

# Standards and Judgments: A Post-axiological Essay

*Barbara Herrnstein Smith*

Axiology — that is, the formal philosophical analysis of questions of value and evaluation — traditionally concerns itself with providing grounds for the justification of value judgments. In relation to literary criticism and aesthetics, axiological debates typically revolve around such issues as the essential nature of literary and aesthetic value — whether or not, for example, it is an objective property of particular texts or artworks and thus specifiable independent of individual readers, perceivers or subjects — and the logical or epistemological character of explicit value judgments — whether, for example, the statement that some artwork is good or bad is a genuine proposition, and thus verifiable in fact or principle, or only a pseudo-statement, the mere public venting of a private preference.

The development, rebuttal and refinement of positions on these issues have dominated aesthetic axiology at least since the eighteenth century, and they continue to preoccupy critical theorists when they turn their attention to the analysis of literary value and evaluation. They were central to the aesthetic theories of Hume and Kant; they haunted I. A. Richards in 1924, the New Critics in the forties and Northrop Frye in the fifties; and minimally revised or updated versions of the orthodox array of positions are elaborated in the work of contemporary critical theorists from E. D. Hirsch, Jr. to Terry Eagleton.<sup>1</sup> What I shall suggest in what follows is that the objectives and arguments of traditional axiology are fundamentally questionable, and that it is desirable — and perhaps possible — to develop an alternate discourse of value and evaluation that is more productively engaged with the current theoretical interests and pragmatic issues of literary and cultural studies.

I shall begin with some general observations on value which, though a bit stark as presented here, will serve to introduce certain themes that recur in the subsequent discussion.<sup>2</sup>

## I

All value may be seen as radically contingent, that is, as neither an inherent property of objects nor an arbitrary projection of subjects but, rather, as the variable product of the dynamics of an economic system. It is readily granted, of course, that it is in relation to a system of that sort that commodities such as gold and bread acquire the value indicated by their market prices. It is traditional, however, both in economic and aesthetic theory as well as in informal discourse, to distinguish sharply between the value of an entity in that sense and some other type of value that may be referred to as its utility or, especially with respect to so-called non-utilitarian objects such as artworks or works of literature, as its "intrinsic value." Like its price in the market-place, however, the value of an entity to an individual subject is *also* the product of the dynamics of an economic system, specifically the personal economy constituted by the subject's needs, interests, and resources — biological, psychological, material, and experiential. Like any other economy, moreover, this too is a continuously fluctuating or shifting system, for our individual needs, interests and resources are themselves functions of our continuously changing states in relation to an environment that may be relatively stable but is never absolutely fixed. The two systems are, it may be noted, not only analogous but also interactive and interdependent, for part of our environment *is* the market economy and, conversely, the market economy is comprised, in part, of the diverse personal economies of individual producers, distributors, consumers, and so forth.

The traditional discourse of value — including a number of terms I have used here, such as "subject," "object," "needs," "interests" and indeed "value" itself — reflects an arbitrary arresting, segmentation and hypostasization of the continuous process of our interactions with our environments — or what could also be described as the continuous interplay among multiply configurable systems. It is difficult to devise (and would be, perhaps, impossible to sustain) a truly Heraclitean discourse that did not reflect such conceptual operations, but we may recognize that, insofar as such terms project images of discrete acts, agents and entities, fixed attributes, unidirectional forces and simple causal and temporal relationships, they obscure the dynamics of value and reinforce dubious concepts of non-contingency — that is, concepts such as "intrinsic," "objective," "absolute," "universal," and "transcendent."

The traditional — idealist, humanist, genteel — tendency to isolate or

protect certain aspects of life and culture, among them works of art and literature, from consideration in economic terms has had the effect of mystifying the nature — or, more accurately, the dynamics — of their value. In view of the arbitrariness of the exclusion, it is not surprising that the languages of aesthetics and economics nevertheless tend to drift toward each other and that their segregation must be constantly patrolled.<sup>3</sup> (Thus an aesthetician deplores a pun of “appreciation” appearing in an article on art-investment and warns of the dangers of confusing “the uniqueness of a painting that gives it scarcity value . . . with its unique value as a work of art.”<sup>4</sup> To those for whom terms such as “utility,” “effectiveness,” and “function” suggest gross pragmatic instrumentality, crass material desires, and the satisfaction of animal needs, a concept such as use-value will be seen as irrelevant to or clearly to be distinguished from aesthetic value. There is, however, no good reason to confine the domain of the utilitarian to objects that serve only immediate, specific and unexalted ends<sup>5</sup> or, for that matter, to assume that the value of artworks has altogether nothing to do with pragmatic instrumentality or animal needs. The recurrent impulse and effort to define aesthetic value by contra-distinction to all forms of utility or as the negation of all other nameable sources of interest or forms of value — hedonic, practical, sentimental, ornamental, historical, ideological, and so forth — is, in effect, to define it out of existence; for when all such particular utilities, interests and sources of value have been subtracted, nothing remains. Or, to put this in other terms: the “essential value” of an artwork consists of everything from which it is usually distinguished.

To be sure, various candidates have been proposed for a pure, non-utilitarian, interest-free and, in effect, value-free source of aesthetic value, such as the eliciting of “intrinsically rewarding” intellectual, sensory or perceptual activities, or Kant’s “free play of the cognitive faculties.” A strict accounting of any of these seemingly gratuitous activities, however, would bring us sooner or later to their biological utility and/or survival value (and indeed to something very much like “animal needs”). For although we may be individually motivated to engage in them “for their own sake” (which is to say for the sake of the gratifications they provide), our doing so apparently yields a long-term profit in enhanced cognitive development, behavioral flexibility and thus biological fitness, and our general tendency to do so is in all likelihood the product of evolutionary mechanisms.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, as I have pointed out elsewhere, the occasioning of such activities (or “experiences”) is not confined to “works of art” and therefore cannot,

without circularity, be said to constitute the defining "aesthetic function" of the objects so labelled.<sup>7</sup> More generally, it may be observed that since there are no functions performed by artworks that may be specified as unique to them and also no way to distinguish the "rewards" provided by art-related experiences or behavior from those provided by innumerable other kinds of experience and behavior, any distinctions drawn between "aesthetic" and "non- (or "extra-) aesthetic" value are fundamentally problematic.<sup>8</sup>

## II

Suggestions of the radically contingent nature of aesthetic value are commonly countered by evidence of apparent non-contingent value: for example, the endurance of certain classic canonical works (the invocation of Homer being a *topos* of the western critical tradition) and, if not quite Pope's "gen'ral chorus of mankind," then at least the convergent sentiments of people of education and discrimination. Certainly any theory of aesthetic value must be able to account for continuity, stability and apparent consensus as well as for drift, shift and diversity. The tendency throughout formal aesthetic axiology has been to explain the constancies and convergences by the inherent qualities of the objects and/or some set of presumed human universals and to explain the variabilities by the defects and deficiencies of individual subjects. I shall suggest an alternate account below, but we may examine first the classic development of the traditional account in Hume's essay, *Of the Standard of Taste* (1757).

The essay opens with what had already become, and remains, the preferred gambit, namely an urbane acknowledgement of the diversity of individual judgments:

The great variety of Taste, as well as of opinion, which prevails in the world is too obvious not to have fallen under every one's observation . . . [T]hose who can enlarge their view to contemplate distant nations and remote ages are still more surpris'd at the great inconsistency and contrariety. We are apt to call *barbarous* whatever departs widely from our own taste and apprehension; but soon find the epithet of reproach retorted upon us. And the highest arrogance and self-conceit is at last startled, on observing an equal assurance on all sides, and scruples, amidst such a contest of sentiment, to pronounce

positively in its own favor.<sup>9</sup>

We see already, however, in the very terms of the move, the shadow of what's to come, as "variety" becomes "contest," a zero-sum game with winners and losers. And, as it turns out, it is precisely that *scruple* which must be removed and that "arrogance and conceit" which must be justified.

By way of emphasizing the cultural diversity of judgments, Hume remarks that "from the very nature of language" even apparent agreement may cover disagreement, and then illustrates the point as follows:

The admirers of the Alcoran [i.e., the Koran] insist on the excellent moral precepts interspersed throughout that wild and absurd performance. But it is to be supposed that the Arabic words, which correspond to the English, equity, justice, temperance, meekness, charity, were such as . . . must always be taken in a good sense . . . . But would we know, whether the pretended prophet had really attained a just sentiment of morals, let us attend to his narration, and we shall soon find that he bestows praise on such instances of treachery, inhumanity, cruelty, revenge, bigotry, as are utterly incompatible with civilized society. (*ST*, 5)

Having before us an example of sentiments "utterly incompatible with civilized society," we are prepared for the pivotal turn that follows:

It is natural for us to seek a *Standard of Taste*: a rule by which the various sentiments of men may be reconciled; at least a decision afforded confirming one sentiment and condemning another. (*ST*, 5)

What makes that search "natural" is a question that remains unanswered in the essay, as is also the question of whose interests are served by either a reconciliation of divergent sentiments of taste or a decision confirming one sentiment and condemning another. One answer — but itself problematic — is suggested by the analogies, recurrent in Hume and elsewhere, between the exercise of aesthetic judgment and the use of instruments of measurement (clocks, watches, scales, yardsticks, etc.) in the pursuit of such affairs as trade, navigation, engineering and property settlements. The analogy appeals to our recognition that, in such affairs, where disruptions and confusions

would result from irregular or inconsistent units, instruments or procedures, a standard that regularizes or "reconciles" them benefits all parties concerned. For such purposes, it is indeed "natural" for those affected to seek a standard, and they commonly find it by *establishing* it: for example, by selecting and arbitrarily privileging a unit based on some relatively durable and/or common accessible reference point with respect to which measurements are conventionally determined as "correct." When we have thus drawn out the analogy, however, the inadequacy of the answer is evident, for it leaves us with the question of what communal good is served by establishing a standard of *taste*, and what practical goal is hindered by the divergence of individual aesthetic preferences and judgments.

A different sort of answer to the initial question is implied in the second part of Hume's observation and emerges with increasing force as the essay unfolds: that is, natural or not, what appears to be desirable is not so much a rule by which sentiments may be reconciled as one that affords "a decision confirming one sentiment and condemning another" — which is quite a different matter. For, in the latter case the objective to be served by the standard is not general communal goals but, on the contrary, the evaluative authority of some members of the community over others; in other words the establishment of a presumptively objective or intersubjectively compelling standard of *taste* functions to justify or to give a show of justice to the exercise of *de facto* social power.

I shall return to the preceding point below. To continue, however, to follow Hume's argument: the search for the standard of taste is represented as not only natural and in the service of peace, justice and convenience, but also as heroic: for it must do battle with the counsel of despair and impotence, that is, axiological skepticism: "that species of philosophy, which cuts off all hopes of success in such an attempt, and represents the impossibility of ever attaining any standard of taste" (*ST*, 6). Briefly put, the skeptic's argument, as Hume presents it, is as follows: whereas in questions of empirical knowledge there is an external standard of correctness, namely conformability to "real matter of fact," in questions of taste "sentiment has a reference to nothing beyond itself, and is always real, wherever a man is conscious of it." Therefore, the skeptic concludes, "every individual ought to acquiesce in his own sentiment, without pretending to regulate that of others," a conclusion which, Hume points out, is in accord with "common sense"; and, he adds, if the skeptic is right, then "the proverb has justly determined it to be fruitless to dispute concerning tastes" (*ST*, 6) —

in short, *de gustibus*.

Because of what is at stake, however, this apparently genial conclusion cannot be the last word. Hume's initial move against it is to invoke another "species of common sense, which opposes it, or at least serves to modify and restrain it":

Whoever would assert an equality of genius and elegance between Ogilby and Milton, or Bunyan and Addison, would be thought to defend no less an extravagance, than if he had maintained a mole-hill to be as high as Teneriffe, or a pond as extensive as the ocean. Though there may be found *persons*, who give the preference to the former authors, *no one* pays attention to such a taste: and *we* pronounce, without scruple, the sentiment of these pretended critics to be absurd and ridiculous (*ST*, 7; emphasis added).

This drawing-room vignette has considerable rhetorical force and, along with another *topos* to be mentioned below, some version of it occurs repeatedly — or is spontaneously recreated — as a triumphant clincher in arguments against axiological skepticism. What may be noted here, aside from that remarkable sequence of pronouns and, of course, the embarrassment of the argument by the examples,<sup>10</sup> is the recouping for "us" of a privilege that was only temporarily set aside in the opening paragraph of the essay as "the highest arrogance and conceit," namely the privilege, when "pretended critics" with "absurd and ridiculous sentiments" contest our own judgments, to "pronounce positively in [our] own favor" — "without scruple." As I suggested earlier, the removal of that scruple and the justification of that privilege is what the Standard of Taste — or, more generally, the entire axiological project — is all about.

The central theoretical move of Hume's argument is to ground the standard of taste in *nature*, specifically on the presumptively uniform biological structure of all human beings. Thus, although he grants that the skeptic is correct in maintaining that beauty is not an objective property of objects but a sentiment produced by objects, or rather by certain of their formal qualities, he observes that there is nevertheless "a catholic and universal beauty" that results from "the relation which nature has placed between the form and the sentiment":

We shall be able to ascertain its influence . . . from the durable admiration which attends those works that have survived all the caprices of mode and fashion, all the mistakes of ignorance and envy.

The same Homer who pleased at Athens two thousand years ago, is still admired at Paris and London. All the changes of climate, government, religion and language have not been able to obscure his glory . . . .

It appears then, that amidst all the variety and caprice of taste, there are certain general principles of approbation and blame, whose influence a careful eye may trace in all the operations of the mind. Some particular forms or qualities, from the original structure of the internal fabric, are calculated to please, and others to displease; and if they fail of their effect in any particular instance, it is from some apparent defect or imperfection in the organ. (*ST*, 8)

Hume goes on to enumerate and elaborate these defects and imperfections at great length, introducing the familiar catalogue (already given vivid expression in, among other places, Pope's *Essay on Criticism*) with an analogy, also a commonplace of the tradition, between "the perfect beauty" as agreed upon by men "in a sound state of the organ" and the "true and real color" of objects as they appear "in daylight, to the eye of a man in health" (*ST*, 10).

This analogy too, however, ultimately controverts the point it was designed to support; for whereas the standardization of color-labels can be justified by an appeal to the overwhelming statistical predominance of persons with "healthy" color-vision, it appears from the very length of the catalogue of defects provided by Hume that, in his words, "the generality of men labor under some imperfection" of the organs of taste — and, indeed, that a man with healthy organs is "so rare a character" that "a true judge in the fine arts is difficult to discover even in the most polished ages" (*ST*, 17). Hume acknowledges the difficulty as follows:

But where are such critics to be found? By what marks are they to be known? How to distinguish them from pretenders? These questions are embarrassing; and seem to throw us back into the same uncertainty from which, during the course of this Essay, we have sought to extricate ourselves. (*ST*, 17)

He goes on to extricate himself by firmly begging the question and casually substituting one dubious universal for another:

But if we consider these matters aright, these are questions of fact, not sentiment . . . . It is sufficient for our present purpose if we have proved, that the tastes of all individuals is not upon an equal footing, and that some men in general, however difficult to be particularly pitched upon, will be acknowledged by *universal sentiment* to have a preference above others. (*ST*, 17-18; emphasis added.)

But of course this alleged universal preference for some art *critics* above others must encounter the same difficulties as the initially alleged universal preference for some art *works* above others, and the argument thus moves us inexorably toward the same uncertainties from which it was designed to extricate us: for the same exceptions to the general rule would have to be acknowledged, the same defects would have to be imputed to those who do not, in fact, prefer those critics preferred by universal sentiment, and the same questions would have to be raised or begged all over again.

The characteristic difficulties encountered by axiological logic are exhibited most dramatically in the concluding pages of the essay, where Hume grants that the skeptic's *de gustibus* argument does hold in certain cases. Since, however, those cases are defined by a principle that logically embraces *all* cases, Hume is edged toward a total turnabout, which he almost — but not quite — executes:

But notwithstanding all our endeavors to fix a standard of taste, . . . there still remain two sources of variation which . . . will often serve to produce a difference in the degrees of our approbation or blame. The one is the different humors of particular men; the other, the particular manners and opinions of our age and country . . . . [W] here there is such a diversity in the internal frame or external situation as is entirely blameless on all sides, in that case a certain degree of diversity in judgment is unavoidable, and we seek in vain for a standard, by which we can reconcile the contrary sentiments. (*ST*, 19-20)

The qualification that keeps this from being a total reversal — for, after all, what other sources of difference *are* there besides those of the “internal

frame" and "external situation"? — is, of course, the phrase "as is entirely blameless on all sides." But this qualification also introduces a new normative consideration, namely how — on what basis, in reference to what standard, grounded on what *other* universal — we decide that something in the internal frame or external situation is *blameable* or not. And so the argument moves again toward that infinite regress of norm and justification, and justification of justification, towards which the essay repeatedly slips and into which *all* axiologies typically tumble.

### III

Given a more sophisticated formulation, Hume's belief that the individual experience of "beauty" can be related to "forms" and "qualities" that gratify human beings "naturally" by virtue of certain physiological structures and psychological mechanisms is probably not altogether without foundation.<sup>11</sup> Taken as a ground for the justification of normative claims, however, and transformed accordingly into a model of standards-and-deviations, it obliged him (as it did and does many others) to interpret as so many instances of individual pathology what are, rather, the variable products of the interaction between, on the one hand, certain *relatively* uniform innate structures, mechanisms and tendencies and, on the other, innumerable cultural and contextual variables as well as other individual variables — the latter including particulars of personal history, temperament, age, and so forth. What produces evaluative consensus, such as it is, is not the healthy functioning of universal organs but the playing out of the *same* dynamics and variable contingencies that produce evaluative divergences.

Although value is always subject-relative, not all value is, equally subject-variable. Within a particular community, the tastes and preferences of subjects — that is, their tendency to find more satisfaction of subjects — that is, their tendency to find more satisfaction of a particular kind in one rather than another of same array of comparable items and to select among them accordingly — will be conspicuously *divergent* (or indeed idiosyncratic) to the extent that the satisfactions in question are themselves functions of types of needs, interests and resources that (a) vary individually along a wide spectrum, (b) are especially resistant — if not altogether intractable — to cultural channeling, and/or (c) are especially responsive to circumstantial context. Conversely, their tastes and preferences will tend to be similar to the extent that the satisfactions in question are functions of types of needs,

interests and resources that (a) vary individually within a narrow spectrum, (b) are especially tractable to cultural channeling, and (c) remain fairly stable under a variety of conditions.

Insofar as satisfactions ("aesthetic" or any other: erotic, for example) with regard to some array of objects are functions of needs, interests and resources of the first kind, preferences for those objects will appear "subjective," "accentric," "stubborn" and "capricious." Insofar as they are functions of the second, preferences will seem so obvious, "natural" and "rational" as not to appear to be matters of taste at all. Indeed, it is precisely under the latter conditions that the value of particular objects will appear to be inherent, that distinctions or gradations of value among them will appear to reduce to differences in the properties or qualities of the objects themselves, and that explicit judgments of their value will appear to be objective. In short, here as elsewhere, a co-occurrence of contingencies among individual subjects will be interpreted by those subjects as non-contingency.

Because we are speaking here not of two opposed sets of discrete determinants but of the possibility of widely differing specifications for a large number of complexly interacting variables, we may expect to find a continuous exhibition of every degree of divergence and convergence among the subjects in a particular community over the course of its history, depending in each instance on the extent of the disparity and uniformity of each of the relevant contingencies *and* on the strength of various social practices and cultural institutions that control the exhibition of extreme "deviance."<sup>12</sup> It may be noted that the latter — that is, the normative mechanisms within a community that suppress divergence and tend to obscure as well as deny the contingency of value — will always have, as their counterpart, a *counter*-mechanism that permits a recognition of that contingency and a more or less genial acknowledgement of the inevitability of divergence: hence the ineradicability, in spite of the efforts of establishment axiology, of what might be called folk-relativism: "*Chacun a son gout*," "One man's meat is another's poison," "*De gustibus . . .*," and so forth.

It follows from the analysis outlined just above that, within any community, the prevailing structure of tastes and preferences (and consequent illusion of a consensus based on objective value) will always be implicitly threatened or directly challenged by the divergent tastes and preferences of *some* of its members (for example, those not yet adequately acculturated, such as the young, and others with "uncultivated" tastes, such as provincials and social upstarts) as well as by most subjects outside the

community or, more significantly, on its *periphery* and who thus have occasion to interact with its members (for example, exotic visitors, immigrants, colonials, and members of various minority or marginalized groups). Consequently, institutions of evaluative authority will be called upon repeatedly to devise arguments and procedures that validate the community's established tastes and preferences, thereby warding off barbarism and the constant apparition of an imminent collapse of standards and also justifying the exercise of their own normative authority. (We recall Hume's words: "It is natural to seek a *Standard of Taste* . . .")

Both informally, as in the drawing rooms of men of cultivation and discrimination<sup>13</sup> or the classrooms of the literary academy, and formally, as in Hume's essay and throughout the central tradition of Western critical theory, the validation commonly takes the form of privileging absolutely — that is, "standard"-izing — the particular contingencies that govern the preferences of the members of the group and discounting or, as suggested above, pathologizing all other contingencies. Thus, with respect to works of literature it will be assumed or maintained: (a) that the particular *functions* they expect and desire such works to perform are their intrinsic or proper functions, all other expected, desired or emergent functions being inappropriate, irrelevant, extrinsic, abuses of the true nature of those works or violations of their authorially intended or generically intrinsic purposes: (b) that the particular *conditions* (circumstantial, technological, institutional, and so forth) under which the members of the group typically interact with those works are suitable, standard or necessary for their proper appreciation, all other conditions being irregular, unsuitable, sub-standard, or outlandish; and, perhaps most significantly, (c) that the particular *subjects* who compose the members of the group are of sound mind and body, duly trained and informed and generally competent, all other subjects being defective, deficient or deprived: suffering from crudenesses of sensibility, diseases and distortions of perception, weaknesses of character, impoverishment of background-and-education, cultural or historical biases, ideological or personal prejudices and/or undeveloped, corrupted or jaded tastes.

With regard to this last point (c), we may recall here the familiar specifications of the "ideal critic" as one who, in addition to possessing various exemplary natural endowments and cultural competencies, has, through exacting feats of self-liberation, freed himself of all forms of particularity and individuality, all special interests (or, as in Kant, all interests whatsoever), and thus of all bias — which is to say, one who is "free" of

everything in relation to which any experience or judgment of value occurs. (In these respects, it may be added, the ideal critic of aesthetic axiology is the exact counterpart of the "ideal reader" of literary hermeneutics.)

We may also note, with regard to (a) above, that the privileging of a particular set of functions for artworks or works of literature may be (and often is) itself justified on the grounds that the performance of such functions serves some higher individual, social, or transcendent good, such as the psychic health of the reader, the brotherhood of mankind, the glorification of God, the project of human emancipation or the survival of Western civilization. Any selection from among these alternate and to some extent mutually exclusive higher goods, however, would itself require justification in terms of some yet *higher* good, and there is no absolute stopping point for what I indicated earlier as the typical infinite regress of judgments and justifications. This is not to say that certain functions of artworks do not serve higher — or at least more general, comprehensive or longer-range — goods better than others. It is to say, however, that our selection among higher goods, like our selection among any array of goods, will always be contingent.

#### IV

It follows from the conception of value outlined here that evaluations are not discrete acts or episodes punctuating experience but indistinguishable from the very processes of acting and experiencing themselves. In other words, for a responsive creature, to exist is to evaluate. We are always calculating how things "figure" for us — always pricing them, so to speak, in relation to the total economy of our personal universe. Throughout our lives, we perform a continuous succession of rapid-fire cost-benefit analyses, estimating the probable "worthwhileness" of alternate courses of action in relation to our always limited resources of time and energy, assessing, re-assessing and classifying entities with respect to their probable capacity to satisfy our current needs and desires, and to serve our emergent interests and long-range plans and purposes. We tend to become most conscious of our own evaluative behavior when the need to select among an array of alternate "goods" and/or to resolve an internal "contest of sentiments" moves us to specifically verbal or other symbolic forms of cost-accounting: thus we draw up our lists of *pros* and *cons*, lose sleep and bore our friends by overtly rehearsing our options, estimating the risks and probable outcomes of

various actions, and so forth. Most of these calculations, however, are performed intuitively and inarticulately, and many of them are so recurrent that the habitual arithmetic becomes part of our personality and comprises the very style of our being and behavior, forming what we may call our principles or tastes — and what others may call our biases and prejudices.

I have been speaking up to this point of the evaluations we make for ourselves. As social creatures, however, we also evaluate for one another through various kinds of individual acts and also through various institutional practices. The longstanding preoccupation of aesthetic axiology with the logical form and cognitive substance of verbal “value judgments” and, in particular, with debates over their “validity,” “truth-value,” and “verifiability,” has obscured the operation and significance of institutional and other less overt forms of evaluation. It has also deflected attention from the social contexts, functions and consequences of all forms of aesthetic and literary evaluation, including their complex productive relation to literary and aesthetic value. Although these latter questions must be (and are elsewhere) subjected to extensive discussion,<sup>14</sup> I shall consider here only *explicit* aesthetic judgments and certain familiar axiological perplexities regarding them.

Evaluations are among the most fundamental forms of social communication and probably among the most primitive benefits of social interaction. (Animals — insects and birds as well as mammals — evaluate *for* one another, that is, signal to other members of their group the “quality” of a food supply or territory by some form of specialized overt behavior.)<sup>15</sup> We not only produce but also solicit and seek out both “expressions of personal sentiment” and “objective judgments of value” because, although neither will (for nothing can) give us “knowledge” of *the* value of an object, both may let us know other things we could find useful. For example, other people’s reports of how well certain objects have gratified them, though “mere expressions of subjective likes and dislikes,” may nevertheless be useful to us if we ourselves have produced those objects or if — as lovers, say, or parents or potential associates — we have an independently motivated interest in the current states, specific responses or general structure of tastes and preferences of those people. Also, an assertion that some object (for example, some artwork) is good, great, bad or middling can, no matter how magisterially delivered or with what attendant claims or convictions of absoluteness, usually be unpacked as a judgment of its *contingent* value: specifically, as the evaluator’s observation and/or estimate of how well that object, relative to others of the

same implied category, has performed and/or is likely to perform certain particular (though taken for granted) functions for some particular (though only implicitly defined) set of subjects under some particular (unspecified but assumed) set or range of conditions. Any evaluation, therefore, is "cognitively substantial" in the sense of being potentially informative about *something*. The actual interest of that information, however, and hence the value of that evaluation to *us* (and "we" are always heterogeneous) will vary, depending on, among other things, the extent to which we have any interest in the object evaluated, believe that we take for granted the same taken-for-granted functions and assume the same assumed conditions, and also think that we (or others whose interests are of interest to us) are among that implicitly defined set of subjects — or, of course, the extent to which we have an interest in the evaluator's sentiments by reason of our independently motivated interest in him or her.

In view of the centrality of the question in post-Kantian aesthetic axiology, it may be noted that if the set of relevant subjects implied by an evaluation is not contextually defined or otherwise indicated, it will usually be appropriately taken to consist of the evaluator himself and all others whom *s/he* believes are *like* himself or herself in the pertinent respects. Of course, some evaluators believe that *all* other people are — or would be — like themselves in the pertinent respects: hence, apparently, the curious and distracting notion that every aesthetic judgment "claims universal subjective validity."<sup>16</sup> The familiar subjectivist/objectivist controversy is commonly seen to turn on whether, in making an aesthetic judgment, I speak "for myself *alone*" or "for *everyone*." A consideration of the social functions of such judgments, however, suggests that, if such a formulation is wanted at all, it should be that, in making aesthetic judgments, I tend to speak "for myself *and some others*."

We may also consider here what is thought to be the suspect propositional status of value judgments as distinguished from and compared to that of so-called factual statements and the consequent demotion of the former to the status of "pseudo-statements." There is, of course, no way for us to be certain that someone's reports of his or her personal likes or dislikes are sincere, or that the estimates and observations offered are the estimates and observations actually made. Like all other utterances, value judgments are context-dependent and shaped by the relation of the speaker to his or her audience and by the structure of interests that sustains the verbal transaction between them. (In effect, there is no such thing as an honest opinion.) For

this reason, we will always interpret (supplement and discount) evaluations in the light of other knowledge we have of the evaluator (or think we have: there is no absolute end to this regress though in practice we do the best we can), including our sense — on whatever grounds — of the possibility of flattery or other kinds of deception: the evaluator may be the author's personal friend or professional rival, s/he may not want to hurt the cook's feelings, s/he may want to recommend himself or herself by creating the impression that s/he shares our tastes, and so forth. In all these respects, however, value judgments are no different from any other kind of utterance, and neither their reliability nor their "validity" as "propositions" is any more (or any less) compromised by these possibilities than that of any other type of verbal behavior, from someone's saying (or otherwise implying) that s/he has a headache to his or her solemn report of the measurement of a scientific instrument.

There is a tenacious conviction among those who argue these questions that unless one judgment can be said or shown to be more "valid" than another, then all judgments must be "equal" or "equally valid." Indeed, it is the horror or apparent absurdity of such egalitarianism that gave force to Hume's vignette of the barbarian in the drawing-room, and that commonly gives force to the charge that "relativism" produces social chaos or is a logically untenable position. While the radical contingency of all value certainly does imply that no value judgment can be more valid than another in the sense of being a more accurate statement of *the* value of an object (for the latter concept then becomes vacuous), it does not follow that all value judgments are equal or equally valid. On the contrary, what does follow is that the concept of "validity" is *inappropriate* with regard to evaluations and that there is no non-trivial parameter with respect to which they *could* be "equal." This is not to say that no evaluations can be better or worse than others. What must be emphasized, however, is that the value — "goodness" or "badness" — of an evaluation, like that of anything else (including any other type of utterance), is *itself* contingent, and thus a matter not of its abstract "truth-value" but of how well it performs various desired/able functions for the various people who may at any time be concretely involved with it. In the case of an aesthetic evaluation, these people will always include the evaluator, who will have his or her own particular interest in the various effects of judgments s/he produces, and may also include anyone from the artist to a potential publisher or patron, various current or future audiences of the work, and perhaps someone who just likes to know what's going on

and what other people think is going on. Each of them will have his or her own interest in the evaluation and it will be better or worse for each of them in relation to a different set of desired/able functions.

As was indicated above, the value of an explicit verbal evaluation — that is, its utility to those who produce and receive it — will, like that of any other type of utterance, always be a function of specific features of the various transactions of which it may be a part, including the relevant interests of the speaker and any of those who, at any time, become members of his or her *de facto* audience. It follows that the value of a value judgment may also be quite minimal or negative. For example, depending on specific (and readily imaginable) contextual features, an aesthetic judgment may be excruciatingly *uninteresting* to the listener or elicited from the speaker at considerable expense to himself or herself. Also aesthetic judgments, like any other use of language, may be intimidating, coercive and otherwise socially and politically oppressive. If they are so, however, it is not because of any characteristic frailty of their propositional status (and “justifying” them — that is, giving a show of justice to their claims of objectivity or universal validity — will not eliminate the oppression) but, once again, because of the nature of the transactions of which they are a part, particularly the social or political relationship between the evaluator and his or her audience (professor and student, for example, or censor and citizen) and the structure of power that governs that relationship.<sup>17</sup> It appears, then, that the obsessive axiological debates over the cognitive substance, propositional status and “truth-value” of aesthetic judgments are not only unresolvable in the terms given but, strictly speaking, beside the point.

The analyses presented here clearly have specific implications for the practices — pedagogic, critical, and so forth — of literary study as well as for literary, aesthetic and cultural theory, or theoretical studies more generally. I regret that I do not have the time to draw any of them out here or to indicate the possible dimensions and directions of the project or, rather, projects — heterogeneous as well as plural — that appear as productive alternatives to aesthetic axiology. I trust, however, that the present essay has at least suggested the potential interest and impact of post-axiological studies.

## Notes

1. Specific works include I. A. Richards, *Principles of Literary Criticism* (1924; rpt. London, 1960); W. K. Wimsatt, Jr., "Explication as Criticism," in *The Verbal Icon* (Louisville, Ky., 1954); Northrop Frye, the "Polemical Introduction" to *The Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton, N. J., 1957); E. D. Hirsch, Jr., "Evaluation as Knowledge" and "Privileged Criteria in Evaluation," in *The Aims of Interpretation* (Chicago, 1976); and Terry Eagleton, *Criticism and Ideology* (London, 1976), esp. pp. 162-187.
2. These observations are developed more fully in a larger study, "Contingencies of Value" (forthcoming in *Critical Inquiry*), from which the present essay is, in part, drawn.
3. The magnetism or recurrent mutually metaphoric relation between economic and aesthetic — especially literary — discourse is documented and discussed by Marc Shell in *The Economy of Literature* (Baltimore, 1978) and Kurt Heinzelman in *The Economics of the Imagination* (Amherst, 1980).
4. Andrew Harrison, *Making and Thinking* (Indianapolis, 1978), p. 100.
5. See George J. Stigler and Gary S. Becker, "De Gustibus Non Est Disputandum," *American Economic Review* 67 No. 2 (March, 1977), 76-90, for an ingenious and influential attempt to demonstrate that differences and changes of behavior (including aesthetic behavior) that appear to be matters of "taste" and, as such, beyond explanation in economic terms can be accounted for (a) as functions of subtle forms of "price" and "income" and (b) on the usual (utilitarian) assumption that we always behave, all things considered, so as to maximize utility. As Stigler and Becker acknowledge, recent experimental studies of "choice behavior" in human (and other) subjects suggest that this latter assumption itself requires modification.
6. See Robert Fagen, *Animal Play Behavior* (Oxford, 1981), pp. 248-358, for an extensive analysis of "intrinsically rewarding" physical activities and an account of the evolutionary mechanisms that apparently produce and sustain them.
7. See the related discussion of "cognitive play" in my *On the Margins of Discourse* (Chicago, 1978), pp. 116-24.
8. Monroe Beardsley's "instrumentalist" (that is, utilitarian) theory of aesthetic value (*Aesthetics: Problems in the Philosophy of Criticism* New York, 1958, pp. 524-76) and Jan Mukařovský's otherwise quite subtle exploration of these questions (in *Aesthetic Function, Norm and Value as Social Facts* [Prague, 1934], tr. Mark E. Suino [Ann Arbor, 1970]) do not altogether escape the confinements and circularities of formalist conceptions of, respectively, "aesthetic experience" and "aesthetic function."
9. *Of the Standard of Taste and Other Essays*, ed. John W. Lenz (Indianapolis, 1965), p. 3. Subsequent references to this edition of Hume's essay appear in my text as *ST* followed by page number(s).
10. Summarizing the argument in his introduction to the essay, Lenz silently substitutes "Shakespeare's poetry" and "doggerel" for Hume's examples, evidently counting on the vividness and direction of *that* contrast to hold up somewhat longer (*ST*, xx). The force of any contrast of that kind, however, is as contingent as that of any other.
11. The discipline of "empirical aesthetics" has been developed out of precisely such a belief. For a recent survey and discussion of its findings, see Hans Kreitler and Shulamith Kreitler, *Psychology of the Arts* (Durham, N. C., 1972).

12. See Morse Peckham, *Explanation and Power: The Control of Human Behavior* (New York, 1979) for an account of deviance (or what he calls "the delta effect") as the product of the relation between cultural practices and the randomness of behavior and, more generally, for a highly original discussion of the processes and institutions of cultural channeling.
13. Communities are of all sizes and so are drawing rooms: the provincials, colonials and marginalized groups mentioned above (including the young), insofar as they constitute social communities, may also be expected to have prevailing structures of tastes and preferences and to control them in the same ways as do more obviously "establishment" groups. Folk-relativism is neither confined to the folk nor always exhibited by them.
14. See sections III and IV, "The Multiple Forms, Functions and Contexts of Evaluative Behavior" and "The Cultural Re-Production of Value," in the article cited above (note 2).
15. To the extent that such forms of behavior are under the control of innate mechanisms that respond directly to – or, in effect, "register" – the conditions in question, they are not strictly speaking verbal or symbolic. For this reason, such evaluations may be "objective" in a way that, for better or worse, no human value judgment can be.
16. Kant's tortured attempt, which occupies most of *The Critique of Judgment*, to ground such a claim on the possibility of a cognition of pure aesthetic value (that is, "beauty") produced by nothing but the free operation of universal cognitive faculties has been recently revived and supplemented by E. D. Hirsch, Jr.'s attempt to ground it on the possibility of "correct interpretation," specifically the "re-cognition" of that "universally valid cognition of a work . . . constituted by the kind of subjective stance adopted in its creation" (*The Aims of Interpretation*, pp. 105-06). For a recent and very thorough examination of *The Critique of Judgment*, see Paul Guyer, *Kant and the Claims of Taste* (Cambridge, Mass. and London, 1979). For a thoroughly irreverent examination of it, see Jacques Derrida, "Economimesis," (Paris, 1975), tr. R. Klein, *Diacritics* II, 2 (Summer, 1981), pp. 3-25.
17. I discuss these and related aspects of verbal transactions in *On the Margins of Discourse*, pp. 15-24 and 82-106, and in "Narrative Versions, Narrative Theories," *Critical Inquiry* 7, No. 1 (1980), 225-26 and 231-36.

