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Taste

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### 1. *Science and Pleasure*

Contrary to the privileged stature that has been granted to sight and hearing, the Western cultural tradition classifies taste as the lowest of the senses, whose pleasures unite man with other animals and in whose impressions one will not find 'anything moral'.<sup>1</sup> Even in Hegel's *Aesthetics* (1817-29), taste is opposed to the two

'theoretical' senses, sight and hearing, since 'a work of art cannot be tasted as such, because taste does not leave its object free and independent, but deals with it in a really practical way, dissolving and consuming it'.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, in Greek, Latin and other modern languages derived from them, there is also a vocabulary that is etymologically and semantically connected with the sphere of taste which designates the act of knowledge: 'The word "sapiens" [wise man] is derived from "sapor" [taste] (*Sapiens dictus a sapore*) for just as the sense of taste is able to discern the flavours [*sapore*] of different foods, so too is the wise man able to discern objects and their causes since he recognizes each one as distinct and is able to judge them with an instinct for truth,' we hear in a twelfth-century etymology by Isidore de Sevilla.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, in his lesson of 1872 on the pre-Platonic philosophers, the young philologist Nietzsche noted

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the following with respect to the Greek word *sophos*, 'sage': 'Etymologically it relates to the family of *sapio*, taste; *sapiens*, the taster; *saphes*, perceptible to taste. We speak of taste in art: for the Greeks, the image of taste is considerably expanded. A form redoubled as in *Sisyphos*, of strong taste (active); even *sucus* pertains to this family.'<sup>4</sup>

In the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, authors began to distinguish a faculty that proclaimed the judgement on and enjoyment of the beautiful as its specific concern. It is in fact the term 'taste' that, in the majority of European languages, takes on a metaphorically opposite and additional sense so as to indicate this special form of knowledge that enjoys the beautiful object and the special form of pleasure that judges beauty. On the first page of the *Critique of the*

*Power of Judgement* (1790), Kant describes with his usual lucidity the 'enigma' of taste as an intertwining of knowledge and pleasure. In a discussion on the judgement of taste he writes:

For although [these judgements] contribute nothing at all to the knowledge of things, still they belong to the faculty of knowledge alone, and prove an immediate relation of this faculty to the feeling of pleasure . . . [this relation] is precisely what is enigmatic in the principle of the power of judgement.<sup>5</sup>

From beginning to end, the problem of taste thus presents itself as that of 'another knowledge' (a knowledge that cannot account for its judgements but, rather, enjoys them; or, in the words of Montesquieu, 'the quick

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and exquisite application of rules that we do *not* even know'<sup>6</sup>) and of 'another pleasure' (a pleasure that knows and judges, as is implicit in Montesquieu's definition '*mesure du plaisir*'): the knowledge of pleasure, indeed, or the pleasure of knowledge, if in the two expressions one gives the genitive a subjective and not only objective value.

Beginning with Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten, modern aesthetics has developed as an attempt to investigate the particularity of this 'other knowledge' and to establish its autonomy alongside intellectual cognition (*cognitio sensitiva* alongside *logica*, 'intuition' alongside 'concept'). In this manner, setting out the relation as one between two autonomous forms within the same gnoseological process, aesthetics left untouched the fundamental problem that, as such, ought to have been

investigated: Why is knowledge originally divided and why does it maintain, likewise originally, a relation with the doctrine of pleasure, that is, with ethics? Is it possible to reconcile this fracture—that science knows the truth but cannot enjoy it, and that taste enjoys beauty, without being able to explain it? Is it possible that science could be the ‘pleasure of knowledge’? How can knowledge enjoy (taste)? Considering aesthetics in its traditional sense to be a historically closed field, we instead propose in the present study to position taste as the privileged site to illuminate these fractures that essentially characterize Western metaphysics—both the division of the epistemic object into truth and beauty, and the division of human ethical *telos* (which in the Aristotelian ethics still appears undivided in the notion of a *theoria* that is also *teleia eudaimonia*, ‘perfect happiness’) into knowledge and pleasure. In the

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Platonic formulation, these fractures are so originary one could say that they constitute Western thought not as *sophia* [wisdom] but as *philo-sophia* [love of wisdom]. Only because truth and beauty are originally split, only because thought cannot integrally possess its proper object, can it become the love of wisdom—that is, philosophy.

### *2. Truth and Beauty*

In the *Phaedrus*, Plato establishes the differential status of beauty with the assertion that, while wisdom has no perceptible image, beauty has the privilege of being the most visible:

Beauty, as I said before, shone in brilliance  
among those visions; and since we came to earth

we have found it shining most clearly through the clearest of our senses; for sight is the sharpest of the physical senses, though wisdom is not seen by it (*phronesis ouch horatai*). For wisdom would arouse terrible love, if such a clear image (*eidolon*) of it were granted as would come through sight, and the same is true of the other lovely realities; but beauty alone has this privilege, and therefore it is most clearly seen (*ekphanestaton*) and the loveliest (*erasmiotaton*).<sup>7</sup>

In the lack of an *eidolon* for wisdom and in the particular visibility of beauty, what is at play is thus the original metaphysical problem of the fracture between the visible and the invisible, or appearance and being. The paradox of the Platonic definition of the beautiful is the visibility of the invisible or the sensible appearance

of the Idea. Yet, it is this very paradox that offers both the foundation and motivation for the Platonic theory of love—and in this precise context, the problem of the beautiful is developed in the *Phaedrus*.

The visibility of the Idea in beauty is, in fact, the origin of the amorous mania that the *Phaedrus* always describes in terms of the gaze and the epistemic process that it brings into being, whose itinerary Plato establishes in the *Symposium*. There, he characterizes Eros' stature in the epistemic realm as a medium between wisdom and ignorance and, in this way, compares it to true opinion, knowledge that judges correctly and grasps the truth without, however, being able to justify itself. Indeed, this medial character of Eros is the basis of its identification with philosophy:

Have you not observed that there is something halfway between wisdom and ignorance?' 'What is that?' 'Right opinion (*orthē doxa*) which, as you know, being incapable of giving a reason (*logon dounai*), is not knowledge—for how can knowledge be devoid of reason?—nor again, ignorance—for neither can ignorance attain the truth—, but is clearly something which is a medium between ignorance and wisdom (*metaxy phroneseos kai amathias*).<sup>8</sup>

[ . . . ]

[Love] is a medium between ignorance and knowledge. The truth of the matter is this: no god is a philosopher or seeker after wisdom, for he is wise already; nor does any man who is wise seek after wisdom. For herein is the

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evil of ignorance, that he who is neither good nor wise is nevertheless satisfied with himself: he has no desire for that of which he feels no want.' 'But who then, Diotima, are the lovers of wisdom, if they are neither the wise nor the foolish?' 'A child may answer that question,' she replied, 'they are those who are in a mean between the two; Love is one of them. For wisdom is a most beautiful thing and Love is of the beautiful; and, therefore, Love is also a philosopher or lover of wisdom, and being a lover of wisdom is in a mean between the wise and the ignorant.'<sup>9</sup>

Each time it appears in the *Symposium*, the amorous trajectory is described as a process that goes from the vision of a beautiful body to the science of beauty (*ton*

*kalou mathema*) and, finally, to the beautiful as such, which is now neither body nor science:

Nor again will our initiate find the beautiful presented to him in the guise of a face or of hands or any other portion of the body, nor as a particular description or piece of knowledge, nor as existing somewhere in another substance, such as an animal or the earth or sky or any other thing; but existing ever in singularity of form independent by itself.<sup>10</sup>

The paradoxical task that Plato assigns to the theory of love is, therefore, that of guaranteeing the relation (the unity as well as the difference) between beauty and truth, or between that which is most visible and the invisible evidence of the Idea. In fact, the principle

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according to which the visible (and therefore the beautiful as 'that which is most apparent') is excluded from the domain of science is among the most profound intentions of Platonic thought. In Book 7 of the *Republic*, Plato explicitly affirms that it is impossible to grasp the truth of astronomy from the standpoint of appearance and visible beauty. The beautiful varieties of the celestial constellations cannot be, *as such*, the object of science:

These sparks that paint the sky, since they are decorations on a visible surface, we must regard, to be sure, as the fairest and most exact of material things but we must recognize that they fall far short of the truth, the movements, namely, of real speed and real slowness in true number and in all true figures both in relation to one another . . . Then, I continued, we must

use the blazonry of the heavens as patterns to aid in the study of those realities, just as one would do who chanced upon diagrams drawn with special care and elaboration by Daedalus or some other craftsman or painter. For anyone acquainted with geometry who saw such designs would admit the beauty of the workmanship, but would think it absurd to examine them seriously in the expectation of finding in them the absolute truth with regard to equals or doubles or any other ratio.<sup>11</sup>

Formulating in a certain manner the programme of the exact sciences, Simplicio is right to claim in his commentary on Aristotle's *On the Heavens* that the foremost intent of the Platonic *episteme* is a *ta phainomena sozein*, a 'salvation of appearances': 'here is the problem

that Plato offered to researchers in this field (astronomy): to find those circular and perfectly regular movements, there is a need for conjecture in order to save the presented appearance of errant stars.<sup>12</sup> Yet only if one could found a knowledge of appearances as such (that is, a science of visible beauty), would it be possible to truly 'save the phenomena'. The *episteme*, by itself, cannot 'save appearances' in mathematical relationships without presuming to have exhausted the visible phenomena in its beauty.

It is for this reason that the relationship between truth and beauty is the centre of the Platonic theory of Ideas. Beauty cannot be known and truth cannot be seen—yet it is this very intertwining of a double impossibility that defines the Idea and the authentic salvation of appearances in Eros' 'other knowledge'. In fact, the

significance of the term 'Idea' (with its implicit etymological reference to an e-vidence, to an *idein*) is entirely contained in the play (in the unity-difference) between truth and beauty. Thus it is that, in the dialogues on love, every time one appears to be able to grasp beauty, there is a return to the invisible; every time that one appears to be able to close in on the consistency of the truth through *episteme*, there is a return to the vocabulary of vision, seeing and appearing. Only because the supreme act of knowledge is split in this manner into truth and beauty ('wisdom is knowledge of the most beautiful' and the beautiful is 'that which is most apparent', but science is 'science of the invisible'), wisdom must be constituted as 'love of knowledge' or the 'knowledge of love' and, beyond any sensible knowledge as much as *episteme*, must present itself as philosophy. That is, as

a medium between science and ignorance—between a having and a not-having.

From this perspective, it is significant that the *Symposium* attributes the sphere of divination to Eros. This is because divination is precisely a form of 'mania': knowledge that cannot, as with *episteme*, explain itself or phenomena but, rather, concerns that which in them is simply sign and appearance. The contraposition between the *orthe mania* of love's knowledge and *episteme* leads once more to the Platonic attempt to institute 'another knowledge' and to save the phenomena between the invisibility of the evidence (truth) and the evidence of the invisible (beauty).

Yet, the Platonic theory of love is not just a theory of another knowledge but also the theory of 'another

pleasure'. If love is in fact the desire to possess the beautiful,<sup>13</sup> if to possess the beautiful is to be happy (*eudaimon estai*), and if love is, as we have seen, love of knowledge, then the problem of pleasure and that of knowledge are strictly connected. For this reason, it is certainly not an accident that, in the *Philebus*, pleasure is analysed from the perspective of science, and that the supreme good is identified as a mixture (*synkrisis*) of science and pleasure, truth and beauty. Plato distinguishes, here, the pure pleasures (*hedonai katharai*)—those of beautiful colours, of figure, of certain odours and sounds—that can be intertwined with science, from the impure pleasures which do not tolerate any relation with knowledge. The mixture of the pure pleasures and pure science is, however, explicitly characterized as the work of beauty, such that the supreme object of pleasure as of science takes refuge once again in the beautiful ('thus

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the power of the good ... it takes refuge in the nature of the good'<sup>14</sup>). The fracture of knowledge that Plato leaves as an inheritance to Western culture is, therefore, also a fracture in pleasure. Yet, both of these fractures that originally characterize Western metaphysics signal towards an intermediate dimension in which one finds the demonic figure of Eros, who appears to be the only one capable of effecting conciliation without thereby abolishing difference.

Only by placing oneself upon such a foundation—that is, only if one can account for this complex metaphysical inheritance, pregnant with the science that, since the end of the eighteenth century, ingeniously presents itself both as 'science of the beautiful' and 'doctrine of taste'—will it be possible to formulate in adequate terms the aesthetic problem of taste. That is,

only on such ground can one grasp that taste is at the same time a problem of knowledge and pleasure or, rather, in the words of Kant, the problem of the 'enigmatic' relation between knowledge and pleasure.

### *3. Knowledge that Enjoys and Pleasure that Knows*

The formation of the concept of taste, from the beginning of the sixteenth century until its final enunciation in the many eighteenth-century treatises on taste and the beautiful, betrays its metaphysical origin through the secret solidarity it presupposes between science and pleasure. Taste appears from the beginning as a 'knowledge that does not know, but enjoys' and as a 'pleasure that knows'. It is thus not a coincidence if, as Robert Klein demonstrated, the first appearances of this

concept are more often to be found in treatises on love and in magico-hermeneutic literature than in artistic literature, strictly speaking.<sup>15</sup> It is in a passage from Book 16 of Campanella's *Theologia* (1613-24) where, in a discussion on the influence of angels and demons on man, we find one of the most untimely appearances of the gustatory metaphor used to signify a particular form of immediate cognition:

*Non enim discurrendo cognoscit vir spiritualis utrum daemon an angelus. . . sibi suadet. . . aliquid; sed quodam quasi tactu et gustu et intuitiva notitia... quemadmodum lingua statim discernimus saporem vini et panis.*

It is not by deliberation that man judges whether a spirit is a devil or an angel ... It is rather by sensitivity and an intuitive understanding

that he is persuaded . . . just as we immediately recognize the taste of bread and wine with our tongue.<sup>16</sup>

It is Campanella, too, who in the preface to *Metafisica* (1638) opposes a form of knowledge by *tactum intrinsecum in magna suavitate* [inward touch of great sweetness] to reason, 'that is almost an arrow through which we reach towards a faraway target without tasting it [*absquegusto*].' The idea of another form of cognition, as distinct from sensation as science and located between pleasure and knowledge, is the dominant trait of the first definitions of taste as a judgement on the beautiful. All aspects of the problem are contained in a passage from Lodovico Zuccolo's *Discorso delle ragioni del numero del verso italiano* (1623), in which he writes on the beauty of verse:

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For reasons that cannot be explained by the human mind, this cause is good, since it is in proportion or harmonious, and another bad. In attempting to attribute such a judgement to a certain portion of the intellect that we can know together with the other sensations, we can only seize on the name of a sense. Thus it is that we habitually say the eye discerns the beauty of Painting, and the ear apprehends the harmony of Music. Though truly neither eyes nor ears are judges by themselves, for in this manner even horses and dogs would have that taste for Painting and Music that we enjoy. However, if indeed a certain superior power together with the eye and the ear form such a judgement, such a power we would know only in proportion to

our native acuity or expertise in the arts—yet without the use of discourse. The human mind knows well that one body, in order to be beautiful, must be more proportional than another. However, that this is good and that is bad remains entirely the judgement of this power together with the senses, which again we discern without discourse. Wherefore we correctly say, for example, that the mouth should have sufficient outline, angles, opening, lip-size, delicately exposed to the outside in order to respond to the measure and proportion of the nose, the cheeks, the eyes, the brow. It is for this reason that Lucretius had a beautiful mouth, and Camilla an ugly one: yet, because it could be made in one way as much as another, it is of taste, and

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sensibility remains the judge, understood in the manner above. Thus it would be folly to seek another reason.<sup>17</sup>

This negative characterization, so to speak, of taste as 'knowledge that is not known' is perfectly evident in G. W. Leibniz. Consider his definition of taste ('Taste as distinct from intellect consists in confused perceptions that we cannot sufficiently clarify. It is something close to an instinct.'<sup>18</sup>) in addition to his observation that painters and other artists can judge works of art rather well, yet cannot account for their judgements without recourse to an *I know not what* (he writes in *De cognitione, veritate et ideis* [1684]: 'we sometimes see painters and other artists correctly judge what has been done well or done badly; yet they are often unable to give a reason

for their judgment but tell the inquirer that the work which displeases them lacks “something, I know not what”<sup>19</sup>).

Nonetheless, it is precisely this empty sense that in the course of the eighteenth century acquires an ever-more crucial place in intellectual debates. If one were to pick the incomplete article that Montesquieu wrote for the *Encyclopédie* as a paradigmatic example of the numerous sixteenth-century treatises on taste, they would find that, with his usual acumen, he gathered the two essential characteristics of this other knowledge: ‘Natural taste is not a theoretical science; it is the quick and exquisite application of rules that one never knows.’<sup>20</sup> ‘Taste,’ he affirms elsewhere, ‘is nothing else but the prerogative to discover, with finesse and alacrity, the magnitude of the pleasure that everything should give to man.’<sup>21</sup> He insists many times on these

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characteristics which make taste something like the knowledge of pleasure and the pleasure of knowledge. In a significant passage alluding to the arbitrary character of man's constitution ('Our manner of being is entirely arbitrary; we could have been made as we were, or differently. But if we had been made differently, we would sense differently'<sup>22</sup>), he suggests that if the soul were not united with the body, knowledge and pleasure would not be divided: 'If our soul had not been united with a body, it appears that it would have loved what it had knowledge of; in our present state, we love almost only what we do not know.'<sup>23</sup>

From this perspective, taste appears as an excessive sense that cannot find its place within the metaphysical partition between the sensible and the intelligible—yet whose excess defines the particular stature of

human knowledge. It is for this reason that philosophers who attempt to describe taste find themselves in the situation of that imaginary traveller in Cyrano de Bergerac's *A Voyage to the Moon* (1649), in which an inhabitant of the moon attempts to explain what he perceives through his senses:

There are a Million of things, perhaps, in the Universe, that would require a Million of different Organs for your to understand them . . . should I attempt to explain to you what I perceive by the Senses which you want, you would represent it to your self as something that may be Heard, Seen, Felt, Smelt or Tasted, and yet it is no such thing.<sup>24</sup>

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Taste is precisely such a missing (or excessive) sense that can only be described through metaphor. It is a properly anti-metaphysical sense that permits what is, by definition, impossible: the knowledge of sensible appearances (of the beautiful as 'that which is most apparent') as true and the perception of truth as appearance and pleasure.

Let us now examine the other face of this excessive sense: the beautiful which constitutes its object. In seventeenth- and eighteenth-century treatises we find the latter constituted, in a perfectly symmetrical manner to the concept of taste, as an excessive signifier that can neither be adequately perceived by any sense nor produce any knowledge. The theory of an *I know not what*, having dominated debate over the beautiful since the second half of the seventeenth century, constitutes

the point of convergence between the doctrine of the good and that of taste. Father Feijóo wrote in *El no se qué* [I Know Not What] (1733):

In many of the products not only of nature but also of art (and perhaps art more than nature), men find, instead of those perfections that are the object of their rational comprehension, another genre of mysterious excellence that while flattering their taste, torments their intellect. Their senses feel it, yet reason cannot make it go away. In seeking to explain the phenomena, one can find neither words nor concepts that correspond with one's impressions and so in order to remove the difficulty, one simply says that there is an 'I know not what' that pleases, enamours, enchants, since it is not possible to

find a more clear explanation of this natural mystery.<sup>25</sup>

We also find that Montesquieu, connecting the 'I know not what' as *invisible charm* to surprise ('Sometimes in a person or in a thing there is an invisible attraction, a natural grace that nobody has the knowledge to define, and that is called an 'I know not what'. It appears to me that this effect is principally founded on surprise.'<sup>26</sup>), finishes with the implicit identification of beauty and pleasure, a relation which he derives from the simple perception of an inadequacy between knowledge and its object. According to Descartes's treatise *Passions of the Soul* (1649), wonder, defined as first among the passions, is nothing but an open passion that has no other content than the perception of a split

as well as of a difference between an object and our knowledge:

When our first encounter with some object surprises us and we find it novel, or very different from what we formerly knew or from what we supposed it ought to be, this causes us to wonder and to be astonished at it. Since all this may happen before we know whether or not the object is beneficial to us, I regard wonder as the first of all the passions. It has no opposite, for, if the object before us has no characteristics that surprise us, we are not moved by it at all and we consider it without passion.<sup>27</sup>

In this way the beautiful, as object of taste, comes to ever-more resemble the object of surprise that Descartes defined in a significant expression as a *free*

*cause'*, an open object or a pure signifier that no signified has yet to fill.

In an article on the beautiful that Diderot wrote for the *Encyclopédie*, the purification and emptying of the idea of beauty of any possible content is carried to its limit. Here, Diderot defines the beautiful as 'all that excites in my mind the idea of relation'.<sup>28</sup> This idea of relation does not refer, however, to any content or to a precise signified ('When I say everything that awakens in us the idea of relation, I do not mean that, in order to call a being beautiful, we must appreciate what kind of relations there are within it'<sup>29</sup>), nor does it recall in any sense the idea of proportion from classical aesthetics: it is nothing but the pure idea of relation in-itself and for-itself, the pure reference of one thing to another. In other words, relation designates an object's character

as signifier, *independent of whatever concrete signified*, which Diderot can, not by chance, exemplify with the parental relation—that is, with something that introduces the individual into a series of purely formal signifying relationships.

A relation in general is an operation of the understanding, which considers either a being, or a quality, as this being or quality supposes the existence of another being or of another quality. For example: when I say that Peter is a good father, I consider within him a quality that supposes the existence of another, that of a son; so on with other relations, whatever they might be.<sup>30</sup>

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Through an audacious anthropological excursus, Diderot draws the origin of the idea of relation (and, therefore, that of the beautiful) back towards the problem of the origin and the development of human knowledge qua capacity to perceive signification:

But the exercise of our intellectual faculties and the necessity to satisfy our needs with inventions, machines, etc., barely had time to sketch notions of order, relation, proportion, arrangement, and symmetry, before we found ourselves among beings where the same notions were, so to speak, iterated ad infinitum; we could not take one step in the universe without awakening these notions; they could enter our souls from anywhere, at any time.<sup>31</sup>

Analogous to the manner in which Diderot defines the beautiful as an excessive signifier (and, implicitly, taste as the sense of signification), Rousseau in 'Essay on the Origin of Languages' (1781) separates within our sensations and perceptions the manner in which they conform to the physical actions of objects on our senses, from their power as signs. He, too, attributes the pleasure that is caused by the beautiful exclusively to this second aspect:

Man is modified by his senses, no one doubts it; but because we fail to distinguish their modifications, we confound their causes; we attribute both too much and too little dominion to sensations; we do not see that often they affect us not only as sensations, but as signs or images.<sup>32</sup>

[...]

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As long as one wants to consider sounds only in terms of the disturbance they excite in our nerves, one will not have the true principles of music and its power over our hearts. The sounds of a melody do not act on us solely as sounds, but as signs . . . Let whoever wishes to philosophize about the strength of sensations therefore begin by setting aside purely sensual impressions apart from the intellectual and moral impressions which we receive by way of the senses, but of which the senses are only the occasional causes . . . Colours and sounds are capable of a great deal as representations or signs, of little as simple objects of the senses.<sup>33</sup>

In its most radical formulation, eighteenth-century reflection on the beautiful and taste culminates in the return to *knowledge* that one cannot explain since it is

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grounded on a pure signifier (*Unbezeichnung*, 'absence of signified', as Johann Joachim Winckelmann [1717-68] will define beauty); and to a *pleasure* that allows one to judge since it is sustained not on a substantial reality but, rather, on that which in the object is pure signification.

#### 4. *Excessive Knowledge*

It is in Kant's *Critique of the Power of Judgement* (1790) that the conception of the beautiful as an excessive signifier as well as of taste as the knowledge and enjoyment of this signifier find their most rigorous expression. From the first page, Kant in fact defines aesthetic pleasure as an excess of representation over knowledge:

However, the subjective aspect in a representation which cannot become an element of

knowledge at all is the pleasure or displeasure connected with it; for through this I cognize nothing in the object of the representation . . . If pleasure is connected with the mere apprehension (*apprehensio*) of the form of an object of intuition without a relation of this to a concept for a determinate cognition, then the representation is thereby related not to the object, but solely to the subject, and the pleasure can express nothing but its suitability to the cognitive faculties that are in play in the reflecting power of judgement, insofar as they are in play, and thus merely a subjective formal purposiveness of the object. . . That object the form of which (not the material aspect of its representation, as sensation) in mere reflection on it (without any intention of acquiring a concept from it)

is judged as the ground of a pleasure in the representation of such an object—with its representation this pleasure is also judged to be necessarily combined, consequently not merely for the subject who apprehends this form but for everyone who judges at all. The object is then called beautiful; and the faculty for judging through such a pleasure (consequently also with universal validity) is called taste.<sup>34</sup>

Readers have often been prevented by the perspective of traditional aesthetics, which finds taste to be a form of knowledge close to logic, from seeing what Kant affirms here with absolute clarity: the beautiful is an excess of representation over knowledge and it is proper that this excess present itself as pleasure. For this reason, Kant does not appear to give the judgement of taste a

precise position in the tri-partition of the faculties of the soul ('We can trace all faculties of the human mind without exception back to these three: the faculty of cognition, the feeling of pleasure and displeasure, and the faculty of desire'<sup>35</sup>), but, on the contrary, affirms that it 'reveals an immediate relation between the faculty of cognition with the feeling of pleasure or displeasure' and that this relation is 'precisely what is puzzling in the principle of the faculty of judgement'.<sup>36</sup> That is, on the one hand the judgement of taste is an excess of knowledge that is not known (a 'judgement with which one does not know anything'), but that presents itself as pleasure. On the other hand, it is an excess of pleasure that is not enjoyed ('the universal communicability of a pleasure', Kant writes, 'already includes in its concept that the pleasure itself must not be enjoyed'<sup>37</sup>), but that presents itself as knowledge. Yet, it

is in virtue of this fundamentally hybrid situation that taste is the medium term that 'effects the transition from the pure faculty of knowledge, which is to say, from the domain of the concepts of nature, to the domain of the concept of freedom; just as in its logical use, it makes possible the passage from understanding to reason.'<sup>38</sup> For Kant, this hybrid status of taste corresponds just as much with the fact that the beautiful can only be defined through a series of purely negative determinations {*pleasure without interest; universality without concept; finality without end*), as with the impossibility of resolving the antinomy of taste in a convincing fashion. It is the latter antinomy that, in the second section of the *Critique of the Power of Judgement*, he formulates in the following manner:

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THESIS: The judgement of taste is not based on concepts, for otherwise it would be possible to dispute about it (decide by means of proofs).

ANTITHESIS: The judgement of taste is based on concepts, for otherwise, despite its variety, it would not even be possible to argue about it (to lay claim to the necessary assent of others to this judgement).<sup>39</sup>

Yet the attempt to resolve this antinomy by placing a 'concept with which one does not know anything' at the foundation of aesthetic judgement is unsatisfactory, as demonstrated by the fact that Kant himself was constrained to return to a 'supersensible' ground and to ultimately admit that the source of judgements of taste remains unknown:

Now all contradiction vanishes if I say that the judgement of taste is based on a concept (of a general ground for the subjective purposiveness of nature for the power of judgement), from which, however, nothing can be cognized and proved with regard to the object, because it is in itself indeterminable and unfit for knowledge; yet at the same time by means of this very concept it acquires validity for everyone (in each case, to be sure, as a singular judgement immediately accompanying the intuition), because its determining ground may lie in the concept of that which can be regarded as the supersensible substratum of humanity ... The subjective principle, namely, the indeterminate idea of the supersensible in us, can only be indicated as the sole key to demystifying this faculty which

is hidden to us even in its sources, but there is nothing by which it can be made more comprehensible.<sup>40</sup>

Kant clarifies the character of this aesthetic Idea, defining it once again as an excessive image—that is, a representation—which cannot be saved through a concept, just as those constellations that embellish the skies cannot be saved in the Platonic *episteme*:

As in the case of an Idea of reason the imagination, with its intuitions, never attains to the given concept, so in the case of an aesthetic Idea the understanding, by means of its concepts, never attains to the complete inner intuition of the imagination which it combines with a given representation. Now since to bring a representation of the imagination to concepts is the same

as to expound it, the aesthetic Idea can be called an inexponible representation of the imagination (in its free play).<sup>41</sup>

In Kant's passage, we find again in all its mystery the original Platonic foundation of the Idea through the difference-unity of beauty and truth. As with the Platonic Idea, so too the Kantian aesthetic Idea is entirely contained in the play between a possibility and impossibility of sight (of imagination), between a possibility and impossibility of knowledge. The Idea is a concept that cannot be represented or an image that cannot be expounded. The excess of imagination over understanding grounds beauty (the aesthetic Idea), just as the excess of the concept over the image grounds the domain of the supersensible (the Idea of reason).

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For this reason, at the end of the second section of the first part of the *Critique of the Power of Judgement*, the beautiful is presented as a ‘symbol of morality<sup>5</sup> and the judgement of taste refers ‘to something that is in the subject itself and outside of it, that is neither nature nor freedom, but which is connected with the ground of the latter, namely the supersensible, in which the theoretical faculty is combined with the practical, in a mutual and unknown way, to form a unity<sup>5,42</sup> In establishing such a relationship between taste and the supersensible, Kant carries out the Platonic project to ‘save the phenomena<sup>5</sup> once again.

Yet, in opposition to the discipline of aesthetics, which we find defined in these same years as a *scientia cognitionis sensitivae*, the stature of the Kantian Idea

excludes (as with Plato) any possibility for a science of the beautiful:

There is neither a science of the beautiful, only a critique, nor beautiful science, only beautiful art. For if the former existed, then it would be determined in it scientifically, that is, by means of proofs, whether something should be held to be beautiful or not; thus the judgement about beauty, if it belonged to a science, would not be a judgement of taste. As for the second, a science which, as such, is supposed to be beautiful, is absurd. For if in it, as a science, one were to ask for grounds and proofs, one would be sent packing with tasteful expressions *ibons mols*).<sup>134</sup>

### *5. Beyond the Subject of Knowledge*

In the preceding pages, we have interrogated the concept of taste as the figure through which Western culture has established an ideal of knowledge that it presents as the fullest knowledge at the same time as it underlines the impossibility thereof. Such knowledge, which could suture the metaphysical scission between the sensible and the intelligible, the subject does not in fact know since he cannot explain it. Taste is an empty or excessive sense, situated at the very limit of knowledge and pleasure (from which derives its metaphorical designation as the most opaque sense), whose lack or excess essentially defines the stature of both science (understood as knowledge that is known, can be explained and, therefore, can be learnt and transmitted) and pleasure (understood as a possession on which one cannot found any knowledge).

The object and ground of this knowledge that the subject does not know is designated as beauty: something that, according to the Platonic conception, is given to sight (*to hallos*, 'the beautiful', is the most apparent thing, *ekphanestatori*), but of which there can be no science, only love. It was indeed this experience of the impossibility of grasping the object of vision as such (of 'saving the phenomenon') that drove Plato to account for the ideal of knowledge not as 'wisdom' [*sapere*] in the etymological sense (*sophia*) but as the desire for wisdom (*iphilo-sophia*). That there is beauty, that the phenomena exceed science, is equivalent to saying: there is knowledge that the subject does not know but can only desire or, rather, there is a subject of desire (a *philosophos*) but not a subject of wisdom (a *sophos*). Plato's entire theory of Eros is precisely aimed at bridging these two divided subjects.

It is for this reason that Plato was able to connect the knowledge of love [*sapere d'amore*] to divinization. The latter presupposes a knowledge hidden in signs that cannot be known but only recognized: 'this signifies that' (which the most ancient divinatory texts explain as the pure grammatical relationship between a protasis and an apodosis: 'if . . . then . . .'), without any subject of such knowledge, nor it having any other significance than the recognition that 'there is a signifier' or even that 'there is signification'. Indeed, what the diviner knows is only that there is a knowledge that he does not know, from which derives its association with *mania* and possession. It is this very knowledge that Socrates adapts by locating in a 'non-knowledge' the content of knowledge proper and placing in a *daimon*—that is, in the 'other' par excellence—the subject of the knowledge that he professes (in the *Cratylus*, the word *daimon* is connected

with *daemon*, 'he who knows'). The ultimate question posed by the beautiful (and taste as 'knowledge of the beautiful') is, therefore, a question of the subject of knowledge: Who is the subject of knowledge? Who knows?

In the course of this study, while explaining the ideas formulated by seventeenth- and eighteenth-century theorists of the beautiful and taste (Diderot in particular), we have frequently made use of the expression 'excessive signifier'. This expression is derived from an epistemological theory that was first elaborated in the domain of anthropology, but whose relevance for reflection on aesthetics did not escape its author: here we refer to the theory of signification that Levi-Strauss developed through the concept of *mana* in *Introduction to the Work of Marcel Mauss* (1950).

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As is well known, Levi-Strauss posited a fundamentally inadequate relation between signification and knowledge that translates to an irreducible excess of the signifier over the signified, the cause of which is inscribed in the origin of man as *Homo sapiens*'.

Things cannot have begun to signify gradually.

In the wake of a transformation which is not a subject of study for the social sciences, but for biology and psychology, a shift occurred from a stage when nothing had a meaning to another stage when everything had meaning. Actually, that apparently banal remark is important, because that radical change has no counterpart in the field of knowledge, which develops slowly and progressively. In other words, at the moment when the entire universe all at once

became *significant*, it was none the better *known* for being so, even if it is true that the emergence of language must have hastened the rhythm of the development of knowledge. So there is a fundamental opposition, in the history of the human mind, between symbolism which is characteristically discontinuous, and knowledge, characterized by continuity. Let us consider what follows from that. It follows that the two categories of the signifier and the signified came to be constituted simultaneously and inter-dependently, as complementary units; whereas knowledge, that is, the intellectual process which enables us to identify certain aspects of the signifier and certain aspects of the signified, one with reference to the other—we could even say the process which enables us to choose, from the

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entirety of the signifier and from the entirety of the signified, those parts which present the most satisfying relations of mutual agreement—only got started very slowly. It is as if humankind had suddenly acquired an immense domain and the detailed plan of that domain along with a notion of the reciprocal relationship of domain and plan; but had spent millennia learning which specific symbols of the plan represented the different aspects of the domain. The universe signified long before people began to know what it signified; no doubt that goes without saying. But, from the foregoing analysis, it also emerges that from the beginning, the universe signified the totality of what humankind can expect to know about it. What people call the progress of the human mind and, in any

case, the progress of scientific knowledge, could only have been and can only ever be constituted out of processes of correcting and recutting of patterns, regrouping, defining relationships of belonging and discovering new resources, inside a totality which is closed and complementary to itself. [ . . . ]

We can therefore expect the relationship between symbolism and knowledge to conserve common features in the non-industrial societies and in our own, although those features would not be equally pronounced in the two types of society. It does not mean that we are creating a gulf between them, if we acknowledge that the work of equalizing of the signifier to fit the signified has been pursued more methodically

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and rigorously from the time when modern science was born, and within the boundaries of the spread of science. But everywhere else, and still constantly in our own societies (and no doubt for a long time to come), a fundamental situation perseveres which arises out of the human condition: namely, that man has from the start had at his disposition a signifier-totality which he is at a loss to know how to allocate to a signified, given as such, but no less unknown for being given. There is always a non-equivalence or 'inadequation' between the two, a non-fit and overspill which divine understanding alone can soak up; this generates a signifier-surfeit relative to the signifieds to which it can be fitted. So, in man's effort to understand the world, he always disposes of a surplus of signification (which he

shares out among things in accordance with the laws of the symbolic thinking which it is the task of ethnologists and linguists to study). That distribution of a supplementary ration—if I can express myself thus—is absolutely necessary to ensure that, in total, the available signifier and the mapped-out signified may remain in the relationship of complementarity which is the very condition of the exercise of symbolic thinking.

I believe that notions of the *mana* type, however diverse they may be, and viewed in terms of their most general function (which, as we have seen, has not vanished from our mentality and our form of society) represent nothing more or less than that *floating signifier* which is the disability of all finite thought (but also the surety

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of all art, all poetry, every mythic and aesthetic invention), even though scientific knowledge is capable, if not of staunching it, at least of controlling it partially.<sup>44</sup>

We can at this point extend Levi-Strauss' considerations to all the epistemological statutes of Western culture, from the ancient world until today. Consider, from this perspective what Plato affirms at the end of Book 7 of the *Republic* with respect to astronomy as *episteme*: that, as we have seen, it is unable to exhaust the visible phenomena as such—those beautiful constellations that embellish the skies—through its explanations but must instead seek the invisible and numeric relations that the former presuppose. We can conclude that ancient science left free in the phenomena what was pure appearance in them (that is, pure signifier), opening

beside itself a space that divinatory science could occupy without contradiction.

The example of astronomy and astrology (which peacefully coexisted in antiquity) is clarifying: the first is limited to expounding the movement of the stars and their reciprocal positions, as a manner of 'saving appearances' in the sense that Simplicius gave to this expression—yet without offering any explanation as such of those beautiful figures that the stars trace in the sky. The phenomena 'saved' by science therefore inevitably leave behind a free residue, a pure signifier that astrology can take as its support and treat as a supplement of signification to distribute at its whim.

In the ancient world, there are thus two species of knowledge: knowledge that is known, which is to say science in the modern sense as founded upon the

adequation of signifier and signified; and knowledge that is not known, which is to say, divinatory science (and the various forms of *mania* enumerated by Plato) that is conversely founded upon the excessive signifier. Returning to the distinction between *semiotic* and *semantic* that Benveniste has formulated as the 'double signification' inherent in human language, one can define the first as semantic knowledge—that has a subject and can be explained—and the second as semiotic knowledge—that does not have a subject and can only be recognized.<sup>45</sup> Between these two forms of knowledge, Plato placed philosophy which, as *mania*, pertains to divination. However, in perceiving the phenomena as beauty it is not limited to carrying out a distribution of the excessive signifier but, thanks to the mediation of Eros, is able instead to save the phenomena in the Idea.

Since the eighteenth century, modern science has extended its territory only at the expense of the divinatory sciences which came to be excluded from knowledge. The subject of science poses itself as the only subject of knowledge, negating the possibility of any knowledge without subject. Nonetheless, the decline of the traditional divinatory sciences did not by any means signal the disappearance of this knowledge that is not known: the growing debate over the '*I know not what*' and taste starting in the seventeenth century and the progressive consolidation of the aesthetic throughout the nineteenth century demonstrates, rather, that science can neither fill nor reduce the excessive signifier. If aesthetics as knowledge of the excessive signifier (of the beautiful) is but a substitute for divination, it is nonetheless not the only knowledge in the modern epoch that comes to the fore after the eclipse of the divinatory

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sciences. In the course of the nineteenth century, even the philological disciplines grasp their own specificity with respect to the natural sciences, explicitly founding their knowledge and method in a hermeneutic circle of the divinatory variety (which means, if one properly reflects, that the question 'Who knows?' in the reading and interpretation of a text—whether it is the interpreter, the author, or the text itself—is not a question that can easily be answered).

Yet another science—whose formative process chronologically coincides with that of the science of the beautiful and that, since the eighteenth century, has assumed a growing importance within the system of knowledge—reveals an unexpected affinity with aesthetics if taste is indeed as much a knowledge that is not known, as a pleasure that is not enjoyed but judged and

measured. We refer, of course, to political economy. Where aesthetics takes as its object a knowledge that is not known, political economy takes as its object a pleasure that is not enjoyed. One could say, in fact, that the latter science begins by identifying its own domain with the 'interested pleasure' that Kant rigorously excluded from the confines of the beautiful. If this is so, are not Marx's teachings but the demonstration (placing the value-form and fetish-character of the commodity at the centre of his analyses in the first chapter of *Capital* [1867]) that this discipline is founded not so much on use value (on utility, an enjoyed pleasure) as it is on exchange value, which is to say, on that which can neither be enjoyed nor grasped in the object—a pleasure that one cannot have? As Georg Simmel intuited in defining money (with an expression that singularly

recalls Diderot's definition of the beautiful) as a 'pure relation without content', the value-form, like Levi-Strauss' *mana*, is a zero symbolic value or pure signifier that simply indicates the necessity of a supplementary symbolic content and a supplementary pleasure, whose calculus constitutes the object of economic science.

Mallarmé's observation, according to which aesthetics and political economy are the only paths open to research on the mind [*ricerca mentale*], is thus more than a superficial analogy.<sup>46</sup> Aesthetics and political economy, *Homo aestheticus* and *Homo economicus*, are in a certain sense the two halves (a knowledge that is not known and a pleasure that is not enjoyed) that taste struggled to hold together for the last time in the experience of a knowledge that enjoys and a pleasure that knows, before their explosion and liberation helped set in motion those

tremendous transformations that essentially characterize modern society.

At the end of the nineteenth century, another science came to occupy the terrain left vacant by divinatory science, a science that—inasmuch as it defines its own domain as the ‘unconscious’—was instituted on the assumption that there is a knowledge that is not known, but that is revealed in symbols and signifiers. As written by he who has derived the most extreme and rigorous consequences that were only implicit in the original appearance of psychoanalysis as semiotic knowledge, ‘analysis came to announce that there is knowledge that is not known, knowledge that is sustained by the signifier itself . . . the unconscious testifies to knowledge that escapes the speaking being’,<sup>47</sup>

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While psychoanalysis bears an essential proximity to aesthetics (that the concept of the unconscious appears for the first time in Leibniz at the limits of that *cognitio sensitiva confusa* which aesthetics will define as its proper sphere is certainly a proof of such proximity), its relation with political economy is no less essential. For the .Ely<sup>48</sup> (a third-person pronoun or non-subject according to the linguists) that analysis places as the subject of a knowledge that is not known is also the subject of a pleasure that is not enjoyed. Recognizing the unconscious as the space of libidinal economy, psychoanalysis is situated at the limit between aesthetics and political economy, between a knowledge that is not known and a pleasure that is not enjoyed—and tends to conjoin them in a unitary project. (The idea of an ‘aesthetics guided by an economic point of view’ that Freud formulates in

the second chapter of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* [1920], is certainly significant).

Despite assisting an unprecedented consolidation of the natural sciences, modern culture has also helped in various ways to constitute and reinforce the new semiotic science that takes as its object a knowledge that is not known and a pleasure that is not enjoyed. The importance of the excessive signifier not only does not diminish, but, in a certain sense, expands. It is almost as if the more that science progresses in its attempt to 'save appearances', the greater becomes that residue of the excessive signifier (the quantity of knowledge that is not known) that must be examined by the divinatory sciences. Semiotic science and semantic science, divination and science strictly appear together linked through a relation of complementarity, in which the one guarantees the possibility and the function of the other.

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The fracture between signification and knowledge—the semiotic and the semantic—is not in fact something produced once and for all outside of the human, but instead is a fracture of this very same subject of knowledge: man as *Homo sapiens*. Since, as a speaking and thinking being, the human is held between signification and knowledge, its cognition is necessarily split and the problem of who knows knowledge (the problem of the subject of knowledge) remains the fundamental question of every epistemology. Despite proceeding from the most profound intentions of ancient philosophy (as of Spinoza's *Ethics*) in assuming the Idea (or God) to be the principle of knowledge, philosophy and modern science since Descartes have instead sought to guarantee the unity of cognition through the fiction of an *ego cogito*, the / as pure self-consciousness, affirmed as the only subject of

knowledge. Yet it is this very subject of knowledge that the most recent developments in the human sciences have called into question. For example, consider psychoanalysis, which has discovered *Es* to be the subject of a knowledge that is not known; as well as structuralism, which has established structure to be an unconscious categorical knowledge without reference to any thinking subject; and linguistics, which has located in the phoneme a knowledge independent of the speaking subject—all resolutely signal towards an Other as the subject of knowledge. At this point, the problem becomes that of the passage between the knowledge that is known and the knowledge that is not known, between knowledge of the Other and knowledge of the subject. Yet, as Benveniste has demonstrated that the semiotic and semantic in language represent two closed worlds between which there is no passage, so there is a hiatus

between knowledge of the Other and knowledge of the subject that cannot clearly be bridged. The Freudian program—according to which ‘where *Es* was, the I should be’—cannot be realized if it is true that the I and the Other are in fact a necessary pair.

It is perhaps not surprising, then, that modern humanity continues to be ever less capable of mastering a knowledge and a pleasure that, to an increasing extent, do not belong to it. Between knowledge of the subject and knowledge without subject, between the I and the Other, an abyss has opened that technology and economy seek in vain to bridge.

Hence, too, semiotics’ incapacity to constitute itself as a general science of the sign, that is, as a knowledge founded upon the unity of signifier and signified. In order to constitute itself as such, it would have to both

reduce the signifier's excess and suture the scission between semiotic knowledge and semantic knowledge, between a knowledge that is not known and a knowledge that is known—a scission which is inscribed in the very notion of the sign on which the discipline is founded. For this reason, one can view the case of Saussure's studies on Saturnian verses—so embarrassing to the linguists—as paradigmatic of semiology's destiny: semiology, having recognized that there is a knowledge of signifiers that is not known yet that reveals itself in anagrams, cannot but seek to attribute this to a subject that can never be found for the simple reason that it has never been.<sup>49</sup> A knowledge that would neither be semiotic knowledge nor semantic knowledge—or that would be both at the same time—could not but situate itself in that fracture between signifier and

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signified that semiology has, so far, always tried to eliminate and obscure.

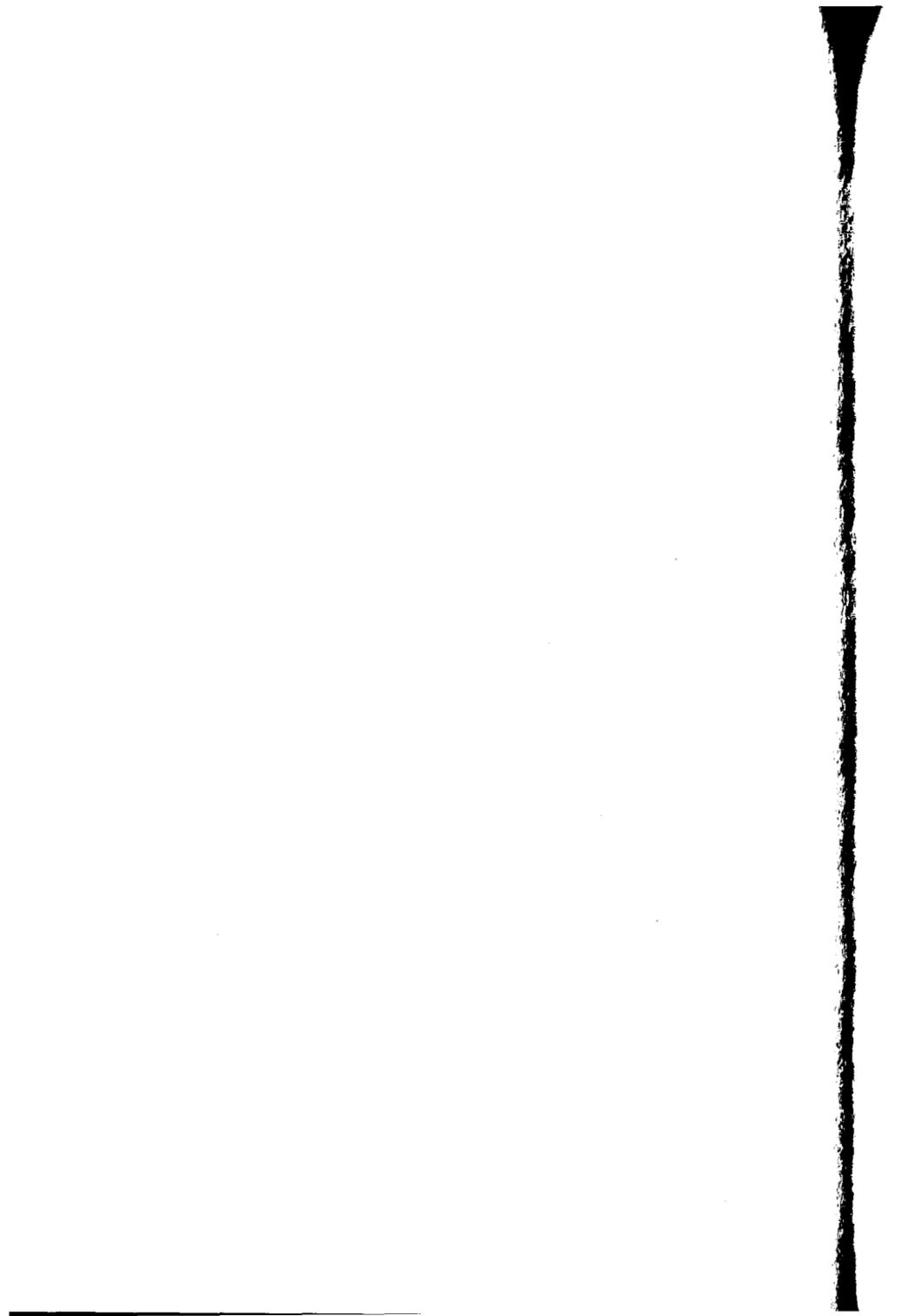
It is perhaps at this point that we are able to grasp the sense of the Greek project for a *philo-sophia*, for a love of knowledge and a knowledge of love, that would be neither knowledge of the signifier nor knowledge of the signified, neither divination nor science, neither knowledge nor pleasure. So, too, may we now grasp that the concept of taste constitutes an extreme and late incarnation of this very project. For only a knowledge that does not belong either to the subject or the Other but instead is situated in the fracture that divides them can claim to have truly 'saved the phenomena' in their pure appearance, without either referring them back to being and an invisible truth or abandoning them to divination as an excessive signifier.

It is this knowledge in which truth and beauty communicate that, at the culmination of Greek philosophy, Plato fixed in the demonic figure of Eros. It is also this knowledge that, at the threshold of the modern age, appeared to the poets of the Duecento as the 'understanding of love' in the beatified figure of a Woman (Beatrice) in whom, finally, science enjoys and pleasure knows. The mythologem of Eros is necessarily inscribed in the destiny of Western philosophy inasmuch as, beyond the metaphysical diremption of signifier and signified, appearance and being, as well as divination and science, it strives towards an integral salvation of the phenomena. Knowledge of love, philosophy, signifies: beauty must save truth and truth must save beauty. In this double salvation, knowledge is realized.

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Only such a pleasure, in which pleasure and knowledge are united, could attain to the ideal of wisdom *\sapienzale\* and thus taste that an Indian poetic treatise, *The Mirror of Composition (Sahitya-darpana)*, has fixed in the concept of 'flavour' *[sapore\ {rasa}\*

Arising from a luminous principle, indivisible, resplendent in its self-evidence, made of joy and thought together, free of contact with any other perceptions, twin to the savouring of the *brahman*, living on the breath of supernatural marvel, such is the Flavour that those who have the means of judgement enjoy as the proper form of self, inseparably.<sup>50</sup>



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