# *Introduction*
## *Being Interested in Beauty*

In 'Of the Spirit in which the Americans Cultivate the Arts,' from the second part of *Democracy in America* (1840), Alexis de Tocqueville indicates that the conditions of democratic nations may not be conducive to the appreciation of beauty.[1] The rationale is that in an aristocratic age, defined by privilege, the worth of the arts is secured by the exclusivity of the work produced but that in a democratic age, characterised by opportunity and instability, the arts are dependent on and their value is diluted by the economic marketplace. Accordingly, 'democratic nations . . . cultivate the arts which serve to render life easy, in preference to those whose object is to adorn it,' and so 'they will habitually prefer the useful to the beautiful, and they will require that the beautiful should be useful' (II.42). For Tocqueville, the loss of distinction between the beautiful and the useful marks a profound change in the value of the arts with consequences for producers as well as consumers. On the one hand, the old kind of art-worker existed within a community of craftsmen, 'not exclusively swayed by his own interest, or even by that of his customer, but by that of the body to which he belongs; and the interest of that body is, that each artisan should produce the best possible workmanship' (II.43). On the other hand, the new kind of art-worker is motivated not to preserve the reputation of a guild but to protect his own interests, which leads him 'to produce with greater rapidity a quantity of imperfect commodities, and the consumer to content himself with those commodities' (II.45). Construed this way, the conditions for art in America in the 1830s present a cautionary example for other nations. It is not just that Tocqueville illuminates the difference between the pursuit of beauty for the interest of an aesthetic group and the self-interested pursuit of beauty but also that he deems aesthetic change to be intertwined with the political change from an aristocratic to a democratic society.

It is obvious that, here as elsewhere, Tocqueville is fascinated by interest-motivated behaviour, for 'there are always a multitude of individuals whose wants are above their means, and who are very willing to take up with imperfect satisfaction rather than abandon the object of their desires' (II.44). It is also obvious that he regrets the diminishing aesthetic purchase of the republican tradition since 'to mimic virtue is of every age; but the

hypocrisy of luxury belongs more particularly to the ages of democracy' (II.45). There is a trade-off, however. Democratic nations could produce 'very commendable works' (II.45) in the useful or decorative arts and the fine arts provided it is accepted that the expanding market for aesthetic objects will alter the perception of what counts as beautiful. The shift is manifest in the fine arts because the conditions and institutions of democracy 'frequently withdraw them from the delineation of the soul to fix them exclusively on that of the body' and, as a result, 'they put the Real in place of the Ideal' (II.46). Tocqueville draws out the distinction by reference to Raphael and David and, in so doing, offers a political explanation for the emergence of realism in painting. Raphael 'sought to make of man something which should be superior to man, and to embellish beauty's self,' whereas David 'and his scholars ... wonderfully depicted the models which they had before their eyes, but they rarely imagine anything beyond them: they followed nature with fidelity' (II.47). The choice of examples is intriguing in light of the common aesthetic heritage of these artists with respect to republicanism and history painting. But the implication is that beauty mattered differently in Florentine public life of the sixteenth century compared to French public life of the eighteenth century. The identification of an artistic transition from the soul to the body and the 'Ideal' to the 'Real' thus registers a broader set of historical transitions from religious to secular society and from a sovereign city-state to an imperial nation.

*Democratising Beauty in Nineteenth-Century Britain* examines how and why beauty matters in public life from the historical moment where Tocqueville leaves off and through the case of Great Britain. The scope of the argument can be summarised as follows. From around the 1830s in Britain, a new language for speaking about beauty begins to be articulated, distinct from traditional philosophical understandings of the aesthetic and instead linked to emerging democratic ideals of equality, liberty, and individuality. Is the love of art and beauty a selfish principle, or could it foster equality? Does beauty represent an expansion of or a limitation on freedom? Can the values of beauty and art be extended to or should they be segregated from public life? Are the pleasures of beauty in conflict with or the means of achieving aesthetic and political enfranchisement? These are the questions that animate the nineteenth-century debate about beauty, which must be distinguished from earlier such debates because it arises in the set of historical circumstances in Britain relating to industry and the rise of capitalism, changing practices of labour and leisure, colonial expansion, and political reform and rebellion – otherwise known as the conditions of modernity. All the writers to be studied – Charles Lock Eastlake, John Ruskin, Walter Pater, Edward Poynter, William Morris, and John Addington Symonds – share an express confidence in the capacity of the arts to educate and thus their desirability for enriching conceptions of the

good. Furthermore, all perceive the material worth and cultural renown of the beautiful as historically specific and so invoke classical, medieval, and renaissance worlds to give voice to concerns about materialism and the decline of taste in modern Britain. Yet the choice of which civilisation was best suited to remodel the relationship between art, individual, and society was shaped by widely different beliefs about whether beauty ought to be independent from or indexed to moral, economic, and political concerns. The consequence is that British art and art writing acquire exigency for ideals of political representation and raise issues relating to national aesthetics, the publics for art, and the place of individuals in the collective life of society.

## From Virtue to Interest

The thesis of this book is that interest replaces virtue in nineteenth-century discussions of beauty in nature and in art. For all its familiarity today, 'interest' has a convoluted history with a shifting set of meanings, and it has been celebrated and attacked through the phases of its historical use.[2] Derived from the Latin *interesse*, 'to be between,' it has the literal sense of 'makes a difference, concerns, matters, is of importance' and a cognate sense of 'damage, loss' deriving from Roman law where 'id quod interest,' or 'what is the share,' was used to resolve disputes involving compensation. In general, the ancient legal senses of interest as having a right or title to or a claim upon and share in something are not usually acknowledged in its modern senses of profit and advantage or detriment. In turn, the emphasis on self-interest in economic contexts has tended to obscure the psychological senses of interest as curiosity, attraction, and concern, that is, the kinds of behaviour not necessarily determined by material acquisitiveness.[3] My intention is not merely to recover the legal and psychological senses of interest but to demonstrate how the use of interest in nineteenth-century arguments for beauty cuts across and exposes a number of aesthetic and political complexities. To this end, it is important to distinguish the interest of something and being interested in something: both register a relation, but in the first case, the relation is objective (in the interests of beauty and art), while in the second case, the relation is subjective (I am interested in art and beauty). The debate about democratising beauty moves between these two cases but gains momentum around the second case for, I propose, the following reasons. First, because interest provides a language that registers an individual's attraction towards and curiosity about a beautiful object but has strong economic and social resonances in suggesting a reward for investment in a common concern. Second, because this language is intimately connected to political representation but has different implications for the individuals and groups included in and excluded from the body of the public. Third, because the identification

of interest can be directed towards participation in the collective life of society but can also be used to justify concern for one's own advantage or detriment.

I draw support for my thesis from historiographical work, primarily the political history of republicanism and principally via virtue and the passions. Two studies are of especial importance for my purposes: J. G. A. Pocock's *The Machiavellian Moment* (1975) and Albert Hirschman's *The Passions and the Interests* (1977). Pocock examines 'the antithesis of virtue and corruption' and its transposition, in eighteenth-century England and America, into 'the quarrel between value and personality on the one hand, history and society on the other, in its first modern secular form.'[4] Granted Pocock's statement largely pertains to the development of Federalist theories of government at the expense of classical republican ideals; still, the process he outlines has consequences for social relations derived from and determined by interest:

> The decline of virtue has as its logical corollary the rise of interest . . . all that each man was capable of perceiving was his own particular interest; and to the extent that there survived the very ancient presumption that only perception of the common good was truly rational, perception of one's interest was primarily a matter of appetite and passion and only secondarily of profit-and-loss rational calculation which might extend so far as perception of one's interest as interdependent with that of another's . . . Interest was both a limiting and an expanding force.[5]

In effect, the yielding of virtue to interest summarises the process of democratisation in the nineteenth century and its paradoxes. For, as Pocock indicates, the re-emergence of interest in public life endangers the idea of 'the common good' because 'appetite and passion' becomes the governing principle and only 'profit-and-loss rational calculation' holds the possibility of protection by the 'perception of one's interest as interdependent with that of another's.' Interest therefore comes to be a means of enlarging and also regulating the socio-political body of the public.

Hirschman offers an economic explanation of the rise of interest, which runs parallel to and sometimes overlaps with Pocock's account of the Atlantic republican tradition.[6] Central to his study is the thesis that an ethos of interest, characterised by self-preservation, vanity, and self-love, emerged from that which it originally sought to neutralise: namely, the reckless pursuit of the passions. The demolition of the chivalric ethos by the interest-paradigm occurred during the renaissance 'not through the development of a new ethic, that is, of new rules of conduct for the *individual*' but due to 'a new turn in the theory of the *state*, to the attempt at improving statecraft within the existing order.'[7] Hirschman argues that 'statecraft' became the impetus for reformulating ideas about human behaviour to include calculations of the passions in justifications for

commercial expansion. In particular, 'one set of passions, hitherto known variously as greed, avarice, or love of lucre, could be usefully employed to oppose and bridle such other passions as ambition, lust for power, or sexual lust.'[8] The process leads, according to Hirschman, to the crucial association of self-interest with capitalism through a rationalisation of 'greed, avarice, or love of lucre' as beneficial to both the individual and the state. This is the countervailing principle, which offsets the calm with the disruptive passions, but Hirschman identifies two other principles used to advance the case for commercial expansion: the repressing principle, which subdues passions through the authority of the state; and the harnessing principle, which binds the passions to social ends. Both Hirschman and Pocock gesture to the protraction of the interest-paradigm in nineteenth-century political theory and especially in liberal thought. For Hirschman, the harnessing principle survived and prospered 'as a major tenet of nineteenth-century liberalism and as a central construct of economic theory,' and for Pocock, Marxist and liberal thought developed in response to the recognition that 'men no longer enjoyed the conditions thought necessary to make them capable of perceiving the common good.'[9]

These influential studies reveal that the rise of interest in political discourse prior to the nineteenth century was, like the history of the word itself, convoluted and contentious. Of late, a number of scholars have revised and extended the arguments of Pocock and Hirschman to draw attention to the competing uses of interest in nineteenth-century political discourse, issuing from utilitarianism and liberalism and challenging hard distinctions between public and private as well as self and other. Stephen Engelmann, for instance, takes Jeremy Bentham's utility principle as a paradigm case, contending that the 'self-society dyad . . . squeezes out alternative conceptions of private and public such as those that are unconcerned with the interior of the self or those that understand the private as one's stake in the public.'[10] By contrast, Dean Mathiowetz emphasises 'the juridical and the plural' history of interest and its possibilities for 'self-understanding, and action.' Indeed, he contends that 'appeals to interest' take place 'at sites of conflict and contestation' but 'deny the plausibility of an alternative statement of affairs'; thus, 'both contestability and its denial must been seen as integral parts of the language of interest, even in the case of self-interest.'[11] I refer to these scholars – Pocock and Hirschman, Engelmann and Mathiowetz – in order to establish the stakes of my enquiry into what it means to take an interest in beauty and whether taking an interest in beauty is necessary to public political life. Construed thusly, *Democratising Beauty* departs from narratives of nineteenth-century British aesthetics that have developed in relation to Kant's notion of disinterestedness and tend to suggest either the inadequacy of the tradition of John Ruskin and William Morris or its significance for Matthew Arnold and the aesthetic movement.[12] According to Kant, to call an object

beautiful as it is received from the senses, 'what we want to know is not whether we or anyone cares . . . in any way about the thing's existence, but rather how we judge it in our mere contemplation of it.'[13] The arguments for art that I shall be examining are therefore un-Kantian in that evidence is marshalled to explain why beauty matters by determining the kind of reward it produces and for whom.[14]

Identifying the reasons people should care about beauty in an urban, industrial society poses a number of problems for the central figures in *Democratising Beauty* in ways that bear out the claims of Engelmann and Mathiowetz. Some present being interested in beauty as an ethical practice with social consequences, others maintain that the self-interested pursuit of the pleasures of beauty can be an expression of freedom, and still others interpret beauty as a cause in which diverse individuals and groups should have an interest. Essentially, they are offering – or endeavouring to offer – alternatives to the axiom that '*taste* is the ability to judge an object, or a way of presenting it, by means of a liking or disliking *devoid of all interest*.'[15] My aim in focusing on what it means to take an interest in beauty is to contribute a new intellectual and cultural history of nineteenth-century Britain from the perspective of art and art writing and in the context of the politics of public life. *Democratising Beauty* is thus indebted to Raymond Williams's *Culture and Society 1780–1950* (1958) and also John Barrell's *The Political Theory of Painting from Reynolds to Hazlitt* (1986).[16] No small books either of these, however the argument that 'the art of a period' arises from and speaks to 'the generally prevalent "way of life"' and so 'aesthetic, moral and social judgements are closely related' has proved decisive for my thinking in this book.[17] In fact, Williams is one of the critics who acknowledges interest is 'a significant example of a word with specialised legal and economic senses which, within a particular social and economic history, has been extended to a very general meaning.' What is more, he notes that 'interest in the now predominant sense of general curiosity or attention, or having the power to attract curiosity and attention, is not clear before C19.'[18] With this in mind, I want to place John Stuart Mill alongside Tocqueville in the intellectual landscape of Britain around 1840 in order to outline a particular (admittedly condensed) history of interest rightly and wrongly understood and thereby point to a tension between the widening of interest and its 'specialised legal and economic senses' – a tension critical to the debate about beauty.

## Interest Rightly and Wrongly Understood

In a lengthy appraisal of the second part of *Democracy in America*, published in *The Edinburgh Review* (1840), Mill commends the book for achieving an 'easy triumph . . . over the indifference of our at once busy and insolent public to profound speculation.'[19] But, he observes,

the adoption of such phrases as 'the tyranny of the majority' by the Tory party, particularly Sir Robert Peel, has produced the erroneous belief that Tocqueville 'is one of the pillars of Conservatism, and his book a definitive demolition of America and of Democracy' (XVIII.156). To Mill, democracy is the best prospect for the progress of civilisation because it encourages moral excellence, so he claims *Democracy in America* for the radical cause and identifies 'inequalities of property' and 'hereditary and titled nobility' (XVIII.163) as the forces counter to democratisation.[20] Indeed, he argues the contrast between aristocratic and democratic societies, so clearly marked in Tocqueville's treatise, rests on different moral understandings: on the one hand, 'the beauty and dignity of virtue, the grandeur of self-sacrifice' and, on the other, 'of honesty the best policy, the value of character, and the common interest of every individual in the good of the whole' (XVIII.184–185). By looking with Tocqueville to America, Mill perceives that the self-regarding and other-regarding interests produce a potential conflict in social relations, for the participation of 'every individual' in the collective life of society depends on 'interests which separate him from his fellow citizens' and 'interests which connect him with them' (XVIII.169). As a result, he volunteered one substantial criticism of Tocqueville: 'he has bound up in one abstract idea the whole of the tendencies of modern commercial society, and given them one name – Democracy; thereby letting it be supposed that he ascribes to equality of conditions, several of the effects naturally arising from the mere progress of national prosperity' (XVIII.191–192). In effect, the separation of democratic from commercial society as well as equality of conditions from national expansion insinuates the difference between social and moral interests and economic interests and thus between an emergent liberal and an established conservative agenda.

The intellectual connections between Tocqueville and Mill are well known.[21] Briefly stated, Mill's preoccupation with the forces of homogenisation and uniformity in public life in turn supports his belief in the sovereignty of the individual, while Tocqueville's preoccupation with the paradox between association and individualism in American society in turn betrays his anxiety about the sovereignty of the people.[22] What is important for my purposes is 'the principle of interest rightly understood' (II.112),[23] which is presented in the second part of *Democracy in America* as a rationale for the pursuit of one's own interests in terms of virtue in not a heroic but a prosaic sense. Premised on the belief that American society is exceptional because it exploits the 'incessant conflict of jarring interests' (II.36), Tocqueville explains that 'the principle checks one personal interest by another, and uses, to direct the passions, the very same instrument which excites them' and continues:

> The principle of interest rightly understood produces no great acts of self-sacrifice, but it suggests daily small acts of self-denial. By itself it cannot suffice to make a man virtuous, but it disciplines a number of citizens in habits of regularity, temperance, moderation, foresight, self-command; and if it does not lead men straight to virtue by the will, it draws them in that direction by their habits (II.36).

The statement is an important reformulation of self-interest as an enlightened mode of governance achieved via 'regularity, temperance, moderation, foresight, self-command.' By this psychological use of interest, the capacity to exercise 'small acts of self-denial' is the condition for equality and the 'security' for the success of democratic society; that is, one citizen's interests are equal to the interests of others, both combatting selfish individualism and enabling self-realisation.[24] On this basis, Tocqueville argues the principle ought to be used in all nations (by which he presumably means all European nations) because 'best suited . . . to the wants of the men of our time, and . . . their chief remaining security against themselves' (II.113).

In a sense, Mill's *On Liberty* (1859) represents an adaptation and transformation of the second part of *Democracy in America* to meet the particular conditions of Britain in the middle of the nineteenth century.[25] This contribution to the 'newer and more difficult subject' of 'society in the widest sense' (XVIII.157) develops the themes of the review of 1840 and of *Principles of Political Economy* (1848). In the latter, Mill's purpose had been, in part, to divorce moral and intellectual from economic interests. The 'stationary state' thesis warns against the confusion of progress with expansion of capital and population: 'there would be as much scope as ever for all kinds of mental culture, and moral and social progress; as much room for improving the Art of Living, and much more likelihood of its being improved, when minds ceased to be engrossed by the art of getting on.'[26] The distinction, between 'the Art of Living' and the 'art of getting on,' is significant for the introduction of a legal provision to the psychological use of interest in *On Liberty*.[27] Herein, Mill isolates the shift from a traditional view of the opposition between the interests of the rulers and the ruled to a new view of the identity of interests between rulers and ruled; the former was a necessary condition of 'the last generation of European liberalism' but not sufficient for the next generation because it fails to acknowledge conditions 'when society itself is the tyrant' (XVIII.218, 219). The question is 'where to place the limit – how to make the fitting adjustment between individual independence and social control' (XVIII.220) so as to prevent homogeneity and promote the diversity of interests. As Mill explains, public opinion is sometimes affected by an individual's reason or 'their prejudices or superstitions' and sometimes by social feelings or 'their envy or jealousy' but 'most commonly, their desires or fears for themselves – their legitimate or illegitimate self-interest' (XVIII.221). This recourse to

legitimacy is key not only in contrast to Tocqueville's use of correctness but also in terms of the specialised sense of interest. Thus, the famous proposal, 'the sole end for which mankind are warranted, individually or collectively, in interfering with the liberty of action of any of their number is self-protection' (XVIII.223), sets a security for individuals or groups against damage by other individuals or groups.

Mill's harm principle expands on Tocqueville's principle of interest and adds a limitation. He identifies three domains of liberty – of conscience, of taste and pursuits, and of combination – and imposes rightful conditions for intervention on the basis that 'to individuality should belong the part of life in which it is chiefly the individual that is interested; to society, the part which chiefly interests society' (XVIII.276). The argument for freedom of opinion in public affairs and freedom of action in private life rests on the belief that individuality is the good that society (and its institutions) should foster and that utility is the means of determining what belongs 'chiefly' to the individual and 'chiefly' to society. Mill reasons that since the 'self-regarding virtues' are 'only second in importance, if second, to the social,' it is incumbent upon human beings to help each other choose 'better from the worse' conduct. But since 'he is the person most interested in his own well-being,' it follows that 'the interest which society has in him individually (except as to his conduct to others) is fractional and altogether indirect' (XVIII.277). This is a version of what Jürgen Habermas has argued is the transformation by which 'the autonomous public . . . secured for itself . . . a sphere of personal freedom, leisure, and freedom of movement.'[28] And yet, Mill's 'despotism of custom' (XVIII.272) expresses the threat to liberty from public opinion and the prospect that a junction between private and public interest will neither diminish individuality nor promote uniformity. For, in his words: 'every one who receives the protection of society owes a return for the benefit, and the fact of living in society renders it indispensable that each should be bound to observe a certain line of conduct towards the rest' (XVIII.276). By this psychological and juridical rendering of what it means to participate in the collective life of society, the conduct of individuals takes the place of a social contract: interest is therefore legitimated as a right to 'do with his life what he chooses to do with it' (XVIII.277) without jeopardising the interests of others and also a responsibility to bear 'his share . . . of the labours and sacrifices incurred' (XVIII.276) to defend the good of the whole.

Isaiah Berlin's classic examination of 'two concepts of liberty' gives considerable weight to Mill in order to expose the difference between freedom from interference and freedom to take control of one's life. The former, 'negative sense,' is 'involved in the answer to the question: 'What is the area within which the subject – a person or group of persons – is or should be left to do or be what he is able to do or be, without interference by other persons?' The latter, 'positive sense,' is involved in

the answer to the question: 'What, or who, is the source of control or interference that can determine someone to do, or be, this rather than that?'[29] The brilliance of Berlin's analysis lies in demonstrating the extent to which the two concepts of liberty are logically proximate but have developed into divergent, and ultimately incompatible, political ideologies. The negative concept of freedom engenders a pluralist view of human life since 'the wider the area of non-interference the wider my freedom'; conversely, the positive concept of freedom begets a monist view of human life, which 'renders it easy for me to conceive of myself coercing others for their own sake, in their, not my, interest.'[30] The latter is captured in Thomas Carlyle's *Past and Present* (1843) with its invective against an industrial world defined 'by able computations of Profit and Loss, by weak considerations of Pleasures of Virtue.'[31] The old moral order exemplified by the life of Jocelin of Brakelond provides the stark contrast to the 'condition of England'[32] in the 1840s characterised and impoverished by the Reform Act, 'Benthamee Radicalism, [and] the gospel of "Enlightened Selfishness".'[33] Carlyle hammers the point (famously so) that interest-motivated behaviour has reduced human life to a calculation: 'Supply-and-demand is not the one Law of Nature; Cash-payment is not the sole nexus of man with man, – how far from it!'[34] The complaint against Bentham and commercial society runs along similar lines to Mill's insistence on the differentiation of social and moral from economic interests but serves different purposes. Liberty, in Carlyle's view, 'the true liberty of a man,' is subject to authority, 'in his finding out, or being forced to find out the right path, and to walk thereon. To learn, or to be taught, what work he actually was able for; and then by permission, persuasion, and even compulsion, to set about doing of the same!'[35]

The 'two concepts of liberty' come into still sharper light if we turn from Carlyle's *Past and Present* to Mill's contemporaneous essays on 'Bentham' (1838) and 'Coleridge' (1840).[36] Like the review of *Democracy in America*, Mill approaches his subjects by suggesting that the historical tension between Progressive and Conservative thought can be represented by 'two systems of concentric circles . . . [which] have only just begun to meet and intersect' (X.78). The gist of the argument is that Bentham and Coleridge are 'two sorts of men – the one demanding the extinction of the institutions and creeds which had hitherto existed; the other that they be made a reality: the one pressing the new doctrines to their utmost consequences; the other reasserting the best meaning and purposes of the old' (X.146). Mill follows Bentham in contending that morality is conduct directed towards the principle of maximising happiness, but his principal complaint is that Bentham paid no heed to the 'moral part of man's nature' and barely acknowledged 'the pursuit of any other ideal end for its own sake' (X.95).[37] What Bentham gets right is the 'illustration' of interest-begotten prejudice, that is, 'the common tendency of man to make a duty