



Book review

***Bentham and the Arts*, edited by Anthony Julius, Malcolm Quinn and Philip Schofield**

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Book review: *Bentham and the Arts*, edited by Anthony Julius, Malcolm Quinn and Philip Schofield

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Readers of *Bentham and the Arts* are greeted by a picture of the philosopher's Auto-icon on the cover; he sits on his chair as if he were part of an audience, his eyes averted from ours. We look at Bentham looking at something else: could it be a painting? Could he be watching a play? The question of Bentham's personal enjoyment of the arts – or lack thereof – is not really addressed in the book, although references are made to Bentham owning Hogarth's illustrations of Samuel Butler's *Hudibras*, to his reading of Fénelon's 1699 *The Adventures of Telemachus* as a source of inspiration for his panopticon and to the classical literary sources he turned to as evidence of public attitudes to homosexuality. The approach adopted in this collection of essays – which originates in a seminar series prompted by Anthony Julius's appointment at UCL as the first professor of law and the arts at the beginning of 2017 and held at UCL in the first half of 2018 – rather consists in contextualising Bentham's views on aesthetics within his own philosophical system (in its linguistic and ethical dimensions in particular), locating them in relation to major theories of his time (Kant, Addison and Hume feature prominently, but one also comes across Helvétius, Rousseau or Dumont) and of Victorian times, and drawing parallels with later thinkers such as Freud or Nietzsche.

Such a reassessment of the relationship between Utilitarianism and the arts was highly needed. Malcolm Quinn opened the way with his

Utilitarianism and the Art School in Nineteenth-Century Britain (2013). The publication of Bentham's *On Sexual Irregularities and Not Paul But Jesus* in the *Collected Works* (2013 and 2014 respectively) provided invaluable material through which to grasp Bentham's approach to the notion of taste. *Bentham and the Arts* was edited by Anthony Julius, Malcolm Quinn and Philip Schofield. Contributors come from fields such as history, philosophy or law, as one would expect in Bentham studies, but also literature, critical theory and the arts, including the notable presentation of their work by Fran Cottell and Marianne Mueller, both academics and practising artists. The volume includes an introduction by Philip Schofield and a combined name and subject index. The last section of the book in particular features useful illustrations, referenced in the list of figures on pages x–xi. For instance, the figure that offers a scale comparison between the projected panopticon and the Millbank Prison that was actually built on the spot purchased by Bentham literally puts things in perspective, illustrating the 'intimate relationship' between inspector and prisoner that would have characterised his relatively small-scale model prison (p. 261).

The book is organised in three sections. The first, entitled 'Philosophy and Sexuality', features chapters by Philip Schofield ('The Epicurean Universe of Jeremy Bentham: Taste, Beauty and Reality'), Frances Ferguson ('Not Kant, but Bentham: On Taste') and Stella Sandford ('"Envy Accompanied with Antipathy": Bentham on the Psychology of Sexual *Ressentiment*'). The second part, 'Intellectual History and Literature', includes contributions by Emmanuelle de Champs ('Literature, Morals and Utility: Bentham, Dumont and de Staël'), Jan-Melissa Schramm ('Jeremy Bentham's Imagination and the Ethics of Prose Style: Paraphrase, Substitution, Translation'), Tim Milnes ('"Is it true? ... what is the meaning of it?": Bentham, Romanticism and the Fictions of Reason') and Anthony Julius ('More Bentham, Less Mill'). The final section comprises chapters by Malcolm Quinn – ('Enlightenment Unrefined: Bentham's Realism and the Analysis of Beauty'), Benjamin Bourcier ('Jeremy Bentham's Principle of Utility and Taste: An Alternative Approach to Aesthetics in Two Stages'), Fran Cottell and Marianne Mueller ('From Pain to Pleasure: Panopticon Dreams and Pentagon Petal') and Carolyn Shapiro ('Bentham's Image: The Corpo-reality Check'). The introduction gives an overview of the contents of each chapter which is not repeated here.

As noted in the introduction to the collection, its title – *Bentham and the Arts* – may at first sight appear to be 'an oxymoron', given Bentham's 'low reputation' of 'an *exemplary* philistinism' (p. 1, p. 171) and the antagonism often assumed to exist between Utilitarianism and political

economy on the one hand and Romanticism and literature on the other. One of the goals of the volume is precisely to free Bentham's reputation from the damage done by other authors, especially John Stuart Mill; the role of critics such as F.R. Leavis in perpetuating this vision is also stressed. Bentham's reputation as a philistine – and Utilitarianism's as 'cultural barbarism' (Quinn, p. 201) – is often based on two aphorisms that Mill ascribed to him in the 1838 essay that bears his name: first that 'quantity of pleasure being equal, push-pin is as good as poetry' and second that 'all poetry is misrepresentation'. The first aphorism is a distortion of a passage from *The Rationale of Reward*, in which Bentham writes that:

Prejudice apart, the game of push-pin is of equal value with the arts and sciences of music and poetry. If the game of push-pin furnish more pleasure, it is more valuable than either. Everybody can play at push-pin: poetry and music are relished only by a few.

The second aphorism, Julius tells us, was invented by Mill. The first statement 'has long been taken as revealing the shallowness of [Bentham's] aesthetic thought and his refusal to take the arts seriously' (de Champs, p. 92). The quotation is contextualised and commented upon in several chapters (most notably those by de Champs and Julius) which go back to Bentham's text and try to set prejudice apart in order to uncover his actual position on the moral utility of arts and on aesthetics.

Bentham's manuscripts on reward show that he considered the fine arts to belong to the 'arts and sciences of agreement', and to include 'music, poetry – or at least most branches of poetry – painting, sculpture and the other arts which aim to imitate figures, architecture and gardening considered in their ornamental branches, &c.' as well as 'games of all kinds'. As often, Bentham occupies a somehow eccentric position in the intellectual landscape of his time, the reason being the foundation of his system on the principle of utility and his conception of pleasure. As Quinn notes, Bentham is 'difficult to include in narratives of British aesthetics' because for him, 'pleasure is what explains human behaviour, not what needs to be explained' (p. 201). The value of arts is that they produce pleasure in the practitioner and keep him out of mischief, such as boredom-induced drunkenness and violence. As Frances Ferguson shows, for Bentham aesthetics in general, and taste in particular, are reducible to pleasure and pain. Moreover, Bentham is set apart by his 'strong focus on individual appreciation and his refusal to admit the existence of one common standard of taste'. He believed that 'utility lay in the pursuit of

individual pleasures, not of collective ones' (de Champs, p. 98). Such a subjectivism has relativist implications, moderated – as Bourcier shows – by the role of the private deontologist.

The reassessment conducted in the book does not fundamentally alter our understanding of Bentham's vision of poetry. For him, poetry, a 'magic art', is intrinsically corrupting because of its closeness to political power and its tendency to inflate sentiments. It is synonymous with mendacity and has no positive moral value: 'between poetry and truth there is a natural opposition: false morals, fictitious nature: the poet always stands in need of something false' (*Rationale of Reward*, quoted p. 174). His view of poetry follows from his instrumentalist relationship to language, and the idea that figurative and metaphysical language is misleading and dangerous. Bentham actually offered tools (paraphrasis and phraseoplerosis) to achieve closer correspondence between linguistic representation and the real. His attacks on the liturgy of the Church, on the use of legal fictions and on the declaratory language of rights are questions of form and style as well as of intellectual substance (Schramm, p. 124). Bentham was thus completely at odds with Victorian authors who explored 'the richesses of metaphysical and liturgical language (which delighted in suggestive ambiguity and the possibility of multiple interpretations)' and who 'insisted on the essential inextricability of ideas, content and form in any written work' (Schramm, p. 125). Bentham's theory of real and fictitious entities is accordingly discussed at several points in the book.

A central concept in the book is that of taste. Bentham's understanding of taste was limited to the sensation derived from the palate or the propensity to derive pleasure from an object. According to Mill, he considered the phrases 'good taste' and 'bad taste' as 'an insolent piece of dogmatism', which gave his philosophy 'that cold, mechanical and ungenial air which characterises the popular idea of a Benthamite' (Mill, quoted p. 3). For Bentham taste was capricious; no single person's taste could be regarded as superior to that of another. Because he started from materialist, epicurean premises, he rejected any claim concerning the existence of a metaphysics of beauty. Bentham repudiated the association between taste and refinement, nor did he subscribe to the widely held view that uniformisation of taste would lead to a more harmonious society.

The fact that he did not recognise a civilising effect of fine arts on the morals of a nation also set him apart from his contemporaries. Moreover, in his view, critics were dangerous: not only did they ruin other people's pleasure, but they also, sometimes very literally, ruined artists whom they did not favour. Taste also served political functions and illustrated the

'confiscation of power' by the aristocracy (de Champs, p. 98). It was used by the ruling few to claim aesthetic and political superiority and to exclude the ruled many, in contrast to the egalitarian commitment to pleasure as the standard of taste. While liberty of taste was necessary in order to bring about the greatest happiness, making 'war upon pleasures' (*Not Paul But Jesus*, quoted p. 228) was the trademark of the tyrant and the despot. As Bourcier explains, the politics of taste became an abuse of power when enforced by rules and laws such as the penal laws on male homosexuality.

The title *Bentham and the Arts* is slightly misleading in that it obscures the importance of sexuality in the volume, especially in the first section. At first the connection between sexuality and 'the arts' may not seem obvious, but the missing link is precisely the concept of 'taste'. Sexuality was a sixth sense, whose pleasures constituted judgements of taste. Bentham condemned the criminal punishment of homosexuality, a policy that relied on principles of asceticism and antipathy. To him it was the antipathy towards homosexuality that was pathological and needed to be explained, rather than homosexuality itself: 'one should dispute the validity of the taste (the disgust of the many) that the English law encourages about taste (the sexual pleasure of the minority)' (Ferguson, p. 48). It is on the topic of sexuality that the figure of Bentham as a reader appears. *Not Paul But Jesus* offers his own reading of the Bible and of the inferences that can be made regarding the social and legal attitude towards male homosexuality. Bentham also draws on classical texts such as Virgil's *Aeneid* and *Eclogues*, Plutarch's *Lives* and Plato's dialogues as evidence of past attitudes to homosexuality, thereby blurring the boundary between history and fiction. He also criticised novels such as Henry Fielding's *Joseph Andrews* (1742) and Tobias Smollett's *Roderick Random* (1748) for feeding popular antipathy against male homosexuality.

Although none of Bentham's texts could be regarded as literature, much remains to be said about the various styles in which he wrote and the genres which he favoured, an aspect discussed in *Bentham and the Arts* by Schramm. One lead left unexplored is the connection between Bentham's thought and the literature of his time, although de Champs suggests, for instance, that further study of Maria Edgeworth in connection with Utilitarianism could be fruitful. The sheer volume of writing that Bentham produced leads Carolyn Shapiro to suggest analogies between the philosopher's actual body and the textual corpus. Both needed the intervention of other hands – that of a surgeon to prepare the Auto-icon and those of editors to prepare his manuscripts for publication. Writing is here regarded as a 'performative act' (p. 271) – a physical, corporeal

activity. The Auto-icon itself could be regarded as a form of writing, or ‘auto-thanatography’ in Bentham’s words (quoted p. 285).

The book also examines Bentham’s artistic legacy, especially in the last section. Although his plan to have a panopticon built in London failed, the architectural design – or some aspects of it – was adopted in several institutions and its ‘imaginary intensity’ is undeniable (Cottell and Mueller, p. 256). The example of the Pentagon Petal discussed by its creators is significant in that respect. The Auto-icon too has proved a source of inspiration for artists. Malcolm Quinn mentions Marcel Broodthaers and Luc Tuymans, and discusses in greater detail – although too briefly for this reader’s taste – its inclusion in ‘Like Life: Sculpture, Color, and the Body (1300–Now)’, an exhibition held at the Metropolitan Museum in New York in 2018.

Taken together, the essays offer a very rich and stimulating reappraisal of the relationship between Bentham – and, more broadly, Utilitarianism – and the arts. The book is sometimes provocative, for instance when Julius suggests that Bentham could be regarded as a ‘radical or avant-garde Romantic’ (p. 184). While the philosopher stands at the juncture between Enlightenment and Romanticism, the suggestion that one need not choose between one or the other is just one of the many stimulating insights that emerge from a volume both scientifically rigorous and highly enjoyable.