When compared with its continental neighbors, Britain in the seventeenth century can hardly be regarded as a cradle of revolutionary aesthetic theory. Much that appeared was derivative—if not actually translated—from better-known French and, later, German sources. Nonetheless, beginning in the middle of the seventeenth century and extending throughout the eighteenth, a substantial body of writing on aesthetics—and particularly on the question of taste—was produced in Great Britain. Bridging moral philosophy, political economy, physiology, and the arts, these writings are particularly illuminating in sketching out the relationships among a set of key terms—taste, appetite, consumption—that resonate throughout the period’s central intellectual and social debates. In her remarkably lively *Taste: A Literary History* (Yale, 2005), Denise Gigante sets out to explore the rich valences of each of these terms, while extending the reach of traditional accounts of aesthetics in the period in a specifically literary genealogy that stretches back to Milton and forward to the Romantic poets, in whose writings these terms and concerns appear with surprising frequency. One of the strengths of this book is its ability to make the story of taste’s British *bildung* uncommonly engaging: at once witty and erudite, the book moves with ease from Enlightenment philosophy to Romantic poetry to contemporary critical theory. Without accounting for taste, this volume suggests, any history of the period’s arts and letters, but also of its economics, politics, and ethics, remains seriously incomplete.

For Gigante, this history begins with the mystery of why gustatory and aesthetic taste should share a lexicon at all. She describes the relationship between the two as a tropological and specifically metaphorical one. Gustatory taste is “a trope for aesthetic judgment,” as well as “an apt metaphor for a kind of pleasure that does not submit to objective laws” (2). Gigante expands the scope of this tropology early on when she notes that this first important era in British aesthetic writing was also an era marked by a consumer revolution.
The two, she remarks, are historically as well as linguistically linked: “an overdetermined, multivalenced concept, consumption is grounded in the power of metaphor and it is time for literary history to examine rigorously its related subsets of taste and appetite” (3). Aesthetic judgment is metaphorically allied with the pleasures of eating, while both make use of a vocabulary grounded in the period’s key economic concerns. While the analysis at times seems restricted by Gigante’s insistence that the relations among these terms are best understood as figural, the recourse to notions such as metaphor, trope, and analogy does allow Gigante to move easily among discursive domains—literary, economic, moral, political—too often held apart by the division of intellectual labor exemplified by the modern university, but unimaginable in an eighteenth-century context.

By bringing into conversation terms like appetite, need, desire, consumption, and, above all, taste, Gigante is able to demonstrate how the discourse of aesthetics and particularly the figure of the Man of Taste perform essential mediating roles among numerous other emergent cultural fields in the eighteenth century. What we know or think we know about this period can sometimes seem directly to contradict itself, while in the midst of such apparent contradictions it is often possible to find aesthetic theory performing explanatory labor. Thus, as Gigante points out in her introduction, if we find ourselves having difficulty moving between thinking of this as the age of sense (or reason) and the age of sensibility (or feeling), we can look to the period’s aesthetic theory to understand how the two might be brought, if not into accord, then at least into conversation. With the help of aesthetics, it may not be necessary to choose between seemingly opposed views—between the Hobbesian or Mandevillian or Swiftian view of the human as a creature of brute appetite and uncontrollable passions, at the mercy of bodily needs and selfish, antisocial cravings, and the idealism of Shaftesbury, Addison, or (at some moments anyway) Pope, intent on purging the human animal of all animalistic traits in a wholesale sublimation of appetite into naturalized and disinterested cravings for beauty, virtue, and sociability.

But why should aesthetics—and in particular, taste—have the capacity to perform this mediating role? Writing on aesthetics in the eighteenth century, including above all the philosophical literature devoted to locating a universal standard of taste, was charged with a number of complementary and lofty tasks. First, as the invocation of Shaftesbury suggests, aesthetics was considered a prime site for discerning how individual pleasures might become collective ones—how, that is, sensory pleasure might contribute to social good. Aesthetics thus acted as a shuttle between universality and diversity, between the possibility of establishing norms and the desirability, if not necessity, of acknowledging individual differences. Yet—and this is the second important contribution of aesthetics—if, as all commentators in the peri-
od agreed, empirical research teaches us that there’s no accounting for taste, that bodies experience pleasure in heterogeneous and unpredictable ways apparently not reducible to systematization, it is nevertheless also the case—or so the majority of these philosophical commentators, foremost among them Burke and Hume, scrambled to convince their contemporaries—that our tastes and our pleasures, if not our very bodies, are susceptible to discipline and education. A universal standard of taste can, then, be identified, even if only a select few, as Hume suggested, actually conform to that standard in any age. As Gigante puts it, “garnering the authority left over from the divine, taste became the most vivid strand of a complex civilizing process in which individuals were taught to regulate themselves and their motivating appetites from within” (7).

This focus on the problem of appetite allows Gigante to identify a third important mediating role played by writings on taste. With the growth of a consumer economy and society, the matter of regulating desires gained urgency in new and once more contradictory ways. We are accustomed to thinking of taste, as Gigante does, as a “civilizing process,” a matter of curbing, constraining, or reeducating baser natures. Yet in an economy based increasingly on consumption, which is to say, on the consumption of excess or surplus value, appetites had to be nurtured—motivated, as Gigante puts it in the preceding passage—as well as disciplined. We misunderstand this era and its perhaps unique tendency to make aesthetics a cornerstone of moral and social philosophy if we only approach the problem of appetite with a Foucaultian vocabulary of regulation and discipline to hand. Gigante reminds readers of Kant’s crucial dictum in the *Critique of Judgment*, that “only when men have got all they want can we tell who among the crowd has taste or not.” Taste is linked to surplus, and “the more men have,” the more opportunities they will be afforded for practicing and advertising their capacities for discernment. Some of the important philosophical labor of this period may have entailed uncoupling aesthetics from appetite, but appetite remained a crucial engine in the transformation of Britain into a consumer society.

Each of the central chapters in Gigante’s book—with the exception of a deftly deployed but disappointingly brief foray into the philosophical terrain—treats a poet whose work in both verse and prose fleshes out these interlocking strains. For the purpose of brevity, two particularly fascinating contributions—one on Milton, the other on Lamb—will have to stand in for the others, but readers will find equally compelling chapters on Wordsworth, Byron, and Keats, along with a final chapter on George IV and the science of gastronomy. The Milton chapter is perhaps the most surprising in the book, if only because histories of British aesthetics, when they have turned to Milton at all, have not done so in order to mine his work for the beginnings of a discourse of taste. Gigante finds those beginnings in the ways Milton “compli-
cates the category of physiological taste,” allowing and encouraging taste to span the domains of material sustenance, morality, and aesthetics (23). Throughout Milton’s corpus, but especially in *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained*, Gigante locates a pervasive concern with the relationships between tasting and knowing, linked forms of ingesting and absorbing the outside world encapsulated in the Latin term *sapere*. The drama of *Paradise Lost*, for instance, revolves around questions of knowledge and pleasure, questions made vivid in the epic’s numerous scenes of eating—the consumption of the apple, certainly, but also the pageantry of feasting in the garden and the preoccupation with the matter of angelic nourishment. In *Paradise Regained*, the central conflict involves tasting and testing, a pair of activities beautifully detailed by Gigante in her reading of both Satan and Jesus as figures who might be described, like Eve in the earlier poem, as “exact of taste” (*PL* 9.838). In a series of scenes characterized by what Gigante calls “mutual resistance,” Satan and Jesus tempt each other to sample a range of offerings, from the worldly pleasures of food and rhetoric to the more godly ones of Scripture (45). Each refuses to consume, or even to taste, the other’s offering, leaving the two locked in a kind of relational impasse in which neither falls prey to the blandishments of the other, but neither receives the satisfaction of seeing his gifts received either. The human figures of *Paradise Lost* may fall by eating, but at least, in so doing, they open to the possibilities of both knowledge and judgment made available by the willingness to taste and be tested, to consume and hence to enter into relation with the world around them.

The multiple concerns of Gigante’s book come together most deliciously in the chapter on Lamb. Although the discourse of taste, or discrimination, is in part a discourse of selectivity, moderation, and regulation, it is also, as Lamb’s marvelously appetitive figure of Edax shows, one of vibrant consumption. As such, it cannot afford to be too choosy, because the entire notion of selection and rejection, of judgment itself, depends upon producing subjects with healthy appetites, constantly capable of being provoked, satisfied, and renewed. Lamb’s comment that the bookstalls and fishmongers of London “feed me without a power of satiating me” is intensely perceptive in this regard, a kind of thumbnail sketch of consumer culture at its most rapacious. As Burke notes in his *Philosophical Enquiry*, the twin enemies of aesthetics are vitiation and satiation, and the job of aesthetic theory, like that of consumer culture, is to keep our appetites for novelty constantly piqued, without allowing that taste for novelty to degenerate into what, in a figure like Elia, Lamb identifies as a kind of perversion. We cannot afford to become so nice in our tastes that we lose all sense of humanity and become mesmerized by the melting eyes of a suckling pig, this chapter suggests, but we also cannot afford to respond to the potential perversions of appetite everywhere warned against in Enlightenment aesthetics by losing our taste for crackling altogether.
NOTES

1. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. James Creed Meredith (Oxford, 1952), 50.

2. Charles and Mary Lamb, *The Letters of Charles and Mary Anne Lamb*, ed. Edwin W. Marrs, Jr. (Ithaca, 1975), 1:267.