising. Furthermore, by following the contributions of Jürgen Habermas, he also offered some interesting analyses concerning the origins of the "literary public sphere", which preceded and created the premises for the birth of

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the political public sphere (p.17). In this cultural environment, the philosophers and the literary critics gained a prominent status, if they were disposed to undertake the task of educating the taste of the public by participating in the refined conversations held in places like social clubs, salons, and literary cafés.

The five essays included in the volume expose a different dimension of Hume's work, but one that has the capacity to shed a new light on his main ideas. In these relatively short texts, we encounter an image of the Scottish thinker that is usually neglected nowadays by exegetes, but was more familiar to his contemporaries and corresponds with Hume's own literary, historical and philosophical aspirations. In the course of his life, he was better known and appreciated for his monumental *History of England* than for his philosophical work. Moreover, in his famous autobiography, *My Own Life*, written only a few months before his death, he acknowledges: "I passed through the Course of Education with Success, and was seized very early with a passion for Literature which has been the ruling Passion of my Life, and the great Source of My Enjoyments"¹. He also describes the way he was "poring over" and "devouring" authors like Voet and Vinnius, Cicero and Virgil and also how he laid the great "Plan of Life" which consisted in maintaining his independence and improving his Talent in Literature. Hence, his interest in literature (in the broad sense, which includes philosophy, history and many other types of creative writing) should not be regarded as a secondary aspect of his work. On the contrary, it is a key element in understanding many of his contributions in a more complete and adequate manner.

The first of the five essays, *Of the Delicacy of Taste and Passion*, was published for the first time in 1741 and addresses the difference between two kinds of people: those who have a special delicacy of passion, and those who enjoy a similar delicacy in taste. The first type of sensibility is a native one and it is regarded by Hume as a great misfortune, because it makes people vulnerable to the most tempestuous changes in dispositions and the victims of the great torments caused by the fact that pains and sufferings are far more frequent in their life than the moments of intense happiness. The second type of sensibility, the delicacy of taste, is mainly an educated and cultivated feature, and has the potential to make one live a happy life, because it increases one's ability to enjoy those refined pleasures which are under one's control. Moreover, he believes that cultivating the delicacy of taste is the best way to cure the excessive sensibility of the passion and to assure a happier life (pp. 78-79). It should be mentioned that, in his opinion, the artistic taste has little to do with rationality. It is just a cultivated sentiment, which is not only the necessary condition for an aesthetic judgement (a "strong sense"), but is practically identical to it and is the most important condition for someone to become an authentic critic of the fine

arts. Nonetheless, he adds that the delicacy of the taste can be acquired only from a vast experience in reading and conversation (p.80-81).

The second text, *Of Simplicity and Refinement in Writing*, was published in 1742 and analyses the relation between the two extreme tendencies manifested in writing: the propensity for an excessively simple style and the predilection for unnecessary refinement. He seeks a solution to this dilemma by following the suggestion of Joseph Addison, who believed that it was necessary to promote "fine writing": a style of writing capable of expressing sentiments which are natural, without being obvious (p.83). Hence, he will argue that the artist must be able to find a surprising way of depicting natural sentiments. He has little to gain from copying faithfully the simplicity of natural feelings (for example, "the observations of a peasant or the ribaldry of a porter"), or from the creations which are "merely surprising without being natural" (p. 85). So, he will argue that the excesses of both styles must be avoided and that a "proper medium" should be preferred. This medium lies not in a precise point and it is compatible with a variety of writing manners. Hume draws comparisons between several authors such as Cervantes, Horace, Corneille, Congreve, Sophocles, Terence, Pope, Lucretius, Virgil, Racine, Martial, Catullus, Cowley, Parnel, Terence or Seneca. These comparisons reveal Hume's vast literary culture and his preference for a style that is more close to simplicity than to excessive refinement: the latter is perceived not only as less beautiful, but also as more dangerous because it is "more apt to pervert the taste of the young and inconsiderate" (p. 89).

The next essay, *Of Tragedy*, was published in 1757 and strives to explain the way in which the depiction of sorrow, terror, anxiety and other passions was capable to generate, in an apparently paradoxical manner, the feeling of "unaccountable pleasure" experienced by the spectators of a well-written tragedy (p.91). Thus, it is a significant work in which Hume attempted to account for the complex nature of the aesthetic experience. He based his analysis on the on the works of Dubois and Fontenelle. From Dubois's reflections concerning poetry and painting, he adopts the idea that the most disagreeable state of our mind is indolence, and, that in order to avoid it, we prefer to have any kind of experience able to arouse passions. However, if the same type of distress, pleasurable for the spectator of a tragedy, were observed in real life, it would have a very different result namely a distinct state of uneasiness. Therefore, the aesthetic pleasure must be explained in another way. Part of the solution is provided by Fontenelle, who stated in his reflexions on poetry that pain can be converted into pleasure and vice-versa by varying the degree in their cause. Hume will develop this idea by affirming that the dominant passion of pleasure, excited by the expressivity of the artist and the beauty of his work, is reinforced and increased by the "impulse" of the negative passions, like sorrow and anxiety, which are depicted in a "softened" manner in the fine

arts. The principle in action is this: the predominant aesthetic emotions “seize the whole mind” and “convert” the negative emotions into themselves (p. 95). The effect of intensifying the pleasure is also induced by novelty, which excites the curiosity and delays information, by strategically placing difficulties before experiencing pleasure and so on. Once again, Hume offers compelling examples from the works of Cicero, Shakespeare and Pliny the Elder, in order to illustrate how this principle works.

The fourth essay, *Of the Standard of Taste*, lends the book its title and was published in 1757. It is the most extensive analysis concerning the nature of aesthetic taste presented in this volume, beginning with the common observation that a great variety of taste exist in the world. Although in every culture and in every language people appreciate “elegance, propriety, simplicity or spirit in writing” and blame “fustian, affectation, coldness, and a false brilliancy”, their opinions regarding the works that should be described in these terms are very different (p. 105). This disagreement mirrors the apparent moral consensus that exists between different cultures when it comes to appreciating qualities such as equity, justice, temperance, meekness, charity and others, a false consensus which masks the real disagreement regarding the types of actions that could be labelled as being equitable, just, charitable and so on. For example, actions described as virtuous by Homer, would be labelled as violent and cruel by Hume’s contemporaries. Hence, the diversity of human aesthetic and moral sentiments is great, but not to such an extent as to justify the opinion that it will be pointless to dispute about tastes (p.109). He believes that the tastes are not naturally equal, and that there is indeed a *standard of taste*, according to which some creations are better than others and some sensibilities are more delicate and refined than others in perceiving these differences.

In discovering the nature of this standard of taste, Hume begins by denying that it has to do with *a priori* reasoning or with the abstract conclusions of the intellect, since no rules of composition can be established in this way without resulting in creations that would be found “most insipid and disagreeable” (p. 110). Therefore, he believes that the rules of composition and the standard of taste should be based on experience and on the observation of common sentiments of human nature. Taste, possessed only by the real critics of fine arts, is compared with a delicate mechanism which requires the concurrence of many favourable circumstances for its proper functioning: “strong sense, united to delicate sentiment, improved by practice, perfected by comparison, and cleared of all prejudice” (p. 123). And the authentic standard of taste and beauty will be provided only by the common verdict given by a community of such critics. Next, he addresses the question if these critics can really be found, and his answer is an affirmative one. Once more, he points out illustrious examples like those of Homer, Terence or Virgil that are rightfully admired

in different ages and by different nations. Nevertheless, he acknowledges that the taste can be perverted by prejudice and the lack of practice or delicacy, but also by the “particular manners and opinions of our age and country”, associated with the fact that we tend to prefer what is similar to us and to dislike what is different. Moreover, he thinks that, while some differences (like those between speculative opinions) can be overcome much easier, others (like those between moral judgements) are much more difficult to treat with indulgence (p. 129).

The final text has the title *Of Essay-Writing* and was published for the first time in 1742. Although it is one of the shorter essays in the volume (having only 6 pages), it addresses one of the central topics of Hume's philosophical and literary view, which is also analysed in some of his essential works like his *Treatise of Human Nature* (1739-1740) or his *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (1748). This theme refers to the difference and the traditional lack of communication between what he calls “the learned world” and “the conversable world” (p. 133). The representatives of the first category are scholars concerned with the difficult operations of the mind that require preparation, solitude and hard work. The members of the second category are inclined to value sociability, human affairs, duties of common life and the more gentle exercise of understanding. In his view, the separation of these worlds has resulted in an insipid and uninteresting social conversation, but also in a type of science and philosophy that was developed by men without taste regarding life and manners and who did not have a proper appreciation for experience. The solution would be to promote a more humanistic philosophy, developed by men of letters who would accept to become “ambassadors from the Dominions of Learning to those of Conversation”, as Hume likes to describe himself (p. 136).

As mentioned above, this is a key aspect of his overall conception, because it is closely related to the project of revolutionising philosophy and transforming it in a “science of the human nature”, built on the new foundation of experience². It is also associated with his argumentation from the first section of *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, dedicated to presenting the different species of philosophy and to criticising the traditional metaphysics. In this book, he asserts/claims that moral philosophy or the science of human nature can be treated in one of the following two manners. The first sees man as born for action and as influenced by taste and sentiment, as valuing beauty and expressivity, poetry and eloquence. Authors like Cicero, Addison and La Bruyere support this position. The second one describes man as a reasonable being, who strives to cultivate his understanding and to discover its principles. However, the writing style cultivated by the second type of authors is abstract and unintelligible to common readers and that is why he believes that the fame of such authors, like Aristotle, Locke and Malebranche, will only be provisional and perishing. Hume seems to have a special quarrel with the

style promoted by Malebranche, who is frequently criticized in his works on the base that his theories are very obscure and speculative and go far beyond the sound base of knowledge represented by common experience³. Hume's solution to this dilemma will be, once again, to combine the two styles of philosophy. Man is not only a reasonable being, but also a social one. Therefore, an author must indulge in his passion for science, but in the same time he must allow his science to be human: "Be a philosopher; but, amidst all your philosophy, be still a man"⁴.

In conclusion, I want to underline the fact that the recommendation presented above was a key principle that governed not only the philosophical work of the Scottish thinker, but also his own remarkable writing style and even his major life choices and character. The project of the "humanisation of philosophy" did not remain just a central idea of his literary essays and theoretical works. He made constant efforts to promote a type of philosophy always in close contact with common experience and common sense. Moreover, his opinions concerning the standard of taste and fine writing are splendidly illustrated by his own exceptional writing style. It is my conviction that any reader of his work is able to appreciate not only his revolutionary and profound ideas, but also his elegant and tasteful manner of writing: his clear and insightful arguments, his graceful but devastating criticism, his entertaining and comforting tone, his precise and expressive terminology and so on. Moreover, as it was noticed by his exegetes, David Hume was a cheerful and kind man, with a sparkling personality, and with great social and conversational abilities⁵. And I believe that these were some of the reasons that determined his great friend, Adam Smith, to describe him in his famous *Letter to Strahan* as „approaching as nearly to the idea of a perfectly wise and virtuous man as perhaps the nature of human frailty will permit"⁶

Notes

¹ David Hume. 1932. "My Own Life". In *The Letters of David Hume*, volume 1, edited by J.Y.T. Grieg. Oxford University Press.

² David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, edited by L.A. Selby and M.A. Bigge, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1960, p. XX.

³ See for example the objections against Malebranche's occasionalism formulated in David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007, pp. 52-53.

⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 6.

⁵ Dennis Rasmussen, 2017, *The Infidel and the Professor: David Hume, Adam Smith, and the Friendship That Shaped Modern Thought*, Princeton University Press, Princeton & Oxford, 2017, pp. 46-49.

⁶ Adam Smith, "Letter to Strahan", In Dennis Rasmussen, *The Infidel and the Professor: David Hume, Adam Smith, and the Friendship That Shaped Modern Thought*, Princeton & Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2017, pp. 220.

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